

PLOW TO PLATE FILM SERIES: STORM LAKE

November 27, 2023



By Adam Rabiner

The principal character of *Storm Lake*, Art Cullen, is the editor of the *Storm Lake Times*, a small-town newspaper in Iowa with a staff of ten, mostly family, and a circulation of around 3,000 readers. With his shaggy mustache and mop-top hair, he is a character, most likely intentionally casting himself as a latter-day Samuel Clemens. Cullen takes his editor's beat very seriously; he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in journalism in 2017 for investigative articles challenging powerful corporate agricultural interests in the state. But he's also a folksy storyteller, in the vein of Garrison Keillor narrating the lives of those who inhabit his fictional Lake Wobegon.

The stories that Cullen tells—assisted by his wife, brother, son, sister-in-law and other relatives—are both broad and deep. Hyper-local news is covered: City Council meetings; the School Board of Supervisors; the Court House; the plight of local farmers confronting odd weather and climate change; and who in the community had a baby, got married or died. But Cullen also covers nationally-oriented stories such as the 2020

presidential election; the disastrous Democratic Iowa Caucus meltdown; and the onset of COVID 19 that same year, with its impact on the paper and the town.

These stories are woven into the documentary, which also chronicles the struggles of the newspaper to stay afloat in the face of various financial challenges—competitors like Facebook, and the dearth of local businesses that can afford to buy advertisements. Cullen recognizes that he needs to increase his readership, but acknowledges as well that people now want to get news for free.

STORM LAKE

A NEWSPAPER. A FAMILY. A COMMUNITY.

DIRECTED BY
JERRY RISIUS AND BETH LEVISON

Another Spectacular 4th of July

[illegible]

storeniskemovta.com



In the past fifteen years, as many as a quarter of the newspapers in the United States have shuttered. *Storm Lake Times* is one of the last of its kind, with its two--times-per-week circulation and \$1 per issue price. Founded in 1990, the paper often just breaks even, perhaps making a small profit one year, followed by a small loss the next. To survive, it must supplement advertising fees with support from its community of readers, which, with an influx of diverse immigrants, has become more diverse and Democratic over the years, though the population outside of town remains firmly Republican. For Cullen and his family, keeping the *Storm Lake Times* afloat is not primarily about achieving financial success. It is about providing good local journalism and news, which Cullen believes is the foundation of a successful democracy. Cullen feels that the 10,000 residents who form the community of Storm Lake represent a microcosm of the nation—which is only as strong as its newspaper and banks.

With the demise of many papers, such as Ohio's *Youngstown Vindicator* among others, Cullen estimates that there are around 300 "news deserts": medium-size towns of twenty to thirty thousand people without a local news source. The plight of these papers parallels that of small family farms, which are also endangered by economic forces and policies favoring agglomeration and huge corporate operations. The business models that once supported small farms, small papers and mom and pop stores have fallen apart, leaving rural communities weaker.

Storm Lake resembles a microcosm of parts of the United States as it grapples with common and widespread issues: warmer and wetter weather and its effect on crop yields and planting patterns, the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment, worsening political polarization, the plight of small family farms, and others. There are no easy answers to these problems. For example, if you repress large-scale agricultural production, where does that leave the workers who rely on it for employment?

Ultimately, this film's central theme is the role that a small-town newspaper plays in helping to shore up democracy. Cullen, who likes to quote Madison and Jefferson, and who proudly displays a poster of JFK on his office wall, may not be representative of his rural community. But in some ways his folksy Mark Twain demeanor and Midwest-

ern decency cast him as the quintessential American Everyman comfortably inhabiting a kind of mythic heartland made famous by *A Prairie Home Companion*, “where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.”

Storm Lake, Dec. 12, 2023 @ 7 p.m.

Screening link: <https://plowtoplatefilms.weebly.com/>

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