

Storm Lake

Here's a paean to journalism, old style. It's also a near obituary for shoe leather journalism as it has been practiced, especially in America's small towns. It is also a chronicle of a close-knit family, the Cullens, who don't want their decades-long work to die along with America's small newspapers. Told in the no-nonsense tones of the laconic Midwest, "Storm Lake" mixes a bit of Lake Woebegone with "All the President's Men." (*The film is currently available on streaming services in the area*).

The Storm Lake Times has been a paragon of news coverage in north-west Iowa for over 30 years. The biweekly paper is produced in Storm Lake, a town of 15,000 souls and the most important one in rural Buena Vista county. The area has been a super-red state for years, though the editor, Art Cullen, is one of the town's leading liberal voices. It is also the home of a couple of America's agricultural corporate giants, including Tyson's Foods, whose hiring has made it one of state's most important source of immigrant employers and local diversity.

Art works with a bevy of other Cullens, including brother John, the publisher who founded the paper, Delores, Art's wife and a reporter and photographer, and Tom, the paper's lead reporter and Art's son. They are devoted to their work (Art won a 2017 Pulitzer Prize for political reporting) but are concerned with their future as their once-ample ad revenue has plummeted in the last decade, and they struggle to get out of the red.

Shot beginning in March 2019, "Storm Lake" also offers a timely capsule of the beginning of the 2020 presidential campaign. The last third of the film shows the idiosyncratic Iowa caucuses, exhibiting the nitty-gritty of the campaign as it tumbles to its February conclusion, a unique collection of mini-polls to determine delegates for each party. This is grassroots (maybe corn-fed) politics, but utterly lacking the nasty tenor of our recent national political scrimmage. The film's chronicle ends with a (soft) bang, as COVID-19 slowly works its way into Iowa—especially at the Tyson plant--and leaves us with the vision of an empty newsroom. Still, the staff of the Times looks to resuscitate itself and keep the real, local news coming.

Art Cullen, with a mop of white fly-away hair that recalls the mature Mark Twain, is the unbidden star of "Storm Lake," (ably directed by Jerry Risius and Beth Levison) the steady, reasonable voice for an enterprise in crisis. He is also the voice of the Times, whose editorials, well-argued and good-humored, won him the 2017 Pulitzer Prize and captured the native wisdom of Iowa. You see him as a good guy to have a coffee with.

Most of the other Cullens also get their innings, but wife Delores and son Tom stand out. Delores, working as both beat reporter and staff photographer, proves to be a level-headed and good humored scribe, while Tom does steady work on local stories while representing new ideas to help the paper survive.

In its soft-sell and amiable way, you admire the Cullen's attitude and work ethic. It might be very nice to wake up in Storm Lake with your morning coffee and read the Times twice a week.

(This film runs 85 minutes and is not rated—though it contains nothing objectionable.)

(June 2021)