



FILM

The Illinois Parables is a Fascinating Portrait of State History

BY LISA TRIFONE ON APRIL 27, 2017 • (LEAVE A COMMENT)



Photograph courtesy of the filmmaker.

On Friday, University of Chicago's Film Studies Center presents a screening of Deborah Stratman's *The Illinois Parables* (<https://filmstudiescenter.uchicago.edu/events/2017/illinois-parables>), a 60-minute film essay on the Land of Lincoln, from the seventh century through the 1980s. Through eleven vignettes, Stratman explores the history of the state: early caves, a Mormon exodus, the Civil Rights movement, and so much more.

Any Illinoisan will recognize much in the film, from downstate historical highlights to racial tensions that plagued Chicago then and still do. What delights in this compact documentary is a scope well beyond an average history class. Case in point: in 1925, a tornado ripped through West Frankfort, a small town at the very southern end of the state. Through meticulous sound mixing and exceptional archival footage, Stratman makes new and instantly familiar a moment long forgotten to Illinois history.

Opting for a retro-feeling 4:3 aspect ratio (the square frame of early televisions), the film feels like something quite out of another time. Microfiche newspaper clippings evoke another era, and even re-enactments are treated just enough to be dated (though that floor lamp in that one shot gives it away). Overall, it smartly manages to channel humanity with scant few humans on screen. Of the paradox, Stratman, in a brief interview, said "It's easy for storytelling to get lodged in the realm of performance and enactment....The relative absence of actors on-screen is one of the reasons why I use as much music as I do. The music becomes a protagonist."

The eleven chapters – parables – both fly by (that's less than six minutes per parable!) and linger, wandering as they do across Illinois's varied tableaus. Thriving fields and snowy trails, urban streets and confederate flags all present a holistic view of a state filled with contradictions. Voiceovers quote the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Father Jacques Marquette, infusing the thoughtful long takes and observational arial views with the weight of our collective history.

And collective, according to Stratman, means more than just those of us in Illinois. The film premiered at Sundance Film Festival in 2016, and has since gone on to screen around the world. "I was concerned it might be provincially pigeonholed, but the film has played well all over North America and Europe. It's recently started touring around the Arab world and South America. Without losing the political relevance of very specific local histories, the themes seem to transcend that regional context."

On the Film Studies website, the screening's description says *The Illinois Parables* "covers a couple of millennia of history in Illinois as a microcosm of the entire country." It may not warrant quite that sweeping a pronouncement. But as a meditation on a state with diverse landscapes and residents, it would serve as a horizon-expanding Friday evening in the city.

The Illinois Parables screens Friday, April 28 at the Logan Center for the Arts (915 E. 60th St.). Free.