The Lynchings in Duluth
By Michael Fedo

Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie are hardly household names in Duluth and the rest of Minnesota. In fact, they were lost or deliberately buried until Michael Fedo, in The Lynchings in Duluth, restored to our attention this trio of slain black circus workers, along with an ugly chapter in this state’s past. These 19- and 20-year-old men were the victims of racial lynching by a frenzied mob on June 15, 1920. Such heinous acts are not supposed to happen in the land of Minnesota Nice.

Fedo, a former correspondent for the New York Times and a professor at North Hennepin Community College in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, relied chiefly upon newspapers, personal interviews, and the Minnesota Historical Society archives to reconstruct the tragic developments in Duluth. He attributed the causes of racial tension in Duluth to actions by U. S. Steel, the city’s largest employer, which had imported black field hands from the South to stifle strike threats by white workers. In addition, restless white World War I veterans, yearning for a chance to show their patriotic manhood, had threatened to run blacks out of town. Some of these veterans were still incensed over having seen black American soldiers with white French women overseas. Then, white Duluthians heard the news that a young white woman had been raped by a group of black men who worked for the traveling circus that had come to town.

Though the woman in question showed no medical signs of being sexually assaulted and said nothing to her parents on the night of the alleged attack, white Duluth officials and citizens rushed to judgment. They believed the story told by the young woman’s boyfriend—to which she later largely attested—that four men had raped her in a field just beyond the circus tents. Quickly, news and rumors raced through the streets of Duluth, and six black workers were jailed. Members of an unruly mob of between 5,000 and 10,000 that had crowded onto Superior Street then broke into the jail and lynched three prisoners by hanging them from a lamppost. For the most part, Duluth authorities were either unable or unwilling to provide the men proper protection despite clearly rising tensions in the city.

Even though rape was never proven and no alleged rapist was ever positively identified, one surviving black circus worker was convicted of rape and eventually served four years of a 30-year sentence. Another was acquitted. A few members of the white lynch mob were convicted of inciting to riot and served short sentences. Black Duluthians, however, suffered lingering effects that included housing, job, and educational discrimination lasting into the 1960s.

In 1919 postwar housing shortages and labor strife fused with white racial fears and hatreds to produce race riots in 26 American towns and cities. The Duluth tragedy was sandwiched between the Red Summer of 1919 and the bloody racial rampage in Tulsa in 1921. Given this national context, the question of “Why Duluth?” might be changed more appropriately to “Why not Duluth?” What makes Minnesotans think they are so different from other Americans?

In a thought-provoking introduction, William Green of Augsburg College, Minneapolis, probed the moral implications of the Duluth lynchings. His own research affirmed the accuracy of Fedo’s account, which lacks footnotes and contains some fictitious names. Fittingly, Green credited Fedo’s straightforward narrative with helping to bring much needed closure to the tragic deaths of Clayton, Jackson, and McGhie.

Reviewed by Donald H. Strasser, associate professor of history at Minnesota State University, Mankato, who has taught African American history since 1968.

Star Island, a Minnesota Summer Community
By Carol Ryan

Carol Ryan’s book about this summer community is a significant contribution to the literature that documents the history of Minnesota’s seasonal recreation industry. In
addition, it is a striking example of work that relies on the technique of oral history for gathering much of the information.

It is perhaps no coincidence that a map of Star Island looks like a distorted map of the United States. One discovers within the first few pages of the book that folks from a number of places made up the summer community that began in 1909 when the fledgling Forest Service opened portions of the Minnesota National Forest (later renamed Chippewa National Forest) for recreational use. Star Island, a two-square-mile land mass near the center of Cass Lake in northern Minnesota, was included. After several lots for cottages were platted, the Forest Service began issuing leases to prospective builders. The part of the island still owned by Indians was eventually parcelled off by the Cass Lake Indian office. The island’s continuing connection to the Forest Service gives a unique dimension to the community. (Leases are automatically renewed for 20 years.) Except for an inn that operated for a short time, a lodge building that offered some recreational opportunities, and a few rental cabins, family cottages have been the mainstay of the island’s summer community.

“Too hot, went to the lake,” the title of Peg Meier’s work on the phenomenon of summer retreats in the north country, also describes the appeal of Star Island. In the book’s first chapter, those who first ventured to the island from places like Kansas City and Lincoln, Nebraska, tell of their desire to escape oppressive summer heat. Succeeding chapters continue the story of the island’s development through World War II and beyond, ending with the “newcomers”—Ryan and her family among them—who discovered the island community in the 1960s and 1970s. Interspersed through the book are chapters on epic events, mostly storms, and community projects. Ryan concludes with her thoughts on the meaning of the place. Also included are an index and a bibliography of selected readings on summer communities.

To document the story of Star Island, Ryan conducted 103 interviews with current and former residents, including someone from every household. Nineteen representative interviews appear in the book, and all are on file at the Minnesota Historical Society.

In capturing the islanders’ own stories, Ryan has succeeded in presenting an entertaining and informative social history of the island. The narrators’ own words provide a personalized account of the challenges and rewards of island living, the changes brought by modernization and technology, and the role Star Island has played in their family’s lives. It comes as no surprise that many of the island’s homes have been passed from generation to generation. A common thread running through the interviews is the residents’ desire for isolation and respite from their lives off the island. They express an extremely close connection to their island retreat—precisely because it’s an island—yet at the same time they value the community that was created primarily on the basis of place.

In gathering a large sample of interviews and asking the same questions of each narrator, Ryan demonstrates solid oral history techniques. But, as oral historians are well aware, conducting interviews is only one step in the process of producing a work. Ryan has also demonstrated good editing capabilities in arranging the selected interviews to best tell the story of Star Island. In addition, she has included photographs and illustrations together with some previously written histories of the island and a variety of newspaper clippings from the Star Island Loon and the Cass Lake Times.

If there are those who still feel that oral history captures only disconnected memories and reminiscences, Star Island: A Minnesota Summer Community serves as a good example of how oral history can be an effective and unique tool for documenting collective memory. Without oral sources, the story of Star Island would be far less complete.

Reviewed by Marilyn McGriff, a local historian from Braham, Minnesota, who has served as president of the Oral History Association of Minnesota. Her article “Minnesota Swedes Raising Cane,” published in Minnesota History, Spring 1999, documents a Swedish American colony in Cuba during the early years of the twentieth century.

**Ojibwa Powwow World**


**Ethnomusicologists** should welcome a report on the musical culture of the Ojibwe of northwestern Ontario, for the area has been underrepresented in the literature. Unfortunately, although the author demonstrates a familiarity with sources on the Ojibwe—her bibliography shows more than 250 entries—this is a flawed book.

Some of Berbaum’s assertions are incorrect, and questionable statements are unsupported by sources. Her claim that “a woman never has a water drum” in the medicine lodge contradicts Selwyn Dewdney’s published medicine-scroll pictographs showing women carrying such drums and leading processions during lodge ceremonies. Her “young male dancers called ‘fancy dancers’ (whose outfits are made of wool fringes)” are, in fact, Grass Dancers. Fancy Dancers wear spayed feather bustles on the lower and upper back and upper arms. Berbaum also tells us that in the Hoop Dance, “the number of hoops depends on the power of the healer-dancer,” suggesting a sacred use for the dance. The Hoop Dance, however, is a recent import from the southern Plains—a secular “show” dance by an individual, usually mounted to impress mostly non-Indian audiences.

Berbaum also accepts unsubstantiated claims of other writers, such as the “Seven fire” concept of Ojibwe migra-
tion from the East Coast. In the *Journal of American Folklore* (1978), I showed that there were many more than seven stopping places, as have other researchers—including Walter J. Hoffman as early as 1885. In addition, she repeats incorrect information from her informants, such as the opinion that the old Moccasin Game songs were textless—a belief contradicted by ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore’s findings early in the twentieth century.

Other factual errors abound. Densmore’s informant is called Nodinens, not Nodimens, and “The Rite of the Drum of Andrew Davis” correctly belongs to Henry Davis at Mille Lacs. Berbaum’s claim that I list Funeral Songs in my dissertation as being secular is totally unfounded. Elsewhere in North America is evident, but some rituals are based occupy more than half of the publication. At best, musical transcriptions are skeletal representations of performances and are essentially meaningless without access to the recordings on which they are based. Ignoring standard ethnomusicological practice, Berbaum nowhere indicates where the recordings are archived, should one wish to verify the accuracy of her notations. Furthermore, the transcriptions’ layout—phrase by phrase, interspersed with variations and enormous blank spaces—makes them awkward to read.

In addition, the author’s musical analyses are flawed by imprecise and confusing use of musical terminology and spiritual interpretations of melodic characteristics. Take, for example, her discussion of drumbeat accompaniment for songs. When she writes “triple drum beat,” she really means two beats, the first of which is heavily accented and twice the duration of the weak beat that follows. (This would be rendered notationally as a triplet.) Berbaum also gives her own twist to standard musical terms without explaining their new meaning. For instance, when describing song style, she writes, “The voice evolves according to a free rhythm of an improvised style which I call the Ojibwa rubato.” Her propensity for spiritual explanations leads her to investigate “the ethos of scales.” To support her acceptance of Hultkrantz’s “soul dualism” in native North America, she forwards the unsupportable argument that the singer’s voice and drum accompaniment are separate, independent expressions moving at different tempi—a notion she may have encountered in Densmore’s published transcriptions from the early-twentieth century, which give different tempo markings for the voice and drum.

While her choreographic descriptions are fairly accurate, the author mentions recent dance importations without explanation. Surely anyone interested in dance would want some description of the “Indian Break Dance” included in the list of Ojibwe social dances at Wabigoon and some meaning for the comment that, for intertribal songs, “Each individual has a free ‘disco’ movement.”

Despite its many drawbacks, *Ojibwa Powwow World* belongs on the shelf of every student of Ojibwe culture, if only for the wealth of information about current Canadian practices. Other positive elements include good new information in interview transcripts on the mide (medicine lodge) and a number of new versions of the origin of the ceremonial dance drum. Berbaum also elicited some unusual and surprising contemporary beliefs. For example, a Sioux Lookout informant explained that, whereas menstruating women were once forbidden from approaching the drum, “Now, with modern protection, their prohibition is less strict!”

It is especially interesting to compare the Canadian practices Berbaum describes with those current in the U.S. Rarely observed below the border is the Canadian restriction of the drum arbor to “traditional” (ceremonial) drums, requiring “contemporary” (store-bought marching-band) drums to locate around the periphery of the dance circle. The greater native language retention in Canada is evident in powwow invocations, which are given “in a high Ojibwa language used for religious speeches” and not understood by all native speakers. In the U.S., it is increasingly difficult to find native speakers to perform this task. Likewise, the important role of dreaming seems intact in Ontario; one must dream about a ceremonial
It’s Gone; Did You Notice? A History of the Mesabi Range Village of Franklin, Minnesota, 1892–1994

By Barbara A. Milkovich


Rather few published books feature the overall history of northern Minnesota’s Iron Range, which includes the Vermilion, Mesabi, and Cuyuna ore-producing ranges. One of the major reasons for this dearth is the complexity of the region, which some have termed Minnesota’s “culture unto itself.” Anyone seeking to write a comprehensive interpretation of Iron Range history must deal with geology, landscape transformation, mining technology, labor issues, politics, and a myriad of ethnic groups. Furthermore, the region’s complex settlement pattern includes numerous towns, such as Hibbing, Virginia, and Eveleth, and hundreds of company-controlled residential enclaves or “locations,” most of which were adjacent to individual mine sites.

What does characterize the historiography of the Iron Range, however, is the relatively large number of brief studies that have been written by former and current residents of local communities. Most feature the initial settlement period, major calamities, extreme weather conditions, the impact of wars and economic depressions, overviews of institutions and organizations, and biographical summaries of community leaders, mining officials, and colorful characters. While these local efforts generally do not venture into interpretation or place the communities into a broader historical, social, or geographical context, the facts, information, and sources they contain can be useful to researchers interested in making broader analyses of the entire Iron Range. Barbara A. Milkovich’s book, a local history of the eastern Mesabi Range community of Franklin, is unusual in that it is written by an academic historian. Currently a research historian for California State University at Dominguez Hills, Milkovich became familiar with Franklin during the 1980s because it was her husband’s home town. Franklin was incorporated as a village along Virginia’s northeastern boundary in 1915. At least 13 locations—developed by various mining companies—were included within the boundaries of Franklin, although four were most important: Franklin, Higgins, Lincoln, and Shaw. Over time, expanding open-pit mining operations resulted in the loss of virtually all evidence of residential activity in Franklin; by 2000 only a few houses still stood in a remnant of Shaw Location.

While Milkovich employed numerous sources—maps, photographs, village records, newspapers, architectural drawings, and secondary accounts—to document the evolution of Franklin, it is her use of oral history that makes the book come to life. Her informants noted their general satisfaction with life in Franklin, especially during the time when the community was envisioned as a “secure environment.” Such security, however, occurred only if residents followed the mining company’s regulations and maintained employment with the firm: “If he [the miner] was no longer employed by the company, he and his family were required to leave their location home.” The fact that so little remains of the locations anywhere on the Iron Range testifies to the often forced movement of people and buildings in the past.

The book is handsomely designed, has attractive typography, and contains a number of well-reproduced illustrations. The only quibbles I have are minor, such as the use of a semicolon in the title and the narrow inner margins of the type pages that force readers to endanger the binding. These small complaints aside, I must emphasize that Milkovich’s book represents the best case study available for any small community on the Iron Range. If more local studies of this quality were prepared for other settlements, then the overall history of the Iron Range could be more thoroughly and adequately addressed.

Reviewed by Arnold R. Alanen, who teaches landscape history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has written extensively about the cultural landscapes, settlements, and immigrant groups of the Iron Range and northeastern Minnesota.
OUR READERS WRITE: In “Searching for Florence” (Minnesota History, Fall 2000), Benjamin Filene recounted a surprising research journey launched by a photo of a young girl seated in front of her piano. Filene’s quest elicited many admiring comments, some of which follow.

Will Powers, design and production manager at the Minnesota Historical Society Press and no mean sleuth himself, wrote:

“I enjoyed your piece about Florence. There is something haunting about that photo: she looks such a mature young lady. A nice bit of sleuthing.

“But you needed a forensic typographer. I was somehow dubious of ‘Moon Wind’ as a song title, so I ran through all the capital letterforms that would have that vertical stroke and serif formation: B D E F H I K L M N P R. ‘Wind,’ ‘Wine,’ and ‘Wink’ were the most likely second words in the title. Then the detail on page 137 shows one eye shut on the man in the moon. A quick search of Google shows a 1904 mazurka called ‘Moon Winks,’ and indeed there is room for the cap S on the right side of the sheet.

“Not that this would have been one damn bit of help finding Florence. But it is how a forensic typographer spends part of his weekend.”

Sheet-music collectors Nancy and Margaret Bergh also recognized the mystery man-in-the-moon music, adding that it was by George Stevens and was billed as a “three-step . . . a piano solo. I don’t know if it was ever published as a song with lyrics,” wrote Nancy Bergh.

As the article reveals, Filene was able to obtain a copy of “Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland,” the other piece of sheet music arrayed on Florence’s piano. That piece moved James K. Foster of Minneapolis to share “a small bit of additional, quite peripheral, information”:

“First, the song was extremely popular in its time and, indeed, for several decades, and I daresay most senior citizens today could hum the chorus from memory.

“Secondly, the woman pictured on the sheet music cover . . . is Reine Davies, a popular music comedy performer of the time. She also appeared in several silent films around 1915 . . . . She lived from 1892 until a relatively early death in 1938 at 45 years of age. Her main claim to fame is probably the fact that she was the older sister of Marion Davies, the film star most famous for being the longtime mistress of William Randolph Hearst.

“As the song was published in 1909, the picture on the sheet music cover was taken . . . when Reine was still a teenager. Comparing her picture to a picture of a late teenaged Marion . . . the family resemblance is striking and unmistakable.”

At the end of his article, Filene concluded, “It was time to call it quits.” Or was it? He soon discovered:

“After reading ‘Searching for Florence,’ Ruth Anderson of MHS’s reference department pointed me to www.ancestry.com, which has the Social Security Death Index online. In a jiffy, I had a list of 16 Florence Jensens from Minnesota, their birth dates, and the months and years of their deaths. ‘My Florence, it turns out, died in October 1982. With that information, I scrolled through microfilm of the St Paul Pioneer Press. On October 11, 1982, an obituary announced the death of Florence E. Jensen, 84, of White Bear Lake.

“That’s all for now.”

CROSSING THE BRIDGE: Growing Up Norwegian-American in Depression and War, 1925–1946, by Earl A. Reitan, is a combined family history and memoir by a Grove City, Minnesota, farm boy who grew up to become a historian at Illinois State University. Reitan’s family left the farm when his father became a small-town banker, a profession that could be unstable in the 1930s and 1940s. It took the family from Grove City to Alberta, Minnesota, and then to Regent, North Dakota. The 143-page paperback was published by Lone Oak Press, Red Wing, Minnesota, in 1999 and sells for $12.95.

COMMUNITY OF STRANGERS: Change, Turnover, Turbulence and the Transformation of a Midwestern Country Town by Joseph Amato and John Radzilowski (Marshall: Crossings Press, 1999, 109 p., paper, $11.95) focuses on the business history of one regional center in rural southwestern Minnesota and the effects of business on the continuity of community. While it offers a short history of Lyon County’s Marshall, it also explores the effects of centralized power, cultural homogenizing, and national and international markets on the increasingly fragmented lives of residents of prairie towns. Social science approaches and data make this book more than a simple town history, and readers will find it thought provoking.

FOUR HANDSOMELY printed “regional-essays” about southwestern Minnesota are available from the Society for the Study of Local and Regional History in Marshall. Scott Anfinson’s Prairie, Lakes, and People: The Archaeology of Southwestern Minnesota (1998, 32 p.) takes a geographical, geological, archaeological, and anthropological look at the region. David E. Wright’s The Farm Chemurgic: Changes in Agricultural Entrepreneurship Between the Two World Wars (1998, 29 p.) looks at attempts by industrialists and scientists to save the American countryside through the introduction of new crops and scientific farming. Thomas D. Isen’s The Cultures of Agriculture on the
North American Plains (1998, 26 p.) reflects on regional changes since the 1950s. Donald D. Stull’s *On the Cutting Edge: Changes in Midwestern Meatpacking Communities* (1997, 29 p.) explores the economic and human consequences of the new, decentralized meatpacking and poultry-dressing industries. All four publications, and many more related to the region, are available for $5.00 each from the Regional History Society at 507-537-7573.

ANOTHER CHAPTER is added to the story of attempts to convert the region’s Native Americans and mixed-blood people in Keith R. Widder’s well-researched and balanced book, *Battle for the Soul: Métis Children Encounter Evangelical Protestants at Mackinaw Mission, 1823–1837* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999, 254 p., paper, $24.95). The book chronicles William and Amanda Ferry’s failed attempt to win souls for their church by running a boarding school for Métis children, which proved more successful at reviving Catholicism than at making the children and their parents into practicing Protestants or abandoning the fur trade for a more “settled” way of life.

THE VAST INLAND SEA of grasses, buried for a century beneath farms, cities, and suburbs, has endured not only in occasional physical remnants but in the memories of settlers and their descendants, books by prairie authors, and the work of prairie artists. *Recovering the Prairie*, edited by Robert F. Sayre (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999, 224 p., cloth, $37.95), examines the perspectives of writers and artists including Aldo Leopold, Wes Jackson, Jens Jensen, and Willa Cather, who have recognized the ecosystem’s unique beauty. A color portfolio of modern artworks confirms the haunting visual appeal of open land and sky.

HANDSOME design and engaging photos enhance Sr. Mary Richard Boo’s booklet, *A City Filled with Music: 100 Years of the Duluth’s Matinee Musciale* (Duluth: Kolath Graphics, 1999, 23 p., $5.00 plus $1.00 postage and handling). Organized by upper-class women to bring classical music to their city, the group has remained active through a century, changing with the times but never abandoning its basic mission. Besides introducing emerging artists to Duluth (Percy Grainger, Pablo Casals, Shirley Verrett, and Dawn Upshaw among them), the group has also sponsored music education and provided an outlet for local composers. Lists of famous soloists and organization presidents for the past 99 years conclude the booklet, which can be ordered from Ellen Marsden, 1112 Missouri Ave., Duluth 55811; 218-724-4694.

INSIGHTS visual and literary from astute Minnesota observers are featured in Voyageur Press’s *Minnesota Days: Our Heritage in Stories, Art, and Photos*, edited by Michael Dregni (Stillwater, 1999, 160 p., cloth, $35.00). Included are short selections from writers such as Keillor, Widder, Lewis, Flandreau, Holm, LaDuke, Parks, LeSueur, Fairbanks, Gruchow, and Hasser, as well as stunning images from Brandenburg, Blacklock, Gag, Jaques, Gawboy, Huie, Firth, anonymous historical photographers, and more. Attractively designed and handsomely printed, this collectible book makes good reading to boot.

A RECENT publication, *St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Cemetery, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1851–1995*, contains an alphabetical listing of the almost 15,000 persons buried in Minnesota Territory’s first Catholic cemetery. Begun two years after the Church of St. Anthony was founded in what became northeastern Minneapolis, the burial ground served French Canadians, then Irish, Eastern Europeans, Italians, and other ethnic groups. Compiled from numerous sources, the listings include name, age, date of burial, and location within the cemetery, as well as other details. The 198-page paperback is available from the publisher, Park Genealogical Books, P.O. Box 130968, Roseville, MN 55113-0968, for $25.00 plus sales tax and $3.00 shipping and handling for one volume ($5.00 each additional copy).