

BOOK REVIEWS

Wild Mares: My Lesbian Back-to-the-Land Life

Dianna Hunter

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018, 256 p., Paper, \$18.95.)

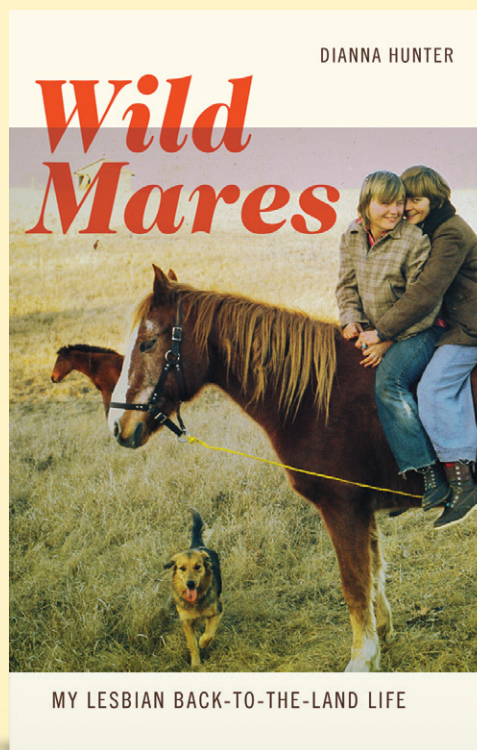
The last twenty years have not been kind to the memoir. In the late aughts, a series of scandals left readers wondering—with good reason—whether their favorite memoirists had really experienced the addictions, romances, and epiphanies they described. An onslaught of celebrity memoirs (I'm looking at you, *Confessions of an Heiress*) devalued the genre almost beyond repair. In a 2011 *New York Times Book Review* article, Neil Genzlinger summed up the opinion of many when he observed, wryly, that memoirs had become standard issue from “anyone who was raised in the '60s, '70s, or '80s, not to mention the '50s, '40s, or '30s.”

Dianna Hunter's *Wild Mares: My Lesbian Back-to-the-Land Life* is an antidote for this kind of memoir fatigue. As if in answer to Genzlinger's plea for writers to abandon memoirs unless they lead to discovery, the book offers revelations in every chapter. Hunter, a retired lecturer in history and women's studies at the University of Wisconsin–Superior, is exactly the kind of person who *should* write a memoir: an expert on an understudied time and place with a willingness to reflect on her role within it.

In *Wild Mares*, that time and place is the rural Upper Midwest of the 1970s and 1980s. After graduating from Macalester College in 1971, Hunter finds herself drawn from the queer feminist networks of the Twin Cities (her recollections of the early years of the Amazon Bookstore Cooperative and the Lesbian Resource Center are invaluable) toward the women's farming collectives that offer her a chance to put her politics into practice. She moves first to Haidiya, a farm outside Gilman, Wisconsin, and then to a series of farms in Aitkin County, Minnesota, chasing her dream of lesbian feminist collective living. That dream, however, proves elusive as friends and lovers move in and out of Hunter's life. At one site, a dairy farm called Del Lago, she runs her own operation and spends a winter caring for her animals alone.

In the 1980s, Hunter advises farmers hurt by price busts, rising interest rates, and a failing credit system. The job leads to a career in farm advocacy, and she rides out the decade struggling against a nationwide farm crisis. She sells her last dairying operation, the Happy Hooper Farm, in 1986, but her experiences as an advocate stick with her. (Between 1987 and 1989 she conducted interviews with her farm-advocate peers and eventually adapted them for print and radio.)

Hunter is modest about her farm skills, which are formidable. They shine through in vivid descriptions of farm chores, from horse breaking and cow testing (sampling and analyzing milk) to fixing a broken water pump and using up the ashes of burned poplar trees. She's humble, too, about her resolve to



come out in the earliest days of gay liberation, when doing so could have made her a target of violence in the Twin Cities as much as in rural areas. “If the cultural rules weren't changing fast enough,” she writes, “we just went on acting as if we had the right to be who we were. . . . We changed the world by acting as if we had already changed it.”

The back-to-the-land movement in which Hunter participated deserves critique. How do you “go back to the land” as a white American feminist when it was never yours to begin with? Hunter, to her credit, acknowledges that the freedom farming offered her was contingent on the displacement of indigenous people. Had she expanded that acknowledgment to include a section on the history of present-day Aitkin County—part of the homeland of the Mille Lacs Ojibwe—she could have tied her experiences to the traditions of land stewardship that preceded her.

Ultimately, the book's greatest strength comes from Hunter's willingness to reckon with the unreliability of memory. Of a scene recalled by a friend, she admits, “I think that came later, but I bow to the possibility that she may be right.” And of another: “Karen tells me that her new lover, Lena, was there too. . . . I can't account for why I'd forgotten that.” Allowing other accounts to coexist beside her own amplifies Hunter's voice and makes *Wild Mares* an example of the memoir genre at its best.

—Lizzie Ehrenhalt

The Great War Comes to Wisconsin: Sacrifice, Patriotism, and Free Speech in a Time of Crisis

Richard L. Pifer with Marjorie Hannon Pifer

(Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2017, 286 p., Paper, \$26.95.)

Can a book about Wisconsin teach us something about Minnesota history? Yes, in the case of Richard and Marjorie Pifer's well-written survey of the Wisconsin home front during World War I. Their book can help us evaluate the claim made by many historians that Minnesota repressed civil liberties more aggressively than most other states during the war. Minnesota's woeful ranking is based on the record of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety (MCPS), the body to which the legislature gave unlimited power for the duration of the war. It was composed of Governor Joseph Burnquist, the attorney general, and five men appointed by the governor, mostly conservative businessmen. Was Minnesota really worse than other states?

Wisconsin and Minnesota had much in common. Upper Midwest neighbors of similar size, each was basically agricultural with one large urban area. The largest city in each state had a socialist mayor (Tom Van Lear of Minneapolis and Daniel Hoan of Milwaukee). Both had many immigrants, including Germans, Scandinavians, and Irish, who were cool toward war with Germany. Wisconsin actually had a higher percentage of German immigrants than Minnesota. In fact, the two states were among the most reluctant to declare war. When the US House voted overwhelmingly in April 1917 for war with Germany, nine (of eleven) Wisconsin and four (of ten) Minnesota congressmen voted "no." All this might predict a similar experience once war was declared.

The Pifers deftly guide the reader through this turbulent period in part by focusing on a small group of leaders who they helpfully separate into three groups. There were the nationalistic, pro-war activists like the aptly named industrialist Wheeler Bloodgood, founder of the Wisconsin Defense League, who sought to impose their brand of "loyalty" on everyone. Countering them were leaders like Senator Robert La Follette, who opposed the war, but once the United States was in it, sought to have it waged, and paid for, consistent with Progressive principles. Between these two poles were "practical politicians" like Governor Emmanuel Philipp, who had little patience for the anti-war movement but "also could not abide the self-righteous super-patriots."

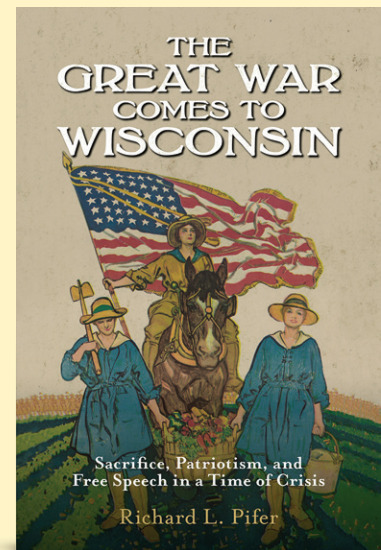
The book credits politicians like Philipp for steering a moderate course. The legislature created a State Council of Defense to supervise war activities, but unlike the MCPS, it was not a businessmen's club. Wisconsin mandated that the council include at least one member representing labor and one representing farmers. Whereas the MCPS established its own militia, the Home Guard, to replace the Minnesota National Guard, which had been federalized, Wisconsin created no

militia. As a result, Wisconsin had to deal with labor disputes by negotiation, while the MCPS could mobilize the Home Guard, as it did during the 1917 transit workers strike. Wisconsin also had no "slacker raids," the sweep arrests of hundreds of young men by the Home Guard in a search for draft evaders.

This was not to say that democratic norms were preserved in Wisconsin. As the Pifers put it, "the war demonstrated the frightening fragility of civil liberties." The State Council of Defense, for example, became increasingly coercive in its efforts to sell Liberty Bonds, which were supposed to be a voluntary way to pay for the war. Some suppression of speech came from government prosecution, but the book also documents widespread vigilante violence, perhaps more than in Minnesota: "A wisecrack in a bar could get one tarred and feathered." However, Governor Burnquist and the MCPS encouraged vigilantism by branding anyone who opposed them as "traitors," while the Wisconsin governor tried to curb such excesses.

This book provides a comprehensive overview of the Wisconsin home front which lays the groundwork for explaining why the two states took different paths. Wisconsin businessmen were very pro-war, but not as organized as their Minnesota peers. As historian William Millikan has shown, the Minneapolis businessmen built the Citizens Alliance, a powerful organization focused on keeping the city union-free. Even before war was declared, they rushed to the legislature to create the MCPS as a weapon against workers and farmers. Wisconsin businessmen were not so proactive, and in any case, Progressives were stronger in Wisconsin, which after all had elected La Follette governor in 1900 and sent him to the Senate in 1905. Socialists were also stronger in Wisconsin, as evidenced by the election of war opponent Victor Berger to a US House seat in 1918. The biggest difference, however, may have been the Nonpartisan League (NPL), which swept to power in North Dakota in 1916 and hoped to replicate this victory in Minnesota in 1918. The NPL's vigorous challenge to Burnquist in the primary was a major factor provoking the MCPS repression. Nothing similar happened in Wisconsin, where the NPL posed no threat to the business elite.

—Greg Gaut





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