Book Reviews

The Grand Portage Story.

By Carolyn Gilman.


THE MINNESOTA Historical Society has done it again! It has issued another outstanding work on an important aspect of the North American fur trade, a history that Americans and Canadians share alike. Besides its considerable publishing output, the Society has contributed to our joint heritage in many ways. Of special note are its part in founding the popular international fur trade conferences and its reconstruction of a North West Company post near Pine City. Not as well known is the prodigious amount of research it has commissioned over seven decades of archaeological and archival investigations.

Much of this endeavor, not surprisingly, has focused on Grand Portage, which had great significance not only in the early development of Minnesota, but in the opening up of North America's interior to European exploration and commerce. Now a quiet backwater off the highway between Thunder Bay and Duluth, this place with its eight-and-a-half-mile portage served as the key link between Lake Superior and the Pigeon River canoe route into the northwest.

The Grand Portage Story is the culmination of all the research and writing that have gone before. Beautifully designed and composed, it pieces together scattered fragments of diverse data, creating in the process a well-documented and highly readable history, which is really three stories integrated into one. The dominant theme, of course, is Grand Portage's central role in the fur trade out of Montreal. Gilman blends new material with old to emphasize not only the entrepôt's emerging transshipping and rendezvous functions but also the momentous events it witnessed, events of long-term impact on the region and its peoples. This part of the story begins with the first use of the portage by the French in 1731 and its assumption by British traders in the 1760s. It continues through the North West Company's transformation of the site into a great rendezvous place and the firm's improvements of both the trail and its upper depot, Fort Charlotte. Making for great drama are accounts of the company's ruthless suppression of would-be competitors, of power struggles within the company itself, of the effect of wars and international diplomacy on the area, and of the fur company's consequent move north to the Kaministikwia River in Canada, where it founded Fort William.

Interwoven into this story are the many illustrious personalities who helped shape Grand Portage's destiny, among them such leading figures in Canadian history as La Vérendrye, Simon McTavish, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, and David Thompson. Gilman also gives prominent place to the French-Canadian voyageurs, their culture, and their essential function in the fur trade. They are little remembered as individuals, except perhaps in Minnesota place names, yet it was their labor that made Grand Portage a major transshipment center on the Great Lakes.

Even for someone familiar with much of this material, Gilman's presentation is fresh and fascinating. For this reader, however, the fur trade story is surpassed by that of the original peoples. In many ways, this book is a summary history of the Lake Superior Ojibway, from Duluth to Thunder Bay. Gilman not only emphasizes the fur trade's complete dependence on native contributions to European exploration, commerce, and survival, but she also stresses the continuity of activity at Grand Portage. She takes their story back into the precontact era and brings it right up to the present.

Of great interest is her clear outline of Ojibway migrations from Sault Ste. Marie to Grand Portage and beyond, including their wars and alliances with other tribes along the way. In light of today's land-settlement cases, the references to territorial ownership are very much au courant. The first British traders in the region found themselves treated as trespassers. As the history of the North West Company proves, they eventually accepted the validity of Indian proprietorship of their own land; their success, they soon discovered, depended entirely on Indian cooperation.

The Nor'westers proclaimed the Indians "free and independent peoples" when in their interest to do so; in practice, however, they preferred the natives "dependent; & consequently industrious and subordinate." Yet the Ojibway survived the inroads of "civilization" with its smallpox and alcohol, its wars and dispersal of their lands, and its exploitation of the region's natural resources. One of Gilman's great contributions to local native history is her tracing of individual family names in government and other records, including those at Old Fort William. She shows the continuity of the Indian story through such successive activities as fishing, mining, and lumbering. The Grand Portage band currently owns and operates the Grand Portage Lodge and Casino, like fur, perhaps, a symbol of native economic reliance on white greed.

The third strand within the text tells how the Grand Portage story came to be uncovered; the site preserved; the reconstruction researched, built and rebuilt, and interpreted.
The book tells the history of the Grand Portage National Monument in full measure. This otherwise splendid work unfortunately is marred by two problematic maps. "The North Shore of Lake Superior" shows Fort William where the reconstruction, Old Fort William, is located—nine miles upriver from the original lakeside fort. Thunder Bay, in turn, is shown at Fort William's original site, whereas both the site and the reconstructed fort are within the city's limits. Like too many maps of fur trade routes, "Places and Waterways of the North American Fur Trade" shows Lake Athabasca as the furthest destination. It would have been appropriate, instead, to portray the extent of trade and exploration by the end of the Nor'westers' tenure at Grand Portage, as Gilman herself has outlined. Another quibble concerns Eastman Johnson, whose wonderful paintings enhance the book, but whose visit to Grand Portage—a momentous event in itself—is not explained.

But these are very minor criticisms. This excellent book should remain in print for a long time. Carolyn Gilman's careful research and eloquent prose deserve much praise, as do the many researchers preceding her, among them Alan R. Woolworth, whose contributions rightly are acknowledged on the title page. Once again, the Minnesota Historical Society has enriched the literature of both the fur trade and the Indians for the enlightenment not only of Minnesotans, but for many fur trade history enthusiasts beyond its borders, including Canada.

Reviewed by Jean Morrison of Thunder Bay, who retired in 1990 after fifteen years as historian at Old Fort William. Among her publications are five articles on Nor'westers for the Dictionary of Canadian Biography and The North West Company in Rebellion: Simon McGillivray's Fort William Notebook, 1815 for the Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society (1988).

By Elizabeth Faue.

This is an important book about the failure of the labor movement to acknowledge the connection between productive and reproductive labor and the importance of women's work to the family economy and public arena. As the folk song says, "Every generation has to win it again/Pass it on to your sister/Pass it on." The author's innovative thesis is that union strength hinges on female support networks rooted in community activism.

Two Minneapolis strikes illustrate her thesis: the telephone strike in 1919 and the strike against layoffs in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) sewing project in 1939. In both, the strikers received a tremendous amount of public support. When police threatened to carry off a female picket from the line during the phone strike, the crowd rescued her. "Parades of strikers were cheered, and the head of Northeast Neighborhood House arranged meetings for the women." The WPA strike was a violent one, because the unions and their allies on the political left challenged the welfare state as well as women's rights to a job in a depression. The police fired at workers and their supporters. Seventeen were seriously injured, including two children; an unemployed older man was killed. In protest of their lack of sisterly solidarity, strikebreakers were not only jeered at, but disrobed. Even though women made up only 10 percent of the workers on the WPA local projects, they nonetheless led the picket lines. They became the heroes and villains of the strike, lionized in the labor press as self-sacrificing mothers and vilified in the courts as viragos and opportunists.

In Minneapolis, despite a tradition of social activism and conditions encouraging labor militance, women remained marginal, excluded from positions of power in the workers' movement and society. Faue traces female migration from the farms in the early 1900s, bringing women to Twin Cities boardinghouses and ethnic associations, to jobs in clerical or service industry in the 1920s, and to high unemployment in the 1930s. She views labor organizing as another family strategy for defense and survival, along with careful consumption, sewing, and gardening. During World War II more women were employed in industry at higher wages, but the unions became more structured and, therefore, women's participation weakened. In the 1940s the state and union bureaucracies took over, and worker involvement and radicalism declined.

Faue imaginatively explores the changing visual and linguistic portrayal of masculinity and femininity in the labor press. As the 1930s represented a crisis in men's wage-earning capacity, there followed a crisis of masculinity. Female workers were almost entirely absent from the labor papers in that decade, their voices seldom recorded or activities described. Outside of the role of nurturer and victim, women had little place in this labor iconography. Union representatives were illustrated in cartoons and posters as massive, muscular men, sometimes as sleeping giants. Nonunion guys and bosses were frail, tiny critters. In the 1940s there was a switch. The male union organizer was now depicted as a dapper Romeo and the worker an adoring, passive female.

This book is exceptional in that it is a feminist history, but the women are not ghettoized. Men's and women's experiences and culture are explored as they intersect. Faue uses literature, the labor press, visual materials, and oral histories to make her theoretical case: that female networks of community-based unions were responsible for the strength of labor in Minneapolis. The highly centralized, national, male-led unions gave stability to the locals but undermined their power. I only wish she wrote with richer details, longer passages from the voices of the workers, and more substantial excerpts from their diaries.

Most historians have written about the cradle of American capitalism, the Northeast—Lowell, Lawrence, Lynn, Paterson, and Pittsburgh—in the nineteenth century, so it is refreshing to read a book about the industrial Midwest in the twentieth century. Minneapolis is significant, as it had a diverse and commercially based economy, rather than a single
industry, and a large and politically active Eastern European and Scandinavian population with strong ties to the left. The strength of the left was expressed largely through the Farmer-Labor, Socialist Workers, and Communist parties. Their legacy of consumer cooperatives, worker education, and politics as a form of community celebration and connection were responsible for the success of labor militance. As these left-wing groups were so responsible for the rise and fall of Minneapolis’s radicalism, I only wish Faue had explored them in more depth instead of mentioning them in passing. Although this is a community study, Faue’s theoretical framework is much broader. Her thesis could be applied to any city.


By John Mark Hansen.
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. 265 p. Cloth, $38.00; paper, $15.95.)

CONGRESS and the farm lobby have been inextricably linked since the 1920s. Lawmakers had maintained a laissez-faire attitude toward agriculture through the early twentieth century, but the agricultural depression of the 1920s brought increasing demands from farm organizations for intervention to benefit farmers. Members of Congress, however, could not afford the technical expertise or the time to master the complexities of agricultural policy making. As a result, in the absence of party leadership, the farm lobby—particularly the Farm Bureau—began to provide information to Congress. It also offered solutions that agricultural constituents favored and marshaled the farm vote to support or reject representatives and senators, based on their aid to agriculture. When Congress recognized that the economic problems of agriculture would not be resolved easily or quickly, it increasingly relied on the Farm Bureau for advice. Once Congress gave access, the farm lobby remained a powerful influence on policy formulation for as long as Congress considered its information reliable and as long as it met that body’s political needs.

By the late twentieth century, however, the farm lobby no longer exercised the strong influence it had a half-century earlier. During the 1950s, the Farm Bureau alienated many members of Congress from the major agricultural states by advocating a flexible price-support program. Moreover, the political power of the farm states waned rapidly after the U.S. Supreme Court required reapportionment based on population in 1964 and farmers declined to less than 2 percent of the population. As a result, representatives and senators from the farm states lost both in numbers and in power. Among the farm lobby today, specific commodity organizations wield the most influence on Congress because they continue to provide the best technical and political information.

John Mark Hansen, assistant professor of political science at the University of Chicago, has written a fascinating book about the farm lobby’s successes and failures in gaining access to Congress. Hansen is particularly concerned with the role of the Farm Bureau in shaping agricultural price-support policy. He argues that interest groups, such as the bureau, gain access when legislators are certain that a given problem will recur and that a specific group provides the best information. By dealing with interest groups, members of Congress can address policy matters that will aid important constituents and solidify support at election time. During the 1920s, the lawmakers learned that the major political parties did not offer viable solutions to the farm problem. Consequently, they began to listen to the farm lobby’s advice in shaping policy. Usually, they supported the lobbyists’ wishes, even at the expense of party discipline, if the proposals helped their constituents. If the proposals did not, then legislators generally voted according to party line. Hansen argues that, overall, the farm lobby has provided efficient and effective service to Congress.

Hansen based his research on the farm-policy debates in Congress and on the interactions of legislators and agricultural groups, particularly during the hearings of the House Agriculture Committee. Farm policy is complex and often confusing, and Hansen makes the material understandable. Although he does not review specific programs in historical context, he analyzes the congressional process that created them. For anyone who has been confused about agricultural policy, this book will help clarify the decision-making process, provided a few cautions are kept in mind.

Although Hansen convincingly traces the origin and development of the farm lobby’s access to Congress, he overlooks the importance of the Department of Agriculture in shaping policy. Beginning in 1933, that department took the initiative for writing agricultural policy away from Congress. Certainly, the Department of Agriculture works with the major farm groups to ensure widespread support, but the technocrats in the executive branch exercise far more authority for crafting farm policy than the author acknowledges. In addition, he overworks his assertion of the importance of the competitive advantage that some groups have over others in providing information to Congress, as well as the significance of the recurrence of problems. All of this makes for unnecessary repetition.

Still, anyone coming to this complex subject for the first time will do well to start with this volume, but it should be read in conjunction with the works of Willard W. Cochrane, Murray R. Benedict, Ross B. Talbot, and Don F. Hadwiger. Hansen’s book will be a useful addition to all collections of American agricultural history. He has written an excellent introduction to the influence of the farm lobby on Congress.

By Roger Mitchell.

ROGER MITCHELL, a poet, went to upstate New York in the early 1980s to do some research for a book of poems and to recapture something of his Adirondacks youth. He left with some of that work done but, more important, he took with him a new passion: Israel Johnson, about whom he had read the following 1836 journal entry: "Johnsons lies at the outlet of Clear Pond has been here four years with his family. Began with his hands and has built 2 saw mills himself of a peculiar construction and is said to have been offered 3000 Dollar[s] for his place." This man's anonymity, his ordinariness, his invisibility, captured Mitchell, almost literally. He spent the next six years in various New York township and county offices, living rooms of local historians, the Syracuse University library, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the interlibrary loan office of Indiana University trying to re-member Johnson's life.

Mitchell shows dramatically and sometimes painfully the complexity of such reconstructions. People move around, they have troubles, they make friends and enemies, they leave loose ends. Most of our lives are not lived neatly, so why would we expect that we could reconstruct them tidily? We live and we leave questions. So did Johnson, lots of them. Mitchell does a good job of answering many of them. He found pieces of Johnson's story on the landscape (Johnson's Crossing), in the federal and state censuses (several counties in New York and elsewhere), in land records (confusing), in military records, in patent records (for three sawmilling inventions), and even two letters from him and a discussion of his business in the papers of Gerrit Smith, the philanthropist, reformer, and congressman from New York State. Mitchell recounts, in almost diary fashion, how he searched for Johnson, even including a soul-satisfying epiphany in front of a microfilm reader. In the process we see that the historian's work calls for persistence, patience, imagination, and, yes, passion. We learn the facts of Johnson's life as we see the path of Mitchell's odyssey. What we do not know in either case is much about the spirits, souls, and motives of either man. Mitchell makes the connections, but he does not fully make the story.

Anyone who has fingered her grandfather's homestead papers or his great-grandmother's quilt knows the thrill of historical connection, attachment, rootedness. It is in this lengthening of the self that many people find the impulse to the historian's work. Mitchell is not explicitly looking for himself or his own family—since Johnson is no relation—but he must have found some connection to this man, some deep sympathy with his story. Why doesn't he tell us? In this silence, he leaves the book's central passion and mystery unexplored. Why Johnson? What part of Mitchell's self did Johnson lengthen? How and why? Mitchell doesn't have to tell us, of course, and as a poet he writes that he prefers showing to telling. If he had told us a little more, however, he would have added texture, context, and deeper meaning to this otherwise loving and lovely account of two men's lives.

Reviewed by ANNETTE ATKINS, a professor of history at St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, who has a strong interest in regional history. Her publications include Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873–78 (1984) and "Minnesota: Left of Center and Out of Place," in Heartland. Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States (1988).

News & Notes

MINNESOTA HISTORY, for the first time in its seventy-seven-year history, is now available to individuals on a subscription basis at $15.00 per year. Previously, individuals received the magazine only as a benefit of membership in the Minnesota Historical Society. To subscribe, call or write the MHS Order Department, 345 Kellogg Blvd. West, St. Paul, MN 55102-1006, (612) 297-3243 or 1-800-647-7827.

THE DAGUERREIAN Annual, 1992, the 256-page yearbook of the Daguerreian Society, contains two articles of particular interest to students of early Minnesota photography. "The Diary of Tallmadge Elwell, Pioneer Daguerreotypist, 1852" by James Taylor Dunn includes a biography of the young photographer who later turned to other businesses to support himself and his family. The bulk of the article reprints parts of Elwell's regular journal, his entire "daguerreotyping diary," and part of the diary of his wife, Margaret Miller Elwell.

Bonnie G. Wilson's "St. Anthony Falls on Silver: A Daguerreotype Collection" lists the ten photographers who operated in early St. Anthony and Minneapolis. It concentrates on the three known to have photographed the falls and reproduces twelve images.
from the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. Although published in a limited edition, copies of the annual may be obtained from the editor, Peter E. Palmquist, 1183 Union St., Arcata, CA 95521.

THE thirty-sixth annual Missouri Valley History Conference will be held in Omaha, Nebraska, March 11-13, 1993. Proposals for papers and sessions in all areas of history are welcome. Send proposals, accompanied by one-page abstracts and vitae, by October 15, 1992, to Dale Gaedert, MVHC Coordinator, Department of History, University of Nebraska, Omaha 68182.

THE NATIONAL Archives has published the first three titles in a new primary-source series. Documents from the National Archives: Watergate, Internment of Japanese Americans, and Women in Industry in World War II. Each 45-48-page booklet includes a preface, historical context for the documents, an introduction to document analysis, a list of primary documents, nine to fourteen reproductions, suggestions for further reading, and basic information about using the National Archives. The booklets may be ordered for $5.95 each from Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 2460 Kerper Blvd., P.O. Box 339, Dubuque, IA 52004.

IN TIME to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of author Maud Hart Lovelace, the Borealis Books series of the Minnesota Historical Society Press has issued a paperback reprint of the novel Early Candlelight (1992, 322 p., $12.95). In the book's new introduction, historian Rhoda R. Gilman discusses the accuracy of Lovelace's entertaining portrait of life at Fort Snelling in the 1830s.

Another new Borealis reprint is Johan Bojer's The Emigrants (1991, 351 p., $12.95), first published in 1925. The popular Norwegian novelist wrote this story of homesteading in North Dakota to celebrate the centennial anniversary of Norwegian emigration to America. A new introduction by Ingeborg R. Kongslien of the University of Oslo assesses Bojer's place among other authors of emigrant fiction.


INTO the Breach: American Women Overseas in World War I (New York: Viking, 1991, 368 p., cloth, $29.95) is a lively, comprehensive examination of female participation in all phases of the war— including pacifists' protests. Authors Dorothy and Carl J. Schneider make excellent use of diaries, letters, memoirs, and fiction to construct their story. They estimate that 25,000 American women served the war effort, often despite a lack of enthusiasm on the part of the male military hierarchy. Separate chapters detail the experiences of women's organizations in the American community abroad; women in medical work; those who dispensed "aid and comfort" in cantonneries, through book programs, and by entertaining troops; telephone operators; reporters; novelists; and protesters. A particularly interesting chapter examines the shameful treatment of black soldiers and the reluctance of American organizations to allow qualified black women to join the effort overseas.

ALBANY, the Heart of Minnesota, a centennial history compiled by that town's Heritage Society and written by Jeanette Blonigen Clancy, offers readers a detailed look at local history as well as the ethnic roots and culture of this part of Stearns County. Four chapters break the century into eras: the pioneer time; after the railroad; the turn of the century; and the modern period. Genealogists will appreciate the focus on families, the particular places in Europe from which they emigrated, and their later accomplishments. Each chapter also includes an overview of local history, tying town developments to national occurrences such as Prohibition and the Great Depression. The 176-page book, published in 1991, also includes more than two hundred photographs, a topical index, and a name index. It can be ordered from the Albany Heritage Society, P.O. Box 25, Albany, MN 56307 for $19.95. Please add $2.00 for shipping of one copy, plus 50 cents for each additional book.

CURRENTS, A Minnesota River Valley Review is a quarterly magazine recently launched by the Scott County Historical Society. Each issue is a potpourri of articles on environmental, historical, and contemporary topics related to the region. Subscription information is available by writing to CURRENTS, 4890 South Robert Trail, Eagan, MN 55123.


The reader will search either book in vain for critical analysis or for substantial discussion of this important artist's relationship to a long sculptural tradition. The audience for Spirit of Bronze will find, however, an appreciative meditation on Granlund's creation of "myths and metaphors for the transcendence of the human spirit." As in the earlier book, there is a brief biographical note, an explanation of the bronze-casting process, and an illustrated catalog of Granlund's sculptures—584 bronzes made between 1950 and 1991. The book is available from Premier Gallery, 141 South 7th St., Minneapolis 55402.

Thomas O'Sullivan

THE SUMMER 1991 issue of the Journal of the American Society of Germans from Russia includes an article, "Volga German-Russians in Minnesota," by Carol J. Halverson. Based partly on the author's oral history research, the article describes several communities settled by this little-studied ethnic group: Riverview, on St. Paul's west side; and various towns in McLeod and Sibley counties, where immigrants worked in the sugar-beet fields.