Curator’s Choice

For several years I have enjoyed watching Lillian Colton work her magic in the Agriculture Building at the Minnesota State Fair. Her 16 years as a crop-art competitor ended in 1982 after she had won all the awards many times over, but she continues to demonstrate her art there.

An Owatonna resident who has attended the state fair for 79 consecutive years, Colton has a following of friends and clients, many of whom come back just to order their next creation while watching her demonstrate her mastery of the medium she describes as relaxing. For each work, Colton cuts out the support-ground shape from nonwarping canvas board and coats the area she will be working on with white glue. She then puts a dab of glue (craft glue for heavier seeds) on the end of a toothpick, which she uses to pick up, place, and move the seeds around. (Tweezers are too messy, and hands tire quickly during the estimated 30 hours it takes to complete a piece.)

The use of seeds, shells, human hair, and wool to create pictures dates to the midnineteenth century in America. As a competition category, crop art (not seed art, since weed seeds are not eligible) began at the state fair in 1965. Few if any other state fairs feature this competition. Although Colton no longer competes at Minnesota’s fair, several dozen of her works are displayed there every year, and she continues to enter the Steele County fair, where she also serves as co-superintendent of fine arts.

Colton is well known for her portraits of celebrities ranging from President Richard Nixon to Kirby Puckett, Barbra Streisand, and Oprah Winfrey. She is particularly fond of bald eagles, however, and chose to create this one for the Minnesota Historical Society. The 29-1/4 x 21-1/2 inch framed eagle is formed from hollyhock, alfalfa, red clover, bromegrass, watermelon, salsify, and cantaloupe seeds; it floats on a blue-painted canvas sky. —Marcia G. Anderson, head of museum collections and chief curator
This book evokes vivid memories of my grandmother’s four-room tar-paper house in Ponsford, a place I called home in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Things hadn’t changed much in those intervening years. Like the tar-paper houses Hilger describes, my grandmother’s house contained Midewiwin objects tucked in a corner. My grandmother’s few dresses were hung on nails, a barrel stove dominated the middle room and heated the entire house, and a kerosene lamp sat on the oilskin tablecloth in the kitchen. The material culture that Hilger described in 1936 remained fairly consistent up to the time my grandmother left Ponsford in 1964.

M. Inez Hilger, a Benedictine sister working on her thesis in social sciences, was influenced by the two great assimilationist agents affecting American Indians—the federal government and Christianity. The former commissioned the study, while the latter most obviously influenced Hilger’s social commentary. Throughout her study, the white man’s way of life is presented as the normative means to social and moral improvement. For example, Hilger suggests that a homemaker be employed to “train the future mothers of the reservation in the arts that contribute to finer and better living conditions.”

Although Hilger defines “home” as a place where families “exchange affections, sympathy, and kindness,” absent from Chippewa Families is a real sense of the warmth, humor, and caring of the people Hilger studied. She had no statistical measures to gauge the affection in the homes. Instead, Hilger measured the material wealth and equated it, ethnocentrically, with “an enriched and comforting environment.” In retrospect, we didn’t have much by middle-class American standards, but we had the strength and wealth of a caring and sharing family and community.

I knew as a child that we were different. Why else would tourists park on the road and take our pictures? I never imagined that our so-called poverty was the reason for their curiosity. We giggled and stared back at their shiny cars, and when we were tired of them, we climbed the nearest tree and hid from their cameras.

Hilger used material culture to divide the Chippewa into groups, specifically the tar-paper house, frame-house, and rehabilitation-house dwellers. Counting objects associated with traditional Chippewa culture and other possessions associated with white culture, she gauged the extent of assimilation experienced by the families.

She found the tar-paper house dwellers, whom she reports were largely full bloods, to be less dependent on objects of white culture, showing “greater efforts at self-help and self-support.” They were “independent, serene and contented.” Evident here is the image of the noble Indian. Those who were purer biologically were somehow better.

Those living in rehabilitation houses were considered to be more assimilated. They resided mainly in the village of White Earth, where, Hilger wrote, they were subject to “drunken debaucheries and loose moral conduct.” Paradoxically, Hilger is saying that those most assimilated had the greatest social problems.

Hilger’s study was not informed by a sufficient theory of cultural change and development. Instead she relied on subjective assessments based on Anglo-European social and moral standards. For example, her work may be compared usefully with George and Louise Spindler’s study of Menomini social and cultural change. In Dreamers with Power the Spindlers demonstrated the importance of long-term residence among a tribal community and the advantage of working with an explicit, critically refined theoretical and methodological position.

Despite my somewhat harsh assessments, I find much to admire in Chippewa Families. It reveals in excruciating detail the material culture of the Chippewa before World War II and before American culture arrived in full force. I appreciate Hilger’s documentation of the social relationships between the Chippewa and various assimilationist agents including schools, churches, the WPA, and the mass media. I enjoyed reading the geographical details. Hilger described not only the history of land ownership on the reservation but the interactions between reservation communities. When reading this book, I imagine Hilger interviewing my great-grandparents, describing
their home, and writing about the people they knew. Social history and material culture evident to Hilger in 1938 come alive again.

Reviewed by Pauline Danforth, a White Earth Ojibway, Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at the University of Minnesota, academic advisor in the College of Liberal Arts, and mother of a soon-to-be-adopted infant son. She is also a writer of prose and poetry, published locally and nationally.

DEAR POPPA: THE WORLD WAR II BERNMAN FAMILY LETTERS
Compiled by Ruth Berman; edited by Judy Barrett Litoff

Isabel Berman did something extraordinary during World War II, although at the time she did not know it. What she did was to take dictation for her children who “wrote” hundreds of letters to their father stationed overseas. A huge sampling of these letters appears in Dear Poppa. It is a wonderful collection indeed. As Litoff points out in a thoughtful introduction, the Berman letters allow us to hear the voices of children during the war, and what is especially significant is that they capture the thoughts, hopes, and fears of children at different ages and stages of development. There is the utter confusion of little Sammy, a preschooler, who is convinced that his father is just like Abraham Lincoln; the slightly older Betsy, who keeps her father informed of the daily goings-on within the family; and the precocious David, age 9 in 1943, who charts the progress of the Allied armies on a map and chides his father for even thinking of moving the family from their home in Minneapolis to California once the war is over: “Now you look here if you dare go to Sacramento you can go by yourself because I’m not going to that horrible place with no lake. I’m going to Hudson Bay. Put that in your pipe and smoke it.”

Clearly, Isabel and her children were exceptional, and Litoff wisely makes no claims for them being an ordinary, representative American family. Isabel and her husband, Reuben, were highly educated Jews, he a physician, she a psychologist with a Ph.D. The letters between the two of them are literate, thoughtful, sometimes playful, and they reflect what we would call a “progressive” approach to childrearing. Nonetheless, the sentiments expressed by the children help us understand how the war years affected children of different ages. Most significant is the simple fact that the war is never far from the children’s thoughts, even young Sammy’s. Writing in June 1944, Sammy denounced Hitler and foresaw the dictator’s demise. “And you know something, when the war is over the Germans will stop fighting us and start fighting Hitler. So there will be nothing left of Hitler, not a trace, just a dead man. And Hitler, you didn’t know, but he is a very wicked man.” And Betsy lets her father know, misspellings and all, how she felt about the war: “If i had wings like a angel I would take some bombs and fli over to germany and japen and bom them. then you could come home sooner. I want you most if all.”

Interspersed with the children’s letters are letters from Isabel to Reuben and from Reuben to each child. We encounter Isabel struggling with the demands of her four children (a baby came in 1942) and letting Reuben know that the war has, indeed, shifted the balance of power within the family: “Now, you may have your views and I mine, but in your absence I am in charge.” And we find Reuben lamenting his separation from his children and realizing the confusion the war creates for his offspring: “And dear little Sammy, who tries so hard to remember his dear loving poppa, now blurred by time and distance into a benign shadow, Abraham Lincoln.” Without fail, these letters offer fascinating insights into children’s perception of war, death, Hitler, Japan, weaponry, and destruction as well as more mundane information about friends, fun, clothes, dogs, and school. While broad generalizations cannot be derived from a source with such obvious limitations, this collection of letters is not to be missed for those interested in war and family life. It is a remarkable source from a remarkable family, and at the end of the book, when we learn in a “Postlude” that David and Sam became physicians and Betsy a mathematician, it comes as no real surprise. Their intelligence and inquisitiveness come shining through in the letters they wrote as wartime children.

Reviewed by Robert L. Griswold, O’Brien Presidential Professor of History at the University of Oklahoma, whose articles and books examine the history of divorce, fatherhood, and western women. His current project is a history of American youth and sport since 1945.

F. K. WEYERHAEUSER, A BIOGRAPHY
By Charles E. Twining

This is the business and family biography of the eldest grandson of Frederick Weyerhaeuser, the German immigrant who founded the family lumber business in Rock Island, Illinois, in 1860. The author has served as family and company historian, having published four previous books about them. This volume covers mainly the second and third generations of the Weyerhaeuser companies, from the end of World War I when young Frederick King Weyerhaeuser entered the business until his retirement as board chairman in 1966.

According to Twining, F. K. Weyerhaeuser pursued two closely linked objectives in his life: the survival of the Weyerhaeuser lumber businesses and the preservation of family unity across the generations. He and his relatives accomplished these objectives by maintaining a decen-
tralized structure, leaving several distinct corporations operating in different cities or towns to provide multiple leadership niches for the men of the family. A more rationalized corporate structure might have led to more efficient operations and better strategic planning for future investments, but it would not have accommodated the family’s career needs or the divergent styles and business judgments of the overlapping generations of leaders. The Weyerhaeusers could afford this loose business structure because the lumber industry was not facing strong technological or marketing pressures for corporate agglomeration. The family owned enough of the nation’s private timberlands to protect its market share and profitability even in moderate recessions. With F. K.’s encouragement they preserved this investment by replanting their cut-over lands, so that by the 1960s they began harvesting second-growth forests.

F. K. himself was quite conservative both politically and in his business strategies. Like nearly all of his business associates, he was a staunch Republican. His wife, Vivian, served as a convention delegate and spent several months in New York working full time on the 1952 Eisenhower campaign. F. K. would speak to any available audience on the dangers of socialism or communism and the evils of federal deficit spending and encroaching regulation. He at least had the ideological consistency to oppose federal spending even for his own lumber industry.

Throughout his business career, F. K. opposed going into debt to finance expansion, and no dramatic innovations in technology, markets, or organizational structure arose from his leadership years. Yet he was one of the more visionary of the conservative cast of Weyerhaeuser men; he was the optimist, the planner, the one to advocate diversification into southern timber lands and paper-products industries. He was the one to push for Weyerhaeuser advertising, brand identification, and public relations, and he was among the first to recognize the political implications of the lumber industry’s actions and to attempt (with little impact, I think) to educate the public on the desirability of private rather than public ownership of the nation’s natural resources.

Twining remarks at the opening of one chapter that “few people find the subject of selling lumber inherently fascinating.” I think most readers of this year-by-year account of a rather muddling third-generation business empire will agree. Twining tells the story clearly, but I doubt that the business and family life of a comparable businessman from a less famous clan would warrant a published biography. Readers attracted to “lives of the rich and famous” will find little glamour here. Vivian did play a leading role in the Metropolitan Opera’s national audition program and, hence, welcomed some prominent musicians as well as business and political figures into the family’s Summit Avenue home, but I was struck more by their relatively mundane lifestyle. There were a vacation home in Florida, a shared hunting-fishing retreat in northern Canada, and only a few trips to Europe or Asia over a lifetime. More often the Weyerhaeusers simply led a conventional life of close family and friends interrupted by the unwelcome demands of frequent travel to coordinate the scattered family businesses.

Reviewed by George D. Green, who teaches economic and business history at the University of Minnesota. He has written on nineteenth-century banking and on aspects of the 1930s depression and has authored a television series on American business history.

Roots of Success: History of the Red River Valley Sugarbeet Growers
By Terry L. Shoptaugh
(Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1997. 271 p. Cloth, $25.00.)

The flat, treeless, fertile, stoneless prairie of the Red River Valley of the North is one of the finest agricultural regions of the North American continent, probably of the world. The valley, which encompasses northwestern Minnesota, eastern North Dakota, and southern Manitoba, is the home of one of the largest concentrations of sugar-beet production on the continent.

Initially, wheat, the traditional frontier crop, was the mainstay of the Red River Valley, then potatoes became the major cash crop, and eventually sugar beets took first place. Under current technology, the heavy organic soils of the valley lend themselves better to beets than most other crops. Beets also can better tolerate excessive moisture, which historically plagues the region. Thus, they have been a key to stabilizing its agricultural economy; however, wet fall seasons are hard on the nerves and, sometimes, the pocketbooks of the growers.

That is the setting for Roots of Success. The author, by virtue of his position as archivist at the Northwest Minnesota Historical Center, became well acquainted with the sugar-beet industry through his collecting data and interviewing growers. He readily admits that he knew virtually nothing about sugar-beet production and little about agriculture. But he listened well and, through extensive use of interviews, has written an interesting history of Red River Valley sugar-beet production and the growers’ association.

Shoptaugh cases into his story with a brief but informative account of how the industry came into being. From that beginning he unravels the story of sugar-beet production in the valley, a story that will prove interesting to residents and, especially, to anyone who knew the pioneers and succeeding generation of growers. The growers’ association commissioned Shoptaugh to write this history and should be pleased with the results.

The book has several flaws, however, that will hamper the possibility of its being read by a wider audience. Most glaring is the lack of documentation. Shoptaugh avoided making citations by alluding to the interviewees or referring to the sources used in the text. This is of little concern to the casual reader but not so to anyone using the book for scholarly research.
In addition, there are inconsistencies, such as the use of “percent” in one sentence followed by “%” in the next. The phrase “more on that later,” a mere crutch, repeats several times. The continuity of the story is interrupted by pages bordered with lines to signify them being offset.

With additional effort by the author and the editor in nearly every case, the material could have been incorporated without breaking the story.

In a major factual error, the book states that in 1961 Bill Dosland recommended that the growers’ association employ a full-time executive director. In fact, Al Bloomquist was employed as the executive director in 1962, and later Bill Dosland was selected as legal counsel. This error might not have been made had Bloomquist, probably the most knowledgeable person on the broad story from 1962 until his retirement in 1992, been interviewed.

The story of the growers’ association is an important part of the region’s history, and the association’s acquisition of American Crystal in 1973 is a watershed in the national agricultural story. These two events make this book a worthwhile read and open the door for a future history of the American Crystal Sugar Company.

Reviewed by Hiram M. Drache, historian-in-residence at Concordia College in Moorhead and the author of eight books and numerous articles on midwestern agriculture. His most recent volume is Legacy of the Land: Agriculture’s Story to the Present (1996).

News & Notes


This year’s judges were Jeffrey Kolnick, associate professor of history at Southwest State University in Marshall, and Linda M. Schloff, director of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, St. Paul. The award includes a prize of $600, which will be presented at the Society’s annual meeting on October 30, 1998.

Our Readers Write: The unidentified clerk shown in a photo accompanying the article on Jazz Age author Thomas Boyd in the Spring 1998 issue of Minnesota History is Joseph Pavlicek (1890–1986), according to Ruth Hedlund and Joseph’s daughter-in-law Lucille Pavlicek, both of St. Paul. The award includes a prize of $600, which will be presented at the Society’s annual meeting on October 30, 1998.

This would explain the puzzling existence of so many copies of each book on the shelves.

A Czechoslovakian immigrant, young Pavlicek settled in St. Paul in 1909. Eventually an accountant for the city, he was a long-time member and officer of the St. Paul Sokol Gymnastic Society and chief promoter of the Sokol’s summer camp in Pine City. His participation in other Czech-American organizations included work as a representative for the St. Paul International Institute and relief efforts for Czechoslovakia during World War II. His papers are deposited in the Immigration History Research Center, St. Paul; those of the G. Sommers and Company are in the Minnesota Historical Society.

READERS of Minnesota History who would like a copy of the table of contents for the eight issues comprising volume 55 (Spring 1996 through Winter 1997–98) may obtain one by writing the editor, 345 Kellogg Blvd. W., St. Paul 55102-1906 or anne.kaplan@mnhs.org.

THE MAJORITY of American women supported the Allied cause during World War II, but U.S. intervention was opposed by a movement led by ultra-right women whose professed desire—to keep their sons out of combat—was mixed with militant Christianity, anticommunism, and anti-Semitism. Glen Jeansonne’s Women of the Far Right: The Mothers’ Movement and World War II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 283 p., cloth, $29.95) examines the motivations of these women, the political and social impact of their movement, and their collaborations with men of the far right and also with mainstream isolationists such as Charles Lindbergh.

The author’s research at the Minnesota Historical Society delved into “the most extensive collection in the public domain” dealing with an aspect of his topic: the Mothers of Minnesota Collection, including the papers of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota that investigated the movement and groups outside of the state.
IN LEWIS CASS AND THE POLITICS OF MODERATION (Kent, Oh.: Kent State University Press, 1996, 416 p., cloth, $39.00) Willard C. Klunder presents a balanced biography and career assessment of a major player in nineteenth-century politics. As governor of Michigan Territory, two-time candidate for the presidency, U.S. senator, and secretary of state and war, Cass was the Democratic Party’s outstanding spokesman for the Old Northwest. Minnesota Territory was formed during his ascendancy, and it was to him that Minnesota’s Democrats looked for help and advice. Klunder’s biography is the first comprehensive work on Cass’s voluminous private papers and correspondence.

USING primary source material, two books portray facets of the lives of nineteenth-century women in Iowa. Tante Johanne, Letters of a Danish Immigrant Family, edited by John W. Nielsen (Blair, Neb.: Lur Publications, 1996, 118 p., paper, $12.95), reproduces selected letters from the 12,000 in the Hansen-Mengers collection in the Danish Immigrant Archive at Dana College in Blair, Nebraska. Dating from 1887 to 1910, the correspondence illuminates the difficult transition of a successful pioneer and mother of 10 children who never felt at home in America. In a story familiar to immigration historians, successive generations became Americanized and left the family’s home in Algona. The trove of letters, translated and left the family’s home in Algona. The trove of letters, translated and left the family’s home in Algona.

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Woman, on the other hand, omits the “underside of pioneer life.” As editor Glenda Riley notes, these writings mostly reflect the experiences of middle-class, educated women, for they are the ones who left behind the diaries, memoirs, and letters excerpted in the volume. Each of the book’s three sections—Seeking a New Home, Daily Life and Family Cares, and Women’s Public Roles and Contributions—contains five or six entries and provides a range of first-person experiences with helpful introductions and annotation by the editor. Published in 1996 by Iowa State University Press, this 300-page paper back is available from the publisher in Ames for $24.95.

“ONLY PEOPLE with short memories forget their migrations,” writes historian Joseph A. Amato in the introduction to To Call It Home: The New Immigrants of Southwestern Minnesota (Marshall, Minn.: Crossings Press, 1996, 117 p., paper, $11.95). Written with John Meyer, John Radzilowski, Donata DeBruyckere, and Anthony Amato, the book was first commissioned as a report to help local officials understand and plan for the newcomers’ needs and their impact on area towns. It concisely compiles comprehensive information—demographic as well as social, cultural, and economic—about the African, Asian, and Hispanic people brought in to work in southwestern Minnesota’s new food-processing industries. Graphs and tables cover most of the demographic information, while chapters address issues of the newcomers’ identity, housing and geography, and attitudes such as “to help or to hate?” Subsequent sections look at individual towns, including Marshall, Tracy, Lynd, and Madelia. In their thoughtful conclusion, the authors recommend cross-cultural understanding as a basis for policymakers’ hard-nosed decisions about the future of their transforming region and the new ethnic groups in-the-making.

A REVISED and greatly expanded version of a popular 1962 publication, Frank L. Klement’s Wisconsin in the Civil War: The Home Front and the Battle Front, 1861–1865 (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1997, 141 p., cloth, $39.00) is a large-format, well illustrated examination of a topic of perennial interest. The author skillfully weaves together the home-front and battle-front threads, beginning with a snapshot of Wisconsin in 1860 and documenting the increasingly nasty partisan squabbling that eventually led to a state supreme court decision against one of Lincoln’s wartime policies. All the while, readers follow Wisconsin troops through each military engagement, learning of individual heroics set against brief histories of all 153 of the state’s regiments. Chapters on Wisconsin’s black soldiers, women during wartime, and soldiers voting in the field shed new light on previously unexamined topics. A “select bibliography” of published sources and theses is a helpful addition for readers who want to know more.

“IF THINGS KEEP UP at the present rate, Minneapolis will have the reputation of having more motion picture theatres than saloons, and it takes some to beat that record,” opined a trade journal in 1914. Kirk J. Besse’s Show Houses, Twin Cities Style (Minneapolis: Victoria Publications, 1997, 165 p., paper, $24.95 plus $4.00 shipping and $1.62 tax for Minnesota residents) lists and describes the more than 330 show houses that provided Twin Citians with a mix of entertainment from 1896 to the present. Chronological chapters follow the industry’s evolution from theaters and nickelodeons to movie palaces, downtown and neighborhood cinemas, “temples of technology,” and, finally, the multiplexes. The book is amply illustrated with playbills and interior and exterior shots of many of the houses in their glory days. Four appendixes list notable Twin Cities showmen, Minneapolis and St. Paul cinemas (with construction dates and final disposition), and the longest running films in Minneapolis history. One word of caution: the author admits that he accepted the showmen’s “no doubt inflated” estimates of theater size, cost, and weekly grosses rather than search out figures in building records and other available sources. Show Houses is available from the publisher, P.O. Box 14625, Minneapolis 55414.

REMINDER: Handsome, sturdy slipcases, open at the back for maximum protection and convenient storage, keep your back issues of Minnesota History within easy reach on your bookshelf. Each container hold eight issues. The maroon-colored cases are embossed with the magazine title and come with a gold-foil transfer for marking the year and volume number on the spine. Available for $9.95 (MHS member price, $8.96) plus tax and shipping from MHS Press: (612) 297-3243 or 1-800-647-7827 and in the Society’s museum store.
From the Collections

Mark O’Leary, Energy Flower, 1993, colored pencil on paper, 3 3/8 x 7 1/16 inches

This small drawing packs the vitality of summer into a few square inches of paper. Mark O’Leary (1953–93) created several hundred such pictures during the last year of his life. An accomplished painter who contracted the AIDS virus while in his thirties, O’Leary found it necessary to work on this small scale as his illness progressed. His drawings have a lively and personal character that is also evident in his papers, presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by Richard Cooper, his partner and fellow artist. —THOMAS O’SULLIVAN, curator of art
New from MHS Press

**Turning the Feather Around**

By George Morrison
As told to Margot Fortunato Galt

In this fascinating self-portrait, George Morrison, who calls himself “an artist who happens to be an Indian,” tells a personal story of a life of changing horizons and artistic achievement. The book is fully illustrated not only with photographs from Morrison’s life but also with many color reproductions of his art. His paintings and sculptures are in the collections of major American museums including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

“When I saw George in the summer of 1994, after a lapse of several years, I sensed that he was ready to tell his story. We began the audio taping at Red Rock, George’s studio home overlooking Lake Superior, drinking coffee brewed strong and aromatic, the way he likes it.

“This book does not pretend to be the last word on George Morrison’s life and art. But it is his word. Only George can paint his own picture, offer us humor and humility in the face of the vast lake, and place bits of driftwood just right to reveal the winding current of his life.” —Margot Fortunato Galt

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