Curator’s Choice

Every summer entrepreneur James J. Hill journeyed from his stately Summit Avenue home to go salmon fishing on the St. John River in Quebec. From his sprawling seven-bedroom lodge built on the bank of the river, Hill and friends set out for the day in their personal canoes piloted by French-Canadian guides. Imbued with the same competitive spirit that had brought them success in business, the fishermen would reconvene at lunch time for the ritual judging of the morning’s catch.

Hill had an eye and pocketbook for the very best in angling function and form. This collection of his fishing gear, recently donated by a family descendant, includes a brass-fitted rod made in London, a reel patented by Edward vom Hofe in 1883, hand-tied flies crafted in Scotland, and a custom-made leather tackle box.

—Adam Scher, museum curator

FRONT COVER: Farm Security Administration photographer Russell Lee roamed northern Minnesota in May 1937 and captured this view of lumberjacks using peaveys to roll and position logs along the bank of the Little Fork River. For a sampling of other New Deal-era scenes from this remote part of the state, turn to the article beginning on page 278. An article on two 1937 strikes by woods workers in this area begins on page 262. Courtesy Library of Congress
In this book, Robert Lavenda examines four Minnesota festivals in depth: Kolacky Days in Montgomery, the Ortonville Corn Festival, the Glenwood Waterama, and the Winter Carnival in St. Paul. His organizing principle, as evident from the title, is an investigation into how festivals create community, particularly in small-town Minnesota. I call this Lavenda’s work because, even though he and Schmid intended it as a dialogue between photographic conceptions and narrative approaches, the narrative dominates.

Throughout, Lavenda assumes, asserts, and examines varied conceptions of community in America. Corn Fests begins with a theoretically oriented chapter on memory and community. It continues with brief historical and contemporary descriptions of the three small-town festivals, examines festivals as markers in the life cycle of small-town inhabitants, and moves to three chapters on the components (food, fun, and carnival) that lead to specific issues in community building. Lavenda goes on to describe the details of organization in the three exemplar festivals, throws in the Winter Carnival for contrast, and ends with some theoretical musings on celebration and community.

Ronald Schmid has included three sections of black-and-white photographs representing events, activities, and people. His work particularly focuses on parades, queen pageants, and general shots of community members working and playing at the festivals.

The real strength of the book lies in the rich description of the community festivals themselves. Lavenda explains the Fourth of July origins of some of the festivals such as Waterama, basing his descriptions on detailed data from newspaper sources, oral histories, and festival archives. He calls attention to the salient features of these festivals with a wealth of sensory detail, citing the “deep, almost earthshaking power of the low brass, the rhythmic drive and thunder of the drum line, the sheer volume of sound, the precise marching, the snap of the flags as the flag twirlers go through their routines” of the high-school marching band, for instance, and its importance in displaying the “young people at another stage of their lives in the community.” By studying the Minnesota Women of Today’s award-winning planning notebook for the Kolacky Days queen pageant and kiddie parade, he evokes the excitement of precision planning and working together for a common goal. He pays attention to specific con-

texts of the festivals at various historical points, situating them as a possible nexus of social, economic, demographic, and political forces.

Lavenda calls attention to the contributions of his graduate students in this process, quoting their field notes and letting readers know that particular people were as involved in studying the festivals as in producing them.

I found several related aspects of Corn Fests problematic, however. Lavenda and Schmid attempted a praiseworthy goal of broadening the audience for a scholarly book on a subject that many people regard as frivolous by definition. Lavenda tells us that he wanted to write neither an academic treatise nor an in-depth history of festivals, not a collection of humorous anecdotes nor a how-to book for festival organizers. He wanted to give the reader an ethnographic perspective and to evoke the festivals and allow the readers to reflect on their own experiences with festival-going. These intentions he accomplished. The theoretical discussion of the relationship between festival and community and the dialogue between the verbal and visual texts work less well. I suspect that the indeterminate audience contributed to this less successful aspect of the book.

Lavenda clearly would like to discuss some complex theoretical features of community but pulls back from the fully fleshed analysis, indicating only the bones. A particularly problematic result is that he mentions aspects that would complicate our understanding of festival as a happy, simple event, but he pulls back every time to talk about festival as it “builds community.” One example is his general treatment of community. I would like to see much more definition, even in a nonacademic treatise, of this concept as Lavenda sees it.

While Lavenda asks us to question the accepted notions of community as a harmonious whole, throughout most of the book he relies on an essentially functionalist notion of community as stable and the Minnesota festival as a contributor to stability; he erases the very differences that he summons. He reminds us that many of these festivals leave out important sectors of the community such as Native American people, farmers, and members of non-dominant ethnic or religious groups but then reasserts festivals as vehicles for reaffirming identity. This would be an excellent opportunity to ask us to consider the lack of dialogue between consensus and nonconsensus concepts of community as they surface in these festivals. After raising questions about the ways in which we negate difference, he then suggests that, structurally, community may only be built from a nondemanding, dauntingly bland vision of common life. “Community festivals cannot press too hard,” he asserts, or too many people will drop out of participation in town affairs—but what if they never do participate in the first place? The festivals tend to reinforce nar-
ratives of dominant identity; what happens to the others? This is a book that does succeed in asking us to think about the relationship of festival and community in small towns and the ways in which these festivals respond (or refuse to respond) to the issues of the day. Lavenda makes many excellent and thoughtful points such as “the current heritage vogue may also foster a treacherous nostalgia, a longing for a past that never existed, a past of quaint clothing and tools, of charming songs in foreign languages, of children who said ‘Yes ma’am’ and ‘No sir,’ where pain, dirt, suffering, intensely hard work, dishonesty, and discrimination never existed.” He brings up the connection between commerce and community in the United States and the ways in which festivals can have meanings never intended by the organizers. Corn Fest will help those who wish a deeper look to consider more analytically the events we take for granted.

Reviewed by Leslie Prosterman, associate professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and author of Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair. Her current research examines aesthetics, art, and public policy in American case law.

Barefoot on Crane Island
By Marjorie Myers Douglas

This charming memoir tells of whole summers spent on an island in upper Lake Minnetonka. 25 miles west of Minneapolis, from 1918 to 1930 when the author was 6 to 18 years old. Its details bring to life a family idyll of deeply loving relationships played out in a natural setting unmarred by electricity, telephones, or stores.

Marjorie’s father, Walter Raleigh Myers, taught German at the University of Minnesota; her mother, Olinia Mattison Myers, had been a librarian. They were Methodist, middle-class WASPs centered in the lives of their three children, of whom Marjorie was the middle, sandwiched between brothers Robert and Everett. When the parents bought their cabin, they owned no car. A system of streetcars took them from Minneapolis to the lake, where the “Yellow Fleet” waited them to the island.

Douglas, now in her mid 80s, vividly captures the splendid details of both natural and family life on Crane Island. Her opening paragraphs recall the feel of bare feet in the grass, the wonder of Dutchmen’s breeches in bloom, the dew sparkling in a spiderweb. She describes herons, loons, and thunderstorms, often lingering on her favorite category, flowers.

Of family life, this memoir describes interactions and the activities of the six-to-nine-year-olds—falling off the pier, forming a pirate club that met in the icehouse, playing tiddly winks with watermelon seeds. Gradually the children grow—caring for each other and others, learning about the opposite sex, becoming expert in gardening, swimming, canoeing, and tennis. Her brothers focus, as well, on boat motors and car engines. In short, Barefoot on Crane Island reveals how children learn on summer islands.

This is Marjorie Douglas’ second book; her first—Eggs in the Coffee, Sheep in the Corn: My 17 Years as a Farmwife—was published in 1994, when she was 82. Her adolescent dream of becoming a writer, formed in part when reading with her mother on Crane Island, she set aside during the realities of the Great Depression in favor of a career in medical social work. She raised three children, spent 17 years as a social worker in the Minneapolis public schools, and helped her husband manage his family farm before returning at last to her dream of writing. She performs her craft simply and well, an inspiring model for anyone wanting to produce his or her own memoir.

Marjorie’s family expected always to take the “Yellow Fleet” to their cabin. In 1919, at the height of water travel, passenger boats landed at Crane Island eight times a day. But by 1924 that service had been reduced to twice daily, and in 1927 it was discontinued. Within these few years so many people had bought cars and traveled on their own that boat service proved unprofitable, forcing the Myerses, too, to buy a car. With cars came suburban sprawl; people began to escape for weekends only, no longer for whole summers. This memoir is suffused with a celebratory sadness for a lost treasure no longer obtainable. Crane Island itself remains undeveloped today, but the suburbs have reached the shore of much of Lake Minnetonka.

This book will appeal to anyone who has had the good fortune, as this reviewer has, to experience family sojourns in island cabins. It will also appeal to those who missed this experience but want to gain it vicariously.

Reviewed by Cynthia Stokes Brown, professor of education at Dominican College, San Rafael, California, and author of five books, including the prize-winning Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement (1986, 1990), Like It Was: A Complete Guide to Writing Oral History (1988), and Connecting with the Past: History Workshop in Middle and High Schools (1994).

By John Radzilowski
(Marshall: Lyon County Historical Society, 1997. 372 p. Cloth, $35.00.)

Marshall’s first 125 years are expertly recalled in the pages of this book. Written for the town’s 125th anniversary celebration, Prairie Town offers readers a narrative that adopts an appropriately boosterish tone without losing sight of larger historical developments. Beginning
with its founding by the Winona and St. Peter Railroad, the settlement’s history is situated in both regional and national contexts. Without intruding on the narrative of a single community, the author takes pains to let readers know that Marshall’s story is shared by many cities and towns in the American West. Radzilowski’s enviable ability to integrate these multiple perspectives is surely due to his background as both a long-time resident of Marshall and as a professionally trained historian.

Readers interested in the evolution of American cities will especially appreciate Prairie Town. Radzilowski understands that Marshall has been an urban place throughout its history, and so the book is organized around issues familiar to urban historians. Based extensively on the files of Marshall’s local newspapers, the book’s heart consists of seven chapters. While these chapters unfold in essentially chronological order, Radzilowski effectively uses specific urban-history themes to explain each era: railroad, regional prominence, often using local newspapers to enrich the book, they also make great use of research papers prepared for its history department.

Throughout Prairie Town, Radzilowski displays a keen eye for the insightful and, often, humorous anecdote. Special “features” recounting colorful aspects of Marshall’s past are interspersed with thematic chapters. The section on Marshall’s rivalry with Tracy, another Lyon County town built by the Winona and St. Peter Railroad, is particularly enjoyable. Marshall and Tracy fought for regional prominence, often using local newspapers to hurl vicious accusations at the other. Yet, while these special sections enrich the book, they also make for the odd, jarring transition. The chapter on Marshall as a railroad town, for example, concludes by noting the hardships faced by early settlers. That subject then leads off the following chapter on Marshall as pioneer town. Unfortunately, the two chapters are separated by a section on “125 Years of Fun,” not quite the message of the surrounding chapters.

While the book paints a positive portrait of Marshall, it does not shy away from dealing with less attractive episodes. The reader is constantly reminded of the town’s struggles to survive in an often hostile natural world. From nineteenth-century fires to twentieth-century floods, Marshall has always fought to master the challenges of nature.

What is more, Radzilowski often notes how the actions of Marshall’s boosters and builders have had unintended consequences. Take, to give a recent example, the long fight to win a college. After competing with the likes of Redwood Falls and years of intense lobbying at the legislature, Southwest Minnesota State College opened in 1967, just when campus protests against the Vietnam War and other perceived injustices were dominating campuses across the country. This meant that many Marshall residents found themselves at political and cultural odds with the students attending the new college.

In the end, then, Radzilowski honors his hometown by producing a book that locals will treasure. Even better, those less familiar with Marshall, like this reviewer, will also learn much from his account about the region, the state, and the nation.

Reviewed by Christopher W. Kimball, chair of the department of history and coordinator of interdisciplinary studies, Augsburg College, where he teaches courses on urban history and the history of the Twin Cities.

“The Voice of the Crane Echoes Afar”: The Sociopolitical Organization of the Lake Superior Ojibwa, 1640–1855
By Theresa M. Schenck

This is an interesting and challenging book on the southwestern Ojibwe. Using primarily ethnohistorical methods and sources, Schenck traces their movement from the Sault Ste. Marie area to the south shore of Lake Superior and into Minnesota. As part of the same process, she traces the rise of a larger “tribal” Ojibwe identity from what were once separate bands scattered in the area of the eastern portion of Lake Superior and northwestern Lake Huron.

Well written and quite modest in length, the book uses only a few examples to help bolster its conclusions. But the author’s conclusions are not conventional; in fact, the book is really a foray, even attack, on conventional wisdom about Ojibwe cultural change, the influence of the fur trade on that change, the nature of Ojibwe leadership, how clans or totems functioned in daily life, the origin of the tribal name, and the supposed importance of Chequamegon Bay as an early settlement site. Schenck’s main aim focuses on earlier scholars’ assertion that Ojibwe participation in the fur trade dramatically altered or diminished native culture. Instead, she argues hard that the fur trade only amplified an already ongoing process of cultural change among the Ojibwe. She asserts that the fur-trade period was a time of cultural continuity or natural changes rather than externally derived cultural change.

For example, she argues that Ojibwe sociopolitical organization remained unchanged from the first records of contact in the 1640s to the 1850s. More as a footnote, she asserts that swift and oftentimes tragic cultural change came as a result of reservation life created by the many Ojibwe-U.S. government treaties.

This work is striking in its unevenness. Schenck’s arguments range from being elegant and using fresh new
sources to making points that are highly generalized and polemical. The argument that the original Ojibwe name came from a band of people whose descendents would be known as the Crane clan is very convincing. Shennick neatly demonstrates the preeminence of this clan in the early 1800s at Chequamegon Bay. On the other hand, Schenck makes critical assertions—such as “the move westward [was] more for new hunting grounds than the fur trade”—without much supporting evidence. She treats the on-and-off-again warfare with the Iroquois and, later, the Sioux more as an explanation for movement and an agent of ongoing change cementing a larger Ojibwe identity than as a force for change set in motion by the fur trade or Euro-American expansion. Schenck also brushes off the issue of over-trapping in the area between 1800 and the 1830s with the quick answer that it was really over-population that depleted resources.

The author is surprisingly dismissive of the historicity of Ojibwe oral traditions. Instead, she views this material as being more reflective of band perceptions and hoped-for history than an alternative source of fact. Accordingly, she prefers to use historical records as primary evidence. One of the fine contributions of this work is her fresh reading of the early primary sources and deciphering the names of the early bands through their many spellings, misspellings, and translations. Schenck’s prior training in romance languages and her mining of some new, early sources make this a very refreshing read.

In the introduction the author makes the very honest point that she wrote this book to help herself and others understand her grandmother’s people. She is clearly sympathetic toward her subject. This little volume does much to challenge many conventional thoughts that have, in their repetition, nearly become fact. Schenck is wonderfully successful in convincing me about a number of these points, but on others she appears to be trying too hard to put forward the best positive interpretation available.

Reviewed by Timothy Cochrane, superintendent of Grand Portage National Monument, who is currently conducting ethnographical research on the leadership and territory of the Grand Portage Ojibwe and their use of Minong-Isle Royale.

**NEWS & NOTES**

A MODEL family-history publication, *Pioneer Families of Minnesota and Their Puritan and Quaker Heritage* (New York: Heptagon Press, 1998, 310 p., hardback, $49.95) should interest not only kin and others engaged in researching their own family backgrounds but also readers who want a vivid, personalized view of aspects of Minnesota Territory and state. Compiled by Henry Hollinshead Morgan assisted by family members and other researchers, the book traces the Hollinsheads, Rices, Bakers, and Kneelands, their ancestors and descendants, from England through colonial America and pre-territorial Minnesota to the present. Early and prominent migrants from New England and the mid-Atlantic states to Minnesota, the families left a wealth of materials both in private possession and public libraries, including the chronicles of Ellen Rice Hollinshead, which describe life in early Minnesota Territory. These have been supplemented with impressive further research as well as photographs, reproductions of documents, and paintings to impart the context and feeling of the times. Ancestor charts and a names index complete the volume, which is available from the Minnesota Historical Society’s museum store (651-296-4694 or 800-657-3773) and the Ramsey County Historical Society (651-222-0701). All proceeds from sales benefit these two societies.

THREE new guides were published by the National Archives and Record Administration in the series *The Trans-Mississippi West, 1804–1912* (Washington, D.C.: NARA, 1996). They are *Part III: A Guide to the Records of the Department of Agriculture for the Territorial Period* (397 p.), and two sections of *Part IV: A Guide to Records of Offices of the Secretary of the Interior for the Territorial Period* (Section 1: *Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior the Commissioner of Railroads* [250 p.] and Section 2: *Records of Select Agencies: The U. S. Geological Survey, the National Park Service, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Mines and Reclamation, and the Offices of Territories and Education* [216 p.]). These guides help unlock the vast research potential of the records for scholars interested in the settlement and development of the West. Previous volumes of the *Guide* have won archival prizes. Order from NARA, 1-800-234-8861.

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 (651) 297-3243 or 1-800-647-7827 and in the Society’s museum store.
In *The Cabins, Ely*, William Schwartz captured the classic sights of a Minnesota summer: the white birch trees, pure blue sky, and log cabins that have meant “up north” to generations of Minnesotans. Schwartz (1896–1977), a Chicago artist, brought a modernist touch to his painting, especially in the bright colors and the crystal-like shapes of rocks along the path. This 1928 oil painting was added to the Minnesota Historical Society Collection through an Annual Fund purchase.
MHS PRESS PRESENTS

BUILDING COMMUNITY, KEEPING THE FAITH
German Catholic Vernacular Architecture in a Rural Minnesota Parish

By Fred W. Peterson

The German Catholic immigrants who founded St. John the Baptist parish on the central Minnesota prairie effected a remarkable transfer of tradition to their new environment. Compelling reading for anyone interested in the complex influence that European culture exerted on the development of America, this book reveals how inherited folk culture, aesthetic values, and religious beliefs were directly embodied in the brick farmhouses, dairy farms, and churches the immigrants built between 1858 and 1915.

“This is a thoroughly and delightfully grounded study of German-American rural buildings and the life inside them. Creatively interpreting drawings, photographs, interviews, and archival sources, Peterson shows how German settlers in Minnesota wove social and religious meaning out of individual homes—all turned, as the author puts it, to keeping ‘a good farm maintained in the family name.’”—Paul Groth, University of California, Berkeley, co-editor of Understanding Ordinary Landscapes

198 pages, 61 photos, 41 drawings, 7 maps, 9 engravings
Cloth, ISBN 0-87351-368-1, $39.95
MHS member prices: $35.96 and $17.96

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