Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century
By Dionicio Nodín Valdés

**Barrios Norteños is an urban history** of the oldest and largest barrio in Minnesota. Although *Barrios Norteños* is a local history, Valdés uses St. Paul as a “window” to other urban Mexican communities throughout the Midwest. Valdés successfully combines a more traditional historical narrative with numerous social, economic, and political theories. The result is an enjoyable history that makes a number of bold claims about Mexican Americans in the Midwest sure to spark debate.

Valdés’s previous book, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917–1970* (1991), focused on agricultural labor and life. In *Barrios Norteños* Valdés details the intricate tie between rural work and the urban experience, demonstrating that the line between “rural” and “urban” is not a clear one in midwestern Mexican American history. The text is constructed chronologically from the early to the late 1900s. Within this frame Valdés describes three “cycles” of history: the formation of Midwest Mexican communities and the inequality of the 1900–1930s; Mexicans’ move into and hold in the industrial working class from World War II onward; and the industrial restructuring and unprecedented growth of the 1980s and 1990s, returning full circle to the types of social relations and rationales seen in the early 1900s.

The two stated goals of *Barrios Norteños* are to reconstruct the place of twentieth-century Mexicans in the urban Midwest through the history of St. Paul and to examine group inequality, a driving theme of Chicano social science research. Valdés makes frequent reference to how these experiences have been portrayed and understood by both Mexicans and non-Mexicans. And while race and class analyses are primary, inextricable issues of ethnicity, nationality, and gender are woven throughout. While theory is important, it is Valdés’s ability to tell good stories that makes the text compelling. Some stories, such as the destruction of the West Side barrio beginning in 1959, seem almost unbelievable—were it not for their abundance and consistency for more than a century.

The boldest conclusion Valdés draws in *Barrios Norteños* is that for more than 100 years Mexicans in St. Paul have remained overwhelmingly a working people who do not achieve economic or social equality with the majority population, despite their many generations in the region. This point challenges the recurring notion that Mexicans are just the latest group of immigrants to the Midwest, who can assimilate and excel if given enough time and desire. Valdés successfully argues that, with the exceptions of African or Native Americans, Mexicans have experienced inequality longer and in more ever-evolving ways than European ethnic and immigrant groups in the region. This contrasts with the Mexican experience in the urban Southwest, where group upward mobility is more common despite similar systems of discrimination and segregation. This claim of enduring stratification based largely on race and economics is supported by meticulous research in more than 26 U.S. and Mexican archives, 20 years of interviews, judicious use of theory, carefully selected examples and statistics, and continuous comparison to related secondary literature.

Valdés proves that decades of concentrated research on local and regional history pay off in detailed and complex scholarship. *Barrios Norteños* is a “must read” not only for those interested in the history of St. Paul but for anyone interested in a greater understanding of the Mexican American experience in the United States.

Reviewed by Susan Marie Green, assistant professor of Chicano studies and history and coordinator of American studies at California State University, Chico. An Andrew Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Humanities in the Spanish department at Bryn Mawr College from 1997 to 1999, she has published articles on Mexican Americans in the Midwest and is currently working on a book, *Zoot Suiters: Past and Present*.

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Cooperative Commonwealth: Co-ops in Rural Minnesota, 1859–1939
By Steven J. Keillor

**Steven Keillor has made** another important contribution to Minnesota history with his detailed and provocative study of cooperatives. Keillor places the history of co-ops “at the intersection of politics, economics, ethnicity, and religion.” By doing so, he also contributes to rural history in general by analyzing farm families in all of their facets. For too long, many of us have tended to write one-dimensional studies of farm families, seeing them either as businesses, political radicals or conservatives, parts of ethnic or religious communities, or either the anchors of patriarchal relations or the birthplaces of feminist challenges to male supremacy. By using co-ops as a lens
through which to view farm life, Keillor challenges us to understand the rural world in all of its messy complexity.

This book cuts a wide swath through Minnesota history, from early statehood to the waning days of the Farmer-Labor Party. It is divided into 14 chapters that cover several types of co-ops and political movements.

Keillor explores in great depth cooperative stores, fire-insurance mutuals, cooperative creameries, farmers’ elevators, telephone and rural electrical co-ops, and the expansion to statewide cooperatives. Along the way, he gives special attention to the political and farm movements that spawned or influenced cooperatives, such as the Grange, the Farmers’ Alliance, the University of Minnesota Extension Service and county agents, the Republican Party of the 1920s, and the Farmer-Labor Party. Keillor also makes much of the role of ethnicity, religion, and technology in shaping the character of the Minnesota cooperative movement.

Among the many interesting things he discusses is how the business history of a cooperative can be affected by the farm commodity it seeks to market and by the ethnicity of the co-op’s founders. Keillor makes the case that Minnesota’s dairy co-ops were largely conservative organizations. Because of the perishable nature of dairy products, cooperative creameries were intensely local and, in their early years, often exclusive in their ethno-religious makeup. By contrast, grain co-ops, though never outside the grip of ethno-religious or local issues, tended to be more radical, fighting the frequent attempts of line elevators, railroads, and millers to create unfair market conditions for farmers. Thus, creameries were more likely to emerge among farmers who attended the same church, and farmers’ elevators more likely to emerge out of some connection to a radical political movement. There are many more such interesting arguments in this richly textured book. The book could have been improved, however, by a more thorough discussion of the Farm Bureau and Farmers Union, two organizations that play a mighty role in rural cooperatives—and in the book—but are not clearly analyzed.

*Cooperative Commonwealth* is provocative. Keillor makes plain that the politics of cooperation in Minnesota took many twists and turns, some of which play themselves out in the book. In the introduction, Keillor writes, “This study is mainly about democracy, which is time consuming, untidy.” What he means, I think, is that during the years of this study, the nation struggled with two models of economic development—the cooperative, based on grassroots democracy, and the corporation, based on the power of accumulated wealth. Keillor clearly understands the unfairness of how this politics played out, as he explains near the end of the book: “The American political economy had allowed cooperatives to thrive only at the rural margins where investors saw too great a risk and too small profits.” As I finished *Cooperative Commonwealth*—and here I ask that each of you read the book and reach your own conclusions—I got the feeling that Keillor sees himself as more the Progressive than the Populist, more the dairy farmer than the wheat farmer, more the conservative than the radical.

Personally, I am uncomfortable with labeling any form of cooperative, however local or ethnically or religiously based, as conservative. Most dairy co-ops, as I learned from Keillor, did not apportion political control through shares held by member: one member, one vote. Such a position, I would argue, is shockingly radical in our own corporate world, where economic power is wielded by the number of shares held. In the end, I believe, the political bent of the “radical” co-ops proved right. By existing on the fringes of the economy, the cooperative challenge was unable to defeat the corporate order. The result has led to the depopulation of the countryside and has endangered farming as a way of life.

I am not a native of rural Minnesota, though I do study and live in it. One winter night last year, while playing city-league basketball, I sat on the bench and talked to a friend and farmer. He told me that his co-op has begun to compete against him in hog production. He predicted that in not too many more seasons he will likely be run out of the pig business by his own cooperative. It seems that in this new century, even the “rural margins” are no longer safe places for a cooperative commonwealth.

*Reviewed by Jeffrey Kolnick, who teaches history at Southwest State University in Marshall, Minnesota.*

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### Trapping the Boundary Waters: A Tenderfoot in the Border Country, 1919–1920

*By Charles Ira Cook Jr.*


**This book is Charles Ira Cook’s memoir** of an adventurous year spent exploring and trapping in what is now the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in the immediate post-World War I era. Cook, who had served in the U.S. Army Air Service during the war, ventured to the village of Winton near the border country in 1919 with a friend, determined to spend a year in the wilderness seeking adventure and excitement. They found both in abundance, but a lot of hard work as well, causing Cook’s partner to abandon the adventure early. Cook then fell in with Bill Berglund, forming an uneasy trapping partnership with the moody and irascible Swede. Cook trapped through the winter, taking a break only to accompany Leo Chosa on an epic dogsled trip to Cowan, Manitoba, and back, at the end of which Cook nearly lost his life.
The era during which Cook conducted his year-long adventure was particularly important in the history of the BWCAW, and first-hand accounts such as his bring personal observation and detail to that history. The era of big-pine logging had begun in the wilderness around 1890 but had pretty much ended in the Basswood-Fall Lake area when Cook arrived in 1919. Cook reported, for example, that Winton was practically a ghost town, with the logging company owning most of the boarded-up buildings there. Similarly, he reported the young second-growth forest in the Basswood Lake area after it had been logged, but by the time he reached Cypress (or Otter-track) Lake to the east, he had entered the virgin forest of tall pines that to this day has never been logged. Cook’s adventure ended shortly before Arthur Carhart’s report to the Forest Service that, among other things, recommended that the area receive some protection as a wilderness; U.S. Secretary of Agriculture William Jardine bestowed the area’s first wilderness designation in 1926, six years after Cook’s departure. It was not until 1936, during the Great Depression, however, that the boundaries of Superior National Forest (first established in 1909) were expanded to include the region covered by Cook’s trapping lines.

Some readers may be squeamish over some of Cook’s descriptions: his raiding of gull eggs to eat, for example, or his proud moment when shooting two timber wolves. His descriptions of trapping and how he and his partners killed various animals may likewise give some readers pause. But such descriptions reflect the reality of Cook’s time as well as the harsh realities of the trapping life. Modern readers will gain an appreciation of some of those realities and times, when Cook had to rely on his own wits and quickly learn skills to survive and when, unlike today, no U.S. Forest Service float planes were available to fly an injured visitor out for medical care. Cook’s tale provides a valuable glimpse back into the history of the nation’s most popular wilderness area and a trapping lifestyle that is now largely gone, at least in the BWCAW.

More careful editing would have provided a better and more accurate context for Trapping the Boundary Waters. Cook wrote of hemlocks several times, for example, yet no hemlocks grow in the BWCAW. In addition, the current name for Iron Mountain Lake, where Cook maintained his main trapping cabin, is Ensign Lake. (The lake is not identified for readers in the text, but one of the maps at the end of the book shows the locations of Cook’s three trapping cabins.) The maps also show roads like the Fernberg Road and Gunflint Trail, which did not yet exist during Cook’s time.

Cook wrote his account around 1953, some 33 years after leaving Winton. The area had changed considerably in the intervening years, much to Cook’s dismay on his return visit in 1953. But the area has again changed dramatically since the 1950s, thanks to a succession of wilderness conservation policies. It has returned much more closely to the wild condition Cook knew in 1920, with the opportunity to again provide wilderness adventures. I’d like to think Cook would approve.

Reviewed by Kevin Proescholdt, co-author of Troubled Waters: The Fight for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. A ten-year guide in the BWCAW, he has worked since 1985 as executive director and now as senior policy director for the Minneapolis-based Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, a nonprofit wilderness conservation organization.

Struggling With “Iowa’s Pride”:
Labor Relations, Unionism, and Politics
in the Rural Midwest Since 1877
By Wilson J. Warren
Cloth, $34.95; paper $19.95.)

SLAUGHTERING AND DISASSEMBLING ANIMALS and turning their body parts into food products is messy work. Struggling With “Iowa’s Pride” shows us that such work has been the foundation of a messy industry, one where corporations eat other corporations and also eat and disgorge communities. It doesn’t make for a pretty picture. Maybe there should be a consumer-warning label on this book: “Not for the faint of heart.” This industry (now including chicken and turkey as well as beef and pork) shaped and continues to shape communities across Minnesota and the Upper Midwest. The location of its plants has served as a magnet for rural-to-urban migrants or long-distance immigrants willing to stomach the work in order to earn a paycheck and benefits. Many of the resulting communities have come to be dominated by the corporations of this industry. At times, these communities have been turned upside down by labor-management conflict or by corporate decisions to sell out or close down altogether.

Struggling With “Iowa’s Pride” offers readers a long-term view of one community—Ottumwa, Iowa—and its relationship largely with one corporation—John Morrell, and its string of collaborators and successors: AMK, Hormel, Excel, Chiquita Brands, and Smithfield Foods. Together, these corporations made millions upon millions of dollars in Ottumwa and similar communities, pulled out and liquidated their responsibilities, and left human carnage behind. Historian Wilson J. Warren has done all of us a service in excavating and revealing such a story, as it brings us into the inner workings of these processes and offers us a yardstick to employ in examining our own, similar communities.

Struggling With “Iowa’s Pride” places Ottumwa within a typology of “terminal marketing centers,” which empha-
sized beef and relied on skilled labor, much of it from southern and eastern Europe, and “direct buying centers,” which emphasized pork and relied on rural, native-born labor. Ottumwa, and most of the Minnesota and Iowa industry, fell in the latter category (in contrast to Chicago, Omaha, and Kansas City). Warren suggests this led to a pattern of industrial relations that revolved around paternalism (evangelically based, in Ottumwa’s case) and welfare capitalism and was reinforced by the ethnic and racial homogeneity of the workforce and the community. Efforts to organize the workers in these direct-buying centers generally failed before the 1930s, when new industrial unions emerged. Even then, however, these communities gave birth to a distinctive pattern of local or regional unionism (the Independent Union of All Workers, based in Austin, Minnesota, and the Midwest Union of All Packinghouse Workers, based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa), which left a strong imprint of local autonomy on the national union that finally emerged in the 1940s. The struggle to build and secure these unions often provoked intense conflict day-to-day on the shop floor, sometimes breaking out in massive strikes. Once they were established, however, labor relations tended to return to a staid, stable foundation, not unlike their status during the eras of paternalism and corporate welfare.

To be sure, these local unions articulated a strong sense of class that reverberated throughout the communities outside the plant gates, typically divided by railroad tracks (the packinghouse workers on one side, the management and white collar workers on the other), but the consequent class consciousness did not contest the industrial, social, and political order of the 1930s and 1960s. Instead, the union, a disruptive and militant force in the 1930s and 1940s, took a position within the labor-relations apparatus of the plant and the political structures of the larger community.

Of course, the only constant within a capitalist economic system is change, and the newly constructed social order of Ottumwa (and likewise Austin, Albert Lea, Cedar Rapids, Sioux City, and more) was barely solidified before its foundation began to erode. Inside the plant, as total job growth slowed and then reversed in the 1960s and 1970s, technological change undermined the traditional divisions between “men’s” and “women’s” jobs and led to a “battle of the sexes” that soon engulfed the local union and the wider community. In the corporate world, Morrell became a party to mergers, plant closings, buy-outs, spin-offs, diversifications, and conglomerations that threatened job security, pensions, wage levels and job standards. Diverse conflicts—along gender lines, along racial lines, along class lines—exploded. While groups of workers might win some of the battles—such as women gaining access to “men’s” jobs—and some of the battles might galvanize community and even national attention—such as the Hormel strike of 1985–86 in which the Ottumwa workers played a dramatic role—the “war” for safe, secure, well-paying jobs was ultimately lost.

When the dust had settled by the late 1980s, Warren finds, there was “a much more transient workforce . . . as dispirited and soulless as Morrell-Ottumwa’s workforce was militant and powerful during Local 1’s heyday.” In the late 1990s Morrell, now part of a multinational conglomerate, found a legal path out of its economic obligations to Ottumwa retirees and promptly ceased paying life insurance and health benefits with devastating consequences. “It is difficult not to feel anything but a sense of despair,” Warren writes.

But no student of history should ever lose hope or give in to this sense of despair. While I was reading this book (mid-summer 2000), 200 workers, most of them immigrants who did not even speak English, successfully unionized a South St. Paul packinghouse after conducting a one-day sit-down strike to protest line speeds. Inspired in part by the dramatic struggle of immigrant hotel workers in Minneapolis, they reconnected with the 1930s history told by Warren, even if they did not know it. This historian, for one, is sure that there are many more chapters yet to write.


The Ecological Indian: Myth and History
By Shepard Krech III
(New York: W. W. Norton, 1999. 318 p. Cloth, $27.95.)

In addressing the question of whether American Indian societies were in both ideology and practice protective of the earth’s biological systems, Shepard Krech steps into the perilous ground between myth and history, where the answer is an emphatic yes and no. Postmodern criticism has taught us to be wary of even such established distinctions as “myth” and “history.” How different are they? To Krech’s credit, he recognizes at the outset that history itself is “a metaphor of the past and metonym of the present.” Myth, for its part, may be light on demonstrable facts yet heavy with truth.

Almost from the first trans-Atlantic contact, Native Americans have served as an inspiration and example for European social critics. The “noble savage”—Rousseau’s natural man—appeared as a challenge to the social hierarchies and political tyranny of Europe. That the picture was a caricature of tribal people made it no less crucial to the development of democratic ideology. Today, as industrial civilization threatens the planet with its technological frenzy and commitment to perpetual growth, indigenous societies that lived in intimacy with nature and in rever-
ence for its life-giving power become a symbol of hope, even though they may never have existed in all the purity envisioned. Thus, the image of the crying Indian, used on a “Keep America Beautiful” poster in 1971 and repeatedly cited by Krech, is more a statement of Euro-American dissent united with Native American protest than a reference to past practices. Like other myths, it speaks its own truth.

Almost any historical generalization about “the Indian” is open to argument, since the cultures of indigenous Americans were immensely varied, even if one limits American Indians (as Krech does) to those living north of the present U.S.-Mexican border. Tribal societies were never static, and especially after European contact they changed greatly over time. Moreover, in sifting documentary and archaeological evidence for clues to actual life ways, ethnohistorians run the risk of creating new myths based on their own assumptions about causation and the dynamics of social change.

Wisely, Krech skirts this risk by examining a series of specific topics in depth but avoiding cosmic conclusions. Although the result might be criticized as piecemeal, it adds to understanding particular examples of American Indian encounters with nature. Topics include the much-debated question of widespread extinctions during the late Pleistocene; the extensive irrigation agriculture practiced by the Hohokam; Native American use of fire to modify the environment and control animals; the near extinction of the buffalo; and the destructive trade in deerskins in the southeast and beaver in the north. Under the title “Eden,” Krech examines conflicting evidence and theories concerning the Indian population in North America.

Finally, in an epilogue Krech weighs the environmental record of American Indian groups in the late twentieth century. Here again, he settles for scattered examples rather than attempting a systematic survey or a comparison of Indian communities with their counterparts among other ethnic groups. As might be expected, he finds the record mixed. Struggle over the proper use of land and resources is common, while strong environmentalist voices like those of Minnesota’s Winona LaDuke and Wisconsin’s Walter Bresette are often ignored in the economic development policies of tribal governments.

Although The Ecological Indian involves no original research, it brings together a great number of secondary sources on the topics covered. Its value is enhanced by 77 compact pages of annotation. These provide an impressive bibliography for all aspects of the subject and testify to Krech’s industrious scholarship.

 Reviewed by Rhoda R. Gilman, whose published work relating to Indian and fur trade history of the northern plains and Great Lakes region includes books, articles, school curricula, and, most recently, a web site on the archaeology of the upper Mississippi Valley.
Apostle Islands from 1872 until 1939. Handsomely illustrated with period and contemporary photographs, maps, and watercolors, the book provides a good overview of the business, including the many kinds of workers and skills needed to run an operation, camp life, log rafting, and the milling process. Originally published by the Schroeder Area Historical Society, the volume is now available from Minneapolis’s Nordin Press (1999, 96 p., cloth, $29.95).

BRIEF SECTIONS on libraries in New Ulm, Minneapolis, and St. Paul, as well as institutions in neighboring Wisconsin and other midwestern states, are included in Dolores J. Hoyt’s A Strong Mind in a Strong Body: Libraries in the German-American Turner Movement (New York: Peter Lang, 1999, 205 p., cloth, $48.95). As early as 1854, the national organization of American Turners encouraged local groups to establish libraries run by volunteers, and by 1918, more than half of the locals had complied. From extant records, this book examines and compares the libraries’ collections, organization, funding, loan and fine policies, and, where possible, patron usage, with an eye to the role that libraries and reading societies played in the life of America’s ethnic groups.

MINUTES of the board of commissioners, treasurers’ and tax assessors’ records, deeds, justice of the peace records, road surveys, brief biographies, and more are contained in Minnesota Beginnings: Records of Saint Croix County, Wisconsin Territory, 1840–1849, a valuable resource on the early years of the region that became Washington County, Minnesota, and St. Croix County, Wisconsin. In addition to the transcribed records, this 986-page, large-format paperback (1999, $29.95) published by the Washington County Historical Society for the History Network of Washington County contains helpful annotation, maps, photographs, and a brief political history of the county.

RADICAL WISCONSIN’S concern with slavery proved the state’s most powerful sentiment, overriding ethnic and cultural issues and, dangerously, even allegiance to the Union, according to Michael J. McManus’s Political Abolitionism in Wisconsin, 1840–1861 (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998, 288 p., cloth, $39.00). The author traces the evolution of the earlier Liberty Party’s antislavery principles as the Free Soil and then Republican Parties modified them to fit their own needs. McManus finds Wisconsin to be more radical on slavery and race-related issues than most northern states, pulling back from the brink of extreme states’ rights doctrine only when faced with President Lincoln’s dogged adherence to unionism and, ultimately, the Civil War itself. This in-depth study of one state’s politics adds a valuable dimension to the regional and national picture of the midnineteenth-century’s swirling issues.

FROM 1954 until 1988 journalist Gareth Hiebert kept his fingers on the pulse of St. Paul, writing human-interest stories for the city’s Dispatch and then Pioneer Press under the name “Oliver Towne.” Hiebert’s 1999 publication, City on Seven Hills: Columns of Oliver Towne (St. Paul: Pogo Press, 204 p., paper, $14.95), offers old friends and new readers some of the best of his impressive output. Grouped into sections on “people,” “getting there and back,” “bricks and mortar,” “faith and belief,” “where we live,” “buying and selling,” and “through the city,” the columns give a lively overview of local history and daily life in the capital city.