The Gág Family: German-Bohemian Artists in America
By Julie L’Enfant

“You’ve got to make luck,” artist Wanda Gág once told her sister Flavia, in a lifetime of advice bestowed on her youngest sibling. Wanda knew. From hardscrabble beginnings as the eldest of seven children in New Ulm, Minnesota, she forged a notable life with the determination of Scarlett O’Hara. After she found a measure of success and fame in New York City and environs, her life was often portrayed as a “Cinderella” story, but Gág knew that it was hard study, unrelenting work, and determination that made her “luck.”

Wanda Gág is a cultural figure deserving more detailed study, analysis, and interpretation. Besides being multi-talented—a superb printmaker and a writer and a revolutionary children’s-book illustrator, author, and designer—she lived a fascinating life. Born in 1893 in an unlikely outpost for a future artist, she created the life of a “modern woman” in New York in the 1920s, bobbing her hair and adopting a lively romantic life. Glamorous, with a movie star’s sense of self-presentation, she could have been a character in an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel, though she was much more self-assured, intelligent, and talented than any of his women. Her diaries stand beside those of Virginia Woolf and Anaïs Nin in their compelling revelations of the emotions and inner life of a woman and an artist.

In the last 10 years, Gág has begun to attract the scholarship that she warrants. Audur Winnan’s lively introduction to Wanda Gág: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Prints (1993) explicates Gág’s artistic ideas and, very importantly, includes excerpts from her unpublished diaries. Karen Nelson Hoyle’s 1994 critical biography, Wanda Gág, focuses on Gág as author and illustrator of Millions of Cats, The Funny Thing, Snippy and Snappy, and the Grimm tales. In 1997 The Unseen Wanda Gág, an exhibition I organized at the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, presented a fuller idea of her artwork by showing many rarely exhibited drawings and watercolors from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Featuring the first display of Gág’s handwritten diaries after they were opened to the public in 1993, the exhibition dispelled the aura of “cute Mid-western children’s book author” that had grown up around Gág after Millions of Cats.

Now, a new publication adds to this scholarship. Art historian Julie L’Enfant’s book, The Gág Family: German-Bohemian Artists in America, enlarges our understanding through a kind of family history that focuses on the three Gágs who became visual artists: father Anton, Wanda herself, and sister Flavia. L’Enfant documents Anton’s early life in Bohemia, his family’s 1873 arrival in Baltimore, its move to St. Paul, and, finally, New Ulm in 1877. Virtually self-taught, Anton became an artist of some distinction, painting murals and the interior of a New Ulm church, running a portrait-photography business, and executing an important large painting of the 1862 Dakota Uprising in New Ulm. The unconventional life he forged with his Bohemian family, bypassing the social norms of the predominantly German settlement, helps explain Wanda’s ability to defy societal expectations for women, especially poor ones. Although Anton died of tuberculosis at age 50 in 1908 and left his wife, Lissi, and seven children desperately poor, he also gave them rich appreciation for the life of the mind, artistic talent, and a sense that, even in poverty, these pursuits were as necessary as bread.

Since Lissi was ill and unable to run the household, Wanda took over at age 15. She not only kept up at school—and insisted that her siblings do likewise—but watched the family finances, made bookmarks and greeting cards to earn money, and never stopped drawing, something her father had tutored and encouraged. Though Wanda left for art school in St. Paul and Minneapolis in 1913, she retained the role of surrogate mother to her younger siblings throughout her life. When Lissi died in 1917, Wanda helped arrange the younger Gágs’ move to Minneapolis. Later that year Wanda left for New York City, but she continued to send money home to support her siblings despite her own poverty. In the 1920s all the Gágs except Stella made their way east, where they lived with and near Wanda until her death in 1946. In the New Jersey countryside, they virtually recreated their childhood home, filled with art and music and games.

Sister Flavia Gág, born in 1907, was 14 years younger than Wanda. The two had a close relationship until Wanda’s death of lung cancer at age 53. Flavia tried to follow in her sister’s footsteps, and she also worked as a composer, with limited success. Like other Gág siblings, Flavia suffered poor health (the legacy of childhood poverty), and she had a nervous, uncertain temperament. Wanda was an exacting teacher, whose words of advice on Flavia’s artwork, professional efforts, and love life often sounded harsh.

The fuller story of Flavia’s life, work, and thoughts, recorded in diaries and letters, is a major contribution of...
this book. We see her stumbling efforts as an artist and writer take flight only after Wanda’s death, no longer overshadowed or intimidated by her successful older sister. Flavia wrote and illustrated more than a dozen children’s books and illustrated 16 more from 1952 into the 1960s with an artistic style that shows her indebtedness to Wanda. Flavia continued to make art and eventually moved to Florida to live near her sister Stella’s family, which included husband William Harm and son Gary. Flavia died in 1978 at age 71.

It was Flavia’s nephew, Gary Harm, who saved her letters, diaries, and artwork and instigated this book. To his and the author’s credit, the story has not been sanitized; it is a refreshingly frank account of the Gågs’ lives, their difficulties and foibles, and their accomplishments.

L’Enfant devotes the lion’s share of her book to Wanda, biographical ground trod by other authors, but she interweaves the story of the artist’s devotion to Flavia and her other siblings. L’Enfant also brings an art historian’s insights to Wanda’s stylistic experimentation. Gåg is hard to categorize, being routinely—and erroneously—lumped in with the regionalist artists of the 1930s. L’Enfant thankfully avoids that pitfall.

Though based solidly in art historical scholarship and in archival primary sources, L’Enfant’s volume reads like a good novel enhanced with lavish family photographs and artwork. The Gåg Family is a handsome book that will be enjoyed as much by readers interested in immigrant and family histories, women’s lives, interesting characters, and dramatic stories as by art historians.

Reviewed by Colleen J. Sheehy, Director of Education, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota; adjunct faculty in American studies, University of Minnesota; and adjunct faculty in art history, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul.

A Little History of My Forest Life: An Indian-White Autobiography by Eliza Morrison
Edited by Victoria Brehm

Out of the shadows of time, Eliza Morrison tentatively emerges to tell us about her life in the forests surrounding Chequamegon Bay in northern Wisconsin. Through careful research, editor Victoria Brehm amplifies Morrison’s unassuming voice as found in her letters to Catherine Gray, her summer employer and benefactor.

Brehm stumbled upon a small volume of Eliza’s letters while researching another project at the Minnesota Historical Society. She found more letters in the papers of William Gray Purcell, noted Prairie School architect and Catherine’s grandson. This led to a two-year acquaintance with Morrison, whom Brehm describes as a “charming, kind, generous, unfailingly entertaining companion.”

The granddaughter of fur traders and their Ojibwe wives, Eliza married the grandson of the same. She was competent and comfortable both in town—LaPointe, Bayfield, and Ashland—and in the forest where she and her husband raised their large family. Her letters vividly show her relationship with the land and waters that sustained their growing family.

Brehm states that she wanted to preserve the original manuscript alive with the voice of Eliza Morrison. She does this beautifully while adding background information about Ojibwe history and culture. In decoding Eliza’s letters to Catherine Gray, Brehm examines the social and economic relationship between them and, in doing so, helps us understand the relationship of indigenous peoples to the tourists who visit their world.

Mrs. Gray, as Eliza refers to her, asks to hear Indian stories, while Eliza, in her letters, separates herself from “the Indians.” Brehm struggles with this anomaly. Eliza’s letters show she existed on the margins, not fully Indian or white. Her ethnic identity was malleable and volitional. Though not cited by Brehm, C. Matthew Snipp, sociologist and a Cherokee, writes extensively on the shifting nature of ethnic identity among Indian people.

Eliza’s letters reveal her lifelong love affair with her husband. She writes affectionately about John Morrison, whom she pursued at the ripe age of 27. She describes rowing from Madeline Island to Bayfield to reacquaint herself with her childhood neighbor. John quickly sets aside his plans to travel to the north shore of Lake Superior and instead asks Eliza to marry him.

Throughout her letters to Catherine Gray, Eliza defers to John’s knowledge of traditional ways, saying he knows more about these things. This is likely true as he grew up among his Ojibwe relatives. Both Eliza and John spoke Ojibwe fluently though they spoke English to their children. Their marriage was a partnership; he valued her advice and often deferred to it. Together they raised ten children, eight of whom lived to adulthood.
Brehm describes them as poor, yet Eliza Morrison’s letters are full of references to the goods they created and sold, including beadwork, moccasins, wild game, wild rice, and maple syrup. Certainly, the Morrisons worked hard, yet they had as much if not more than their Indian and mixed-blood neighbors. They are poor only in comparison to the family of Catherine Gray.

Just as Eliza made a living in the seasonal, circular pattern of the traditional Ojibwe, so Brehm begins with Eliza’s love story and ends with legendary stories of Ojibwe women abandoned on a rock outcropping in Lake Superior. Brehm concludes that Eliza must have known many more stories and questioned why she wasn’t more forthcoming with Catherine Gray. Eliza’s letters do not reveal why she was so reticent. Perhaps she knew more, or maybe the stories seemed ordinary to her and thus she didn’t value them. As Brehm suggests, her reluctance may even have been an act of resistance.

Brehm has created a unique story that blends the native voice of Eliza Morrison with her own, more linear and factual voice. She gives us maps, chronologies, and glossaries to aid our understanding of Eliza’s world. Listening to them together, one hears both the sissiquad of the forest and the hum of the modern information age. Photographs taken by William Gray Purcell and others borrowed from various archives provide us a visual picture of Eliza’s world.

This book can be supplemented with writings by other Ojibwe and mixed-blood Ojibwe women, some who preceded Eliza (1837–1921) and many who came after, including Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (1800–41), Ignatia Broker (1918–87), Maude Kegg (1904–96), and Anne Dunn (b. 1940).

Reviewed by Pauline Brunette Danforth, an Ojibwe from the White Earth Reservation and a published writer of poetry and nonfiction. In 2002 she completed her American Studies Ph.D. dissertation titled “Night Flying Woman: Sacred Stories of the Ojibway.”

A Good Boat Speaks for Itself: Isle Royale Fishermen and Their Boats
By Timothy Cochrane and Hawk Tolson

A distinctive commercial fishery and boat-dependent way of life once flourished around Isle Royale in northwestern Lake Superior. After commercial success peaked early in the twentieth century, the archipelago became a national park, cultivated as a pristine, wild place distinct from its thousands of years of human habitation and fishing industry. By the time authors Tim Cochrane and Hawk Tolson experienced this unique environment, a century of intensive fishing life remained mainly in testimonies of former island residents and the gracefully deteriorating hulls of their indigenous boats.

Intrigued by these boats, stories, and people, Tolson and Cochrane recorded interviews and boat shapes and explored documentary collections in regional repositories. To loft A Good Boat, they drew from interviews and personal communications with about three dozen individuals, information on about twice as many regional boats, and historical photographs, many from fishing families. Notably, from the 1980s until the present, they developed long and trusting relationships with several former island families, which enriched their understanding. While their inquiry spans the 1850s into the 1950s, the testimony and boats mainly represent a period from the 1890s to the 1950s when Norwegians, Swedes, and Swede Finns joined Ojibwe, French, French-Canadian, Cornish, and English families on the island, adapted gas engines to small Mackinaw-based sailing boats, and moved from salt-fish to fresh- and frozen-fish markets.

In four generous chapters amply embellished with notes, Cochrane and Tolson describe the area’s lake history, geography, and fish stocks. With stories, they flesh out island culture, reflecting immigrant backgrounds, personalities drawn to island fishing, family involvement in work, customs and pastimes that integrated work with community life throughout the year, and relationships with the built environment—on shore and off. They discuss Isle Royale’s largely lake-trout-hookline and herring-gillnet fisheries, detailing the complex navigational and biological knowledge that underlies fishing in this tough environment and interrelating knowledge about fishing gear, boats, and propulsion. They canvass the main categories of island boats—gas boats, herring skiffs, launches, resort stock boats, and fish tugs—showing especially how each was conditioned for local use. They focus particularly on the classic 24-foot gas boat as the “ultimate evolution of Isle Royale fishing craft,” describing the form’s keeled, double-ended foundation and its steam-bent, planked-skeleton construction, as well as individual
boats. They finish with sketches of builders and details of their construction techniques.

In a brief appendix, the authors describe the course of their research and convey something that rarely receives attention: the close relationships they noted between fishermen and individual boats. In a moving tribute to the intimate, almost human nature that island people accord to these work partners, the authors relate how fishermen part with their gas boats by turning them loose like domesticated wild animals to find their own way as their ends near.

Presenting the intersections of stories, artifacts, and images, Tim Cochrane and Hawk Tolson have created much more than the sum of these parts. Their book fans life back into Isle Royale’s past fishing life and shows outsiders just how island people once could say that “a good boat speaks for itself.”

Reviewed by Janet C. Gilmore, an independent folklorist based in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, and a specialist in maritime folk life. Dr. Gilmore has published on commercial fishing traditions of the Oregon coast, western Great Lakes, and upper Mississippi River, including The World of the Oregon Fishboat (1986, 1999), and has worked with fishing families to present their traditions in exhibits and festivals.

My First Years in the Fur Trade: The Journals of 1802-1804
By George Nelson
Edited by Laura Peers and Theresa Schenck

In 1802 a 15-year-old English lad named George Nelson departed from Sorel, Quebec, and headed west as an apprentice clerk for the XY Company, a strong competitor of the better-known North West Company. Nelson kept a journal of his first two years in the trade, which he rewrote in 1811 and recast again in 1836 after his forced retirement from the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1823. These journals comprise the heart of this excellent book, one that illuminates the life of a young man engaged in the fur trade. Nelson was a sensitive, well-educated, naive fellow, not entirely suited for the hurly-burly life of the frontier fur trade. Set apart from his companions by his literacy, educational attainments, and position as a clerk, he endured an isolated, often lonely existence. Taken advantage of by his more experienced underlings, he found it difficult to acquire the requisite skills and experience that would lend him authority and yield him profits. He hungered for the fatherly and professional approval of XY Company head Sir Alexander McKenzie, but McKenzie took a dislike to the young man, and Nelson’s career suffered accordingly.

Nelson recounts the daily grind of the trader’s life with little hint of romanticism and offers numerous insightful observations of the Ojibwe and other Native nations. While many such diaries have been published, this one is a standout because of Nelson’s youth and the journal’s poignant intimacy. Few fur traders spilled much ink recording their emotional responses to daily events, large and small. Nelson’s ruminations tell readers much about his personality and about the circumstances of the fur trade west of the Great Lakes in the first years of the nineteenth century. His work duties, the grueling hardships of winter life around Lake Winnipeg and the Folle Avoine country, his “country” marriage to a young Ojibwe woman, and his tortuous quest for economic security all make informative reading.

Editors Laura Peers and Theresa Schenck exercised commendable restraint with this publication, offering an unaltered text and useful annotations. As their introduction points out, this is the first book to include all of Nelson’s early writing, and Nelson’s “introspective, reflective texts” display his “lack of self-confidence, his fears and frustrations, his growing embitterment at a blighted career, and his often plaintive tone.” Readers follow the tribulations of a youth on the way to becoming a man, and this aspect of the journals is practically unique in primary fur trade literature.

Nelson’s life cannot be considered a stellar economic success, yet his legacy—and his gift to historians—lies in the touching humanity of the words he scrawled upon those diary pages. Few sources equal this one in shedding light on what it must have like to be a young man trying to make his way in a precarious occupation, far from friends, home, and family, living among Indians and callous traders.

Reviewed by Barton H. Barbour, assistant professor of history at Boise State University in Idaho. His most recent book is Fort Union and the Upper Missouri Fur Trade (2001). He is currently writing a biography of Jedediah S. Smith.
This year’s judges were Stephen Gross, assistant professor of history at the University of Minnesota, Morris, and Carol Schneider, head of the education department at the Minnesota Historical Society. Each award includes a prize of $600.

Rose Kantor is the winner of the 2003 Minnesota History Magazine Award for the best senior-division History Day paper on a Minnesota topic. For this year’s theme, “Rights and Responsibilities in History,” Kantor judiciously assessed a contentious issue and the arduous path to legislation in “The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act of 1978: Striking the Balance Between Environmental Rights and Responsibilities.” Kantor was a ninth grader at Southwest High School in Minneapolis when she wrote the award-winning paper. The $50 prize is awarded by the editors of Minnesota History.

Historian Helen M. White’s newest book explores several facets of a multifaceted early Minnesotan in Henry Sibley’s First Years at St. Peters or Mendota (St. Paul: Turnstone Historical Research, 2002, 70 p., paper, $12.95). The 23-year-old employee of the American Fur Company first settled in 1834 at St. Peters, the outpost near Fort Snelling that would be his home until 1862. During that time, Sibley’s role in Minnesota affairs grew greatly as he became influential in business and politics. Drawing from primary sources, including Sibley’s own writings, White also relates aspects of Sibley’s personal life—his love of hunting, nostalgia for his mother’s cooking, and his bachelorhood and marriage. Amply illustrated, the slim volume is available from the Sibley House Historic Site (651-452-1596) as well as the History Center and Fort Snelling museum stores.

Floodplains and wetlands, river valleys and uplands, flora and fauna take center stage in Draining the Great Oasis: An Environmental History of Murray County, Minnesota, edited by Anthony J. Amato, Janet Timmerman, and Joseph A. Amato (Marshall, MN: Crossings Press, 2001, 283 p., paper, $25.00). In 19 essays, 15 authors probe the relationships between humans and their environment: the tallgrass prairie that was transformed into land suitable for large-scale agriculture. An extensive bibliography that begins with an introduction, “The Nature of Ecological History,” offers suggestions for more reading on topics such as ditches, horse ecology, barns, and weeds.

Jazz’s “first hipster” receives his due in Douglas Henry Daniels’s Lester Leaps In: The Life and Times of Lester “Pres” Young (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002, 524 p., cloth, $30.00). While telling the story of the man later dubbed President of the Tenor Saxophone, this fascinating biography explores the life of early jazz musicians, their bands, life on the road, and the racism they faced. Early in his career, well before Kansas City and New York, Count Basie and Billie Holiday, Young lived in Minneapolis, and the story of his life there—including the city’s jazz scene and African American community—is an added bonus for Minnesota readers.

The terrible Hinckley fire of September 1894 is the centerpiece of Firestorm, Jan N. Schultz’s young adult novel. Skillfully weaving fictional protagonist Maggie and her family into the historical events, Schultz recounts the dry summer, the raging fire, the escape by train that some were lucky to make, and the aftermath of the conflagration. Published by Carolrhoda Books of Minneapolis in 2002, the 203-page cloth book ($15.95) won this year’s Minnesota Book Award for young adult fiction.

Between 1965 and 1975, the federal government indicted some 22,500 persons for draft-law violations—778 of them in Minnesota. For Judging the Judges: Justice, Punishment, Resistance, and the Minnesota Court during the War in Vietnam (St. Cloud: North Star Press, 2002, 240 p., paper, $14.95), retired attorney Ken Tilsen combed the now-dispersed docket books and legal memoranda related to these Minnesota cases. His book follows several draft resisters and analyzes the conviction rates and length
of sentences handed down by Minnesota’s four sitting federal judges—Edward N. Devitt, Earl R. Larson, Phillip Neville, and Miles W. Lord. He finds that their verdicts and sentences were remarkably similar despite the judges’ markedly different political and social outlooks. Tilsen, who represented draft resisters before these four sitting federal judges—Edward N. Devitt, Earl R. Larson, Phillip Neville, and Miles W. Lord—famously said, the law—judiciary in society—the belief that the courts should serve justice, not, as Oliver Wendell Holmes famously said, the law—
is as relevant today as it was during the divisive Vietnam War era.

The James J. Hill Library will award a number of grants of up to $2,000 to support research in the James J. Hill, Louis W. Hill, and Reed/Hyde papers. Among them, these collections contain material on family history and social, cultural, and economic activities from the 1850s to 1960. The deadline for applications is November 1, 2003. For more information contact W. Thomas White 651-265-5441 or twhte@jjhill.org.

The 1837 treaty removing the Winnebago from their lands in Wisconsin provided remuneration to them and their mixed-blood “relations and friends.” Government officials subsequently traveled west to determine who was qualified to receive funds. Now, transcriptions of the hearings as well as brief essays about the treaty commission and allegations of fraud are available in the paperback book “Neither White Men Nor Indians”: Affidavits from the Winnebago Mixed-Blood Claim Commissions, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, 1838–1839, edited by Linda M. Waggoner (Roseville, MN: Park Genealogical Books, 2002, 127 p., $25.00).

These affidavits, taken to verify the applicants’ parentage, contain a wealth of material for genealogists and historians alike. The book may be ordered from the publisher, P.O. Box 130968, Roseville 55113; add $4.00 shipping and, for Minnesota residents, sales tax.
