

Under a Flaming Sky: The Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894

By Daniel James Brown

(Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2006. 256 p. Cloth, \$22.95.)

Forest fires are the subject of an extensive historical literature. The horror, the vastness, and the irreversible consequences of a great fire compel fascination. Despite sophisticated technical knowledge of the physics of fires, the availability of well-trained fire crews, and ingenious equipment on the ground and in the air, wildfires still present a threatening force capable of striking out beyond our control and incinerating trees, houses, people—anything that falls into their path.



Minnesota has been the victim of numerous great fires, which have formed an important element of the state's forest history. Of these catastrophic events, the Hinckley fire of September 1, 1894, is the best known, both in the region and in national consciousness. The Hinckley fire was devastating: 436 officially listed as killed and many more presumed dead; the towns of Hinckley, Sandstone, Mission Creek, Pokegama, and Quamba destroyed; and much of the surrounding forest, farmland, and wildlife consumed. Alerted by telegraph on the night of the fire, relief trains, both the St. Paul & Duluth Railroad (later the Northern Pacific) and the Eastern Minnesota Railroad (Great Northern), played a dramatic part in the rescue of many settlers, and the train crews emerged as the heroes of the great catastrophe. Immediately dispatched from Duluth with food, supplies, and medical help, the trains then carried survivors to Duluth and Minneapolis, in many cases separating families and creating great confusion. The telegraph also brought news of the disaster to the outside world, prompting extensive newspaper coverage of the fire and its human tragedy.

Daniel James Brown's *Under a Flaming Sky* is the latest in a long and varied list of books about the fire. Several early works were compilations of survivor accounts, memoirs, and newspaper articles; more recent contributions include carefully researched monographs such as Grace Stageberg Swanson's *From the Ashes: The Story of the Hinckley Fire of 1894* and Lawrence H. Larsen's *Wall of Flames: The Minnesota Forest Fire of 1894*, and even a mystery novel by Larry Millett, *Sherlock Holmes and the Red Demon*. *Under a Flaming Sky* is something of a hybrid.

Author Daniel Brown has both taught writing and produced guides to writing, so it is not surprising that his book reads very well. As an academic, Brown has command of

research skills, and he has carefully constructed the chronological narrative of the beginnings of the two fires that converged in Hinckley, the desperate attempts of the residents to first deal with and then flee from the fire, the complicated story of the three trains that tried to rescue the townspeople, and the aftermath of the fire and tragic reality of shattered families and destroyed communities. Brown is also a descendant of one of the Hinckley families, and he skillfully weaves the intimate details of his great-grandparents' experience into his narrative.

This is a particularly touching story of Norwegian immigrants: the man setting out alone, working in the woods and sawmills until he could build a house in Hinckley, well beyond the expectations of a Norwegian fisherman or peasant. He brought his wife and three children by ship to Duluth and then to their new home in Hinckley, only to lose his life in the great fire and leave a shattered wife and psychologically scarred children. How often was this tragic story re-enacted? is the inevitable question.

Brown also inserts into his narrative, where relevant, brief technical explanations of the workings of the lumber industry, forest conditions and contemporary meteorology, the physics of large fires, burn medicine, the way in which people are killed by fire, and post-traumatic stress disorder and its impact on fire sufferers. All of this makes for a powerful book and brings home once again the enormity of this great Minnesota disaster.

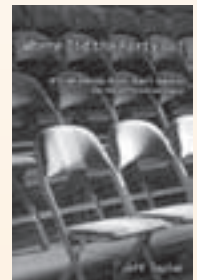
Reviewed by Francis M. Carroll, St. John's College, University of Manitoba. The co-author, with Franklin R. Raiter, of The Fires of Autumn: The Cloquet-Moose Lake Disaster of 1918 (1990), he also fought forest fires as a young man.

Where Did the Party Go? William Jennings Bryan, Hubert Humphrey, and the Jeffersonian Legacy

By Jeff Taylor

(Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006. 372 p. Cloth, \$44.95; paper, \$19.95.)

The United States is just a bit under two-and-a-half centuries old. But despite its relative youth (think of, say, China, England, or France), the U.S. has national political traditions. As a people we possess and use long-standing and systematically related ideas about how American politics ought to work. This



fact sometimes surprises foreigners, yet it would be surprising if we lacked robust national traditions. We belong, after all, to a polity founded through a politically revolutionary articulation of ideas—Jefferson’s “self-evident truths.” Our polity and our traditions have been perpetuated by a fundamental charter, the Constitution, a text that has given rise to endless, universally shared discussion and argument. Such conversation across the centuries has indeed helped to create a nation.

But how many genuinely resonant vocabularies for discussing our politics do we have? What do they say? When does one matter to politics more than another—and why? We have partial answers to these questions, thanks to the kind of study that Jeff Taylor has written. His is not the first such volume, of course. Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Vital Center* (1949) was once very influential. Political scientists still read and discuss Louis Hartz’s 1955 classic, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, and James Morone has done much to revitalize Hartzian analysis, writing two big volumes about American political traditions, *The Democratic Wish* (1990) and *Hellfire Nation* (2003). In Spring 2007, Princeton sociologist Paul Starr published *Freedom’s Power: The True Force of Liberalism*.

All such ambitious treatises seek a way to mobilize a wide audience and to mount social criticism of a troubling phenomenon in our politics. Hartz assailed a political culture that could support McCarthyism and sought to show that the liberal tradition was, paradoxically, often operationally illiberal because it had no rivals within American politics. Morone has shown that distrust of government and popular preoccupations with the personal character and virtue of ordinary citizens have profound effects on the kinds of social policies we adopt and how we design them.

For his part, Jeff Taylor seeks to show that the Democratic party and its leading politicians have gradually cut loose—to their detriment—from their Jeffersonian origins. By the Jeffersonian tradition, Taylor means a political discourse that emphasizes a constellation of things. He poses them as a series of contrasts: ideology versus pragmatism, commitment versus compromise, populism versus elitism, morality versus economics, common good versus special interests, agrarian versus urban, left versus center, and radical versus respectable. The Jeffersonian tradition encompasses everything on the left side of these dyads.

Democrats today, Taylor holds, do not walk the walk or talk the talk of their venerable Jeffersonian tradition. They sit on corporate boards, go to special conferences for special people in luxury resorts, and vacation at the shore homes of wealthy donors. They have made their peace with what is effectively a new Gilded Age in American politics.

Taylor’s implicit policy recommendation is for Democrats to repudiate these alliances, return to a fundamental faith in the people, and live that faith. Be like William Jennings Bryan, Taylor says. There was a real tribune of the people. Hubert Humphrey pretended he was a defender of the little man, but he wasn’t, really. In fact, Taylor is at pains to draw unflattering contrasts between Bryan and Humphrey—at Humphrey’s expense.

Democrats today are, in Taylor’s scathing epithet, “limousine liberals.” Think here, for example, of the furor over John Edwards’s \$400 haircuts in Beverly Hills. Taylor wants politicians who claim that they speak for the people to identify, authentically, with the needs and hopes of ordinary people. If they paid more attention to the Jeffersonian tradition, they could achieve that authenticity. In doing that, they would restore the Democratic party to its former strength and glory.

If you suspect that Taylor is upset about the social distance between most national politicians and regular people, you would be right. He often goes a bit too far, in fact, because of his deep concern. He retails for instance, the innuendo that Bill Clinton spied for the CIA while he was a Rhodes scholar. He castigates Jimmy Carter for not making his peace with the “Wallace wing” of the Democratic party, instead choosing (so Taylor claims) to cozy up to the Trilateral Commission. So, there’s a certain amount of old-fashioned populist resentment coursing through Taylor’s historical-intellectual analysis. But, in the end, Taylor has a point about regular two-party politicians today. Those who seek the presidency in our time are quite Hamiltonian—concerned with political economy and national greatness but not, in their hearts and minds, finely attuned to the life rhythms of ordinary Americans.

But is the larger implication really true? Has the Democratic party’s compromise with organized wealth betrayed popular control of our government? Here, Taylor leaves out the power of public opinion and elections. The idea that genuine representation of the average American does not matter to the person in the White House is hard to square with the plain facts. Everything we know about the presidency and its day-to-day life suggests that the holder of the office, whoever it is, is constantly and viscerally aware that the hopes, fears, and aspirations of the public rest with him. True, presidents manage that awareness so that it does not overwhelm them. But the psychological salience of the public is omnipresent in presidential experience.

As for restoring the Democratic party to a former glory, very little can help the Democrats—or the Republicans, for that matter—to become the dominant force in American politics. The Democratic party was an oversize supermajority for decades because it joined urban ethnics in the North

to Southern whites, male and female. Such awkward super-majorities have nowhere to go but down, toward a smaller size. It is no surprise, really, that today about half the population identifies with one party, the Democrats, while the other half identifies with the other, the Republicans. That is not going to change any time soon, Jeffersonian tradition or no Jeffersonian tradition.

As the close finishes in the last two presidential elections have shown, partisan identities among voters today are stronger and more stable than they have been in some time. What, then, does that say about Taylor's claim that the Democrats no longer represent wage earners and the working poor? Who is voting for Democrats? The answer is: wage earners and the working poor. Electoral and survey data show that the less money you make, the more you identify with the Democratic party, no matter what your skin color, faith, or residence. The relationship is not perfect, of course—there are poor Republican voters and wealthy liberal Democrats. But the correlation is nonetheless strong, and it has gotten much stronger in the last 50 years.

Is identifying with Democrats a costly mistake for the poor, workers, and much of the middle class, a desperate attempt to salvage some sort of social protection from phony competition between Tweedledum and Tweedledee? Again, the answer is no. American macroeconomic performance differed systematically between Republican and Democratic presidents from 1950 to 2000, and the difference did not go away after President Bush's inauguration in 2001. Princeton political scientist Larry Bartels has shown that unemployment is lower and that gross domestic product growth is historically higher when Democrats occupy the White House; consequently, citizens in the bottom two-fifths of the income distribution experience real income growth, pre-tax. (As it happens, all boats rise: the top three-fifths also prosper.) Conversely, when Republicans are in the White House, there are real (that is, inflation-adjusted) income losses to those below the median of the income distribution. Democrats seem to care more, too, about post-tax income growth. President Clinton sharply expanded the Earned Income Tax Credit, a program that Bush and the GOP have since sought to scale back, claiming that the incidence of fraud made the program administratively unmanageable.

In short, certain empirical implications and applications in Taylor's stimulating and extensively researched book do not pan out. If one reads it, however, as a lament about the loss of a *candidate style*—a combination of political vocabulary and persona—then it is often eye opening. If the Democratic party nominates John Edwards to run for president in 2008, you will want to have this book as you follow both the contest and what happens next, should Edwards be elected.

It will help you to gauge the distance between populist Jeffersonian style of today and yesterday.

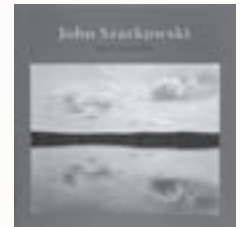
Reviewed by Rick Valelly, professor of political science at Swarthmore College and author of The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement (2004).

John Szarkowski Photographs

By John Szarkowski, with an essay by Sandra S. Phillips

(New York: Bullfinch Press, 2005. 155 p. Cloth, \$60.00)

Writing in 1999, photographer and photo curator John Szarkowski described his "photo-excursion" to Nebraska and Mexico. He said he was better satisfied by the photographs he had taken in Nebraska and concluded, "This would seem to lend credence to the notion that one should work in a neighborhood where one knows what the symbols mean." If there is any region where Szarkowski could be said to know the symbols, it is the American Midwest, but more particularly, Minnesota. Fifty years ago he produced a groundbreaking photographic book on the state, which sat on the *New York Times* bestseller list for eight weeks in 1958. The book made clear that Szarkowski not only knew what a Minnesota lake looked like, but also what it *meant*.



Born in Wisconsin in 1925, Szarkowski got interested in photography at an early age. After a stint in the army, he studied art at the University of Wisconsin. In 1948 he became the staff photographer at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. At this time, he began recording the Minnesota landscape and people. He also began to study and photograph the work of Chicago architect Louis Sullivan, best represented in Minnesota by his Owatonna bank building. Eventually Szarkowski received a Guggenheim fellowship to do *The Idea of Louis Sullivan*, published by the University of Minnesota Press in 1956.

Szarkowski's method was innovative: he was less interested in the pure abstraction of architectural form than in the way in which design was part of an ongoing human landscape. In Szarkowski's photographs, Sullivan's handsome designs hold their own against cars and pedestrians rushing by. Set into the side of the Garrick Theater in Chicago was the "Ham n' Egger" diner. Szarkowski's interior of the Owatonna bank records the farmers in overalls doing their banking. These details of a beautiful building, a busy bank, a living community did not lessen an appreciation of

Sullivan's work but were part of what Szarkowski called the "life-facts" of these structures.

Because of Szarkowski's work with the University of Minnesota Press, its director invited him to do a pictorial book for the state's bicentennial. *The Face of Minnesota*, published in 1958, was a record of urban, rural, and wilderness landscapes, a photographic catalog and text describing not only what things looked like in Minnesota but also what the place meant to Minnesotans, whether they lived in the country, the old cities, or the new suburbs. Szarkowski captured the Minnesota of which its citizens were proudest, a place with an interesting history, but also a state on the move, full of bright, enterprising people who started great industries yet preserved the values of its lakes, rivers, and wilderness. Szarkowski's Minnesota was also a state with a gentle sense of humor and self-deprecation. It was the Minnesota of the 1973 *Time* magazine cover and the one that shows up in some of the work of Garrison Keillor.

After the Minnesota book, Szarkowski's work could have taken him in many directions, as exemplified by the many beautiful photographs from throughout his career included in this new volume. His wilderness photographs could have led him to the kind of work perfected by Jim Brandenburg in northern Minnesota. In fact, a chance meeting in 1951 with environmentalist Ernest Oberholtzer prompted Szarkowski to start a book on the Quetico-Superior region, one he has never finished.

Instead of pursuing such possibilities, Szarkowski, in 1961, became director of the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). He is best known ev-

erywhere but in Minnesota for what happened next. For 30 years at MOMA he helped lead a sea change in the way photography is viewed. He brought respectful attention to many great photographers, past and present. And he wrote books that revolutionized the way people, worldwide, talk and write about photographs. In works like *Looking at Photographs* and *The Photographer's Eye*, as well as many books about individual photographers, Szarkowski made clear that photographs should not be viewed as illustrations for texts but, rather, as objects of attention and investigation on their own.

Szarkowski's view of photographs is frequently personal. His perceptive writing often has the amused tone of an essayist, a tone that also comes through in the letters and other accounts that provide the text for this book of his own photographs. The one criticism one could make of his writing is that he sometimes makes it seem too easy, suggesting wrongly that if one looked at a photograph long enough, even without recourse to research, one could figure out what the photograph meant—and that that meaning could be communicated entirely in a short essay.

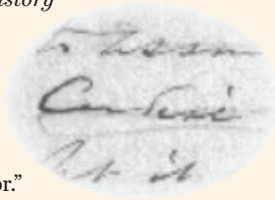
This book is a beautiful collection of photographs spanning Szarkowski's entire career, including his Minnesota pictures and the work he resumed after retirement in 1991. Together with an informative text, an essay on his work, and a chronology of his life, it provides a valuable document about someone who has greatly influenced the iconic record of the Minnesota region.

Reviewed by Bruce M. White, author of We Are at Home: Pictures of the Ojibwe People (2007).

OUR READERS WRITE:

Issues past and current elicited a volume of recent correspondence. From Dr. John Maxfield, soon seconded by Rodney More:

“Thank you for the wonderful issue of *Minnesota History* (Spring 2007). I note on page 188 in the letter from W. T. Sherman to Stephen Miller . . . a transcription question in the phrase ‘complete [?] respect and friendship.’ In viewing the photograph of the letter, it seems clear that the word actually is ‘cordial.’ Maybe you can share that suggestion with the author.”



We did, and author Hampton Smith cordially agrees.

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The short feature on Rochester’s Kahler Grand Hotel, also in the Spring issue, prompted correction from two readers, and we are grateful for their help. In the words of Alan Calavano,

“John Kahler did not open the Cook House. The Cook House was opened in 1869 by John Ramsey Cook, a 31-year-old native of Ohio who came to Rochester in 1856 with a fair-sized fortune. . . . When the Cook House opened, it was acclaimed as the finest hotel in southern Minnesota. Later, it became somewhat of a white elephant . . . and John Kahler was brought to Rochester in 1887 to manage it, which he did successfully, later starting his own hotel.

“Perhaps a more serious error is to say that Dr. William Worrall Mayo opened St. Marys Hospital. . . . In 1883, following the tornado, Mother Alfred Moes of the Sisters of Saint Francis went to Dr. Mayo to suggest the construction of a hospital. Dr. Mayo told her that . . . she’d never be able to raise the money. . . . When Mother Alfred persisted, Dr. Mayo agreed that he and his sons would staff the hospital if Mother Alfred could raise \$40,000 to build it, quite possibly thinking that would be the end of the discussion. By 1887, the sisters had raised the \$40,000, and they purchased the nine acres . . . on which St. Marys now stands. The hospital didn’t officially integrate with Mayo Clinic until 1986.”

■
From Timothy G. Maloney comes some additional information on presidential longevity, in response to “The Making of the Modern Vice Presidency” (Fall 2006):

“In footnote 6, Richard Moe said, ‘On May 23, 2006, Carter and Mondale surpassed the record of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson as the president and vice president who have lived longest since leaving office.’ That may indeed be the longevity record for a . . . team of president and vice president, but Adams’s record for post-presidential longevity was broken by Herbert Hoover, who left the White House on March 4, 1933, and died on October 20, 1964—31 years, 7 months, and 16 days later. His record still stands. Only Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan surpass him for age at the time of death. They both died at the age of 93. Hoover was 90.”

■ Jacob Nelson’s paper, “Stained by the Blood of Our Children: The Ojibwa’s Triumph over Bureaucracy following the Sandy Lake Tragedy,” is the winner of the 2007 *Minnesota History Magazine* Award for the best senior-division History Day paper on a Minnesota topic. For this year’s theme, “Triumph and Tragedy,” Nelson combed through letters, treaties, and other government documents, as well as secondary sources, to understand and analyze the events and aftermath of what came to be known as the Wisconsin Death March. An 11th grader and a post-secondary enrollment option student, he wrote his paper for a Minnesota history course at Saint Paul College.

■ Minnesota, as a rail hub, figures prominently in *From Steel Tracks to Gold-Paved Streets: The Italian Immigrants and the Railroad in the North Central States* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 2005, 204 p., paper, \$15.95). Noticing that Italians were all but absent from accounts of railroad building after the Civil War, author Marie-Christine Michaud set out to add their story to the better-known accounts of the Irish and Chinese laborers. The result, as she writes, is “neither a history of the railroad nor a report on the labor movement in the United States but a sociological work about the interdependence between Italian immigrants and the American railroads.” The book’s three sections detail the forces that brought Italians west of the Mississippi, the attitudes and working conditions they faced, and the organization and evolving identity of Italian-American railroad communities.

■ At the center of *Father Joseph Goifon: A Tale of a French Missionary* (White Bear Lake, MN: White Bear Stereoptics, 2005, 92 p., hardcover) is the priest’s own recount of a harrowing journey from St. Paul to Pembina in 1860: “Lost Five Days in the Snows of Manitoba.” Editor Duane Thein, with the help of numerous translators, presents the autobiographical account first in English and then in French, the lan-



guage that Father Goiffon used to record his tale 48 years after surviving it. The story has been lightly annotated to add information and context, and several appendixes supply relevant maps, letters, and Goiffon family history. In the 1870s the “frozen priest of Pembina” was called back to the St. Paul Diocese from his parish in St. Joseph, Dakota Territory (present-day Walhalla, North Dakota). He then served for many years in Minnesota, including parishes in Little Canada, White Bear Lake, Centerville, Rice Lake, Moundsview, and Mendota. This book is available from the White Bear Lake Area Historical Society, 651-407-5327, and the Washington County Historical Society, 651-439-5956; call for price, tax, and shipping information.

■ *Sunshine Always: The Courtship Letters of Alice Bower and Joseph Gossage of Dakota Territory* tells a true story through correspondence, supplemented by entries from Bower’s journal. On the advice of a mutual friend, Gossage, founder of the *Rapid City Journal*, began the exchange, seeking to hire Bower, one of the few woman typesetters of the time. For various reasons, Alice did not take the job, but the two continued writing to each other, revealing their hopes, dreams, and the daily rituals of their lives. In 1881 the distance between their homes in Rapid City and Vermillion was a long journey by carriage and train. Joseph was finally able to make that journey to meet Alice and her family. It was love at first sight, and they became engaged before

Joseph boarded the train for home. The letters that followed give the reader a glimpse of how Alice prepared for the marriage, what sickness was riddling her little sister, which social activities she joined, and how she longed to see Joseph again. Joseph answered her letters with the same commitment and daily news. Their correspondence provides, as well, a view of Dakota Territory in the 1880s and the struggles people endured to survive. Maxwell Van Nuys, Alice’s nephew, compiled the letters and historian Paula Nelson edited the book (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2006, 293 p., cloth, \$24.95).

■ Journalist Gregg Aamot puts a very human face on the state’s changing cultural and economic landscape in *The New Minnesotans: Stories of Immigrants and Refugees* (Minneapolis: Syren Book Co., 2006, 148 p., paper, \$14.95). Each chapter begins with a profile of a community member and then segues to the larger issues each group faces as it seeks to retain or adapt its culture in a new setting. As the author and his interviewees point out, more recent newcomers from Eastern Europe, Mexico, Central and South America, Africa, and Southeast Asia are grappling with challenges similar to those faced by the predominantly European immigrants of previous eras. *The New Minnesotans* is available at www.itascabooks.com or by calling 1-800-901-3480.

And for those equally interested in older immigrant groups, the Minnesota Historical Society Press has recently added three books to its “People of Minnesota” series: *Swedes in Minnesota* by Anne Gillespie Lewis (93 p., 2004); *Poles in Minnesota* by John Radzilowski (101 p., 2005); and *Mexicans in Minnesota* by Dionicio Valdés (100 p., 2005). Each paperback book sells for \$13.95.

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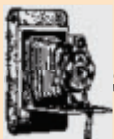
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MHS COLLECTIONS

A Lazy Day



SUMMERTIME AT A MINNESOTA RESORT, and the livin' is easy. Four women play cards in the shade, talking, laughing, and drinking Coca Cola. No housekeeping chores hold them indoors. Their men may be away at war or on a golf course nearby.

Master photographer Kenneth M. Wright perfectly portrayed the joys of a leisurely day in 1943 at Fair Hills Resort on Pelican Lake. Well practiced in outdoor photography, Wright was known for his dramatic views along the North Shore of Lake Superior and in Itasca State Park. But here he features an intimate scene of four women playing bridge or rummy under lush trees near a rustic cabin.

The earliest cabin at Fair Hills was built in 1906 by three farmers who rented boats to fishermen. In 1926 the Keldahl family bought the resort and, by the time of this photo, it had a grand lodge and 43 cabins. Never a dull moment was allowed, as guests were offered a choice of tennis, golf, fishing, swimming, billiards, shuffleboard,

dancing, beach sings, and Friday-night bridge tournaments. Owner Dave Keldahl recalled that during the war years, 1940–45, “there were lots of single women and not many couples.” Most guests arrived by train so as to save their gasoline ration coupons.

In 1940, over 80 percent of American families played cards, according to a survey by the Association of American Playing Card Manufacturers. Contract bridge, solitaire, and rummy were the most popular games. The association boldly declared, “More people play cards than take part in any other form of recreation except listening to the radio, going to the movies and reading.”

Looking back from the fast pace and extreme recreation of the twenty-first century, we can long for a slow summer's day like this one.

—**BONNIE WILSON**

Bonnie Wilson, an independent photo curator and researcher, is the author of Minnesota in the Mail (2004).



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