

Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out

Annette Atkins

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press,
2007. 310 p. Cloth, \$27.95; paper, \$18.95.)

State histories can be tedious to read. The traditional political, economic, and social subjects prevail along with deference to important men and women. Scholarly writing about Minnesota has followed this trajectory, and much of it has made an important contribution to our knowledge of the state's history. Most of these histories have been written for the scholarly audience, particularly historians and students. Annette Atkins is well-known to anyone who reads the state's history. She is a veteran teacher of Minnesota's past, knows the archival collections, and writes with skill. This tribute is not to promote her reputation—her work stands on its own merit—but rather to say that she has reached a point in her career where she can afford to take risks that less experienced historians cannot, pursuing new and innovative approaches. The result is a refreshingly different history of Minnesota.

Atkins has written a book for the general public, although scholars and students can learn much from it. She makes a considerable point of integrating the history of Minnesota with the nation's past to show the state's significance, but she does so by telling stories of everyday people whose lives were inextricably woven into Minnesota's history. Her structure is neither strictly chronological nor traditionally topical. Instead, Atkins analyzes the everyday matters of life that scholars transform into issues such as whiteness, modernization, and ethnicity. Her study is particularly engaging because she asks penetrating questions: "Are women better off now than before?" She empathically answers, based on extensive research, "It depends." Or, "Is factory labor better than hand labor?" To which she replies: "For whom?" Atkins is skillful at looking at the proverbial other side of the coin. The result is an engaging, informative history that integrates biography, genealogy, and the study of material culture into a book that approaches the past slightly off center, that is, nontraditionally. The history of Minnesota is better for it.

Atkins is particularly adept at integrating the past with the present. Whether her starting point is Fort Snelling, the Ojibwe, or immigrants in St. Paul, she tells a story of individuals whose lives give immediacy to matters of race, work,



and gender. She informs us, as well, about political schisms from Ignatius Donnelly to Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarty to Jesse Ventura, all of which help the reader understand the often cerebral and sometimes visceral nature of Minnesota's politics. Minnesotans have a reputation for being nice, well educated, and polite, but their history bears the scars of racism, violence, and greed, which Atkins carefully points out. She stresses that Minnesota has had a rich history of ethnic, social, and cultural diversity which has become even more complex with the increasing immigrant population from Africa and Southeast Asia.

History is messy, that is, complex. Relationships change, political certainties crumble, and the interactions between men and women are unpredictable. Whether the topic is labor on the Iron Range, economic development in Minneapolis, or agricultural production in the southwest, Atkins's stories link seemingly unimportant people to the history of Minnesota and the nation. If Atkins sometimes dwells too much on national trends, she always returns to Minnesota examples to make her point. Still, her intent was to cast a broad net in pursuit of Minnesota's history. In the tradition of Marc Bloch, she argues that knowing is not enough; one must understand. Atkins may perhaps agree with Bloch that this admirable goal is neither easily pursued nor often achieved. Yet anyone interested in the history of Minnesota or the Midwest will find this study informative, readable, and usable. Atkins has set a new, high bar for the writing of state history that will engage both general readers and professional historians.

Reviewed by R. Douglas Hurt, head of the department of history at Purdue University. His most recent book is The Great Plains during World War II, published by the University of Nebraska Press.

The West the Railroads Made

Carlos A. Schwantes and James P. Ronda

(Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008.
229 p. Cloth, \$39.95.)

Nothing epitomizes western development more than the railroad. Locomotives, rolling stock, and rails provided both a literal and figurative engine of change, symbolized technological triumph over distance, and connected western settlers with the modern social amenities of the East. In *The West the Railroads Made*, authors Carlos A. Schwantes and James P. Ronda provide a beautifully illustrated, well-written analysis of the unrivaled and myriad ways in which

the railroad transformed the American West up to the present day. While the text and imagery focus primarily the northern Great Plains and Northwest, the many historical examples of the railroad's effects in these regions are easily extrapolated to other areas of western frontier development.

Schwantes and Ronda begin their analysis with a summary of midnineteenth-century promoters of a transcontinental railroad. These early advocates accurately foresaw railroads as the next essential step, beyond the limited travel routes of steamboats, for exploiting western resources. Future development proved them correct, and by 1883 four transcontinental trunk lines snaked from the East to the Pacific. Less than a generation later, an ever-expanding network of railroads delivered the natural and agricultural resources of the West to eastern factories, mills, and consumers while simultaneously conveying a cornucopia of manufactured products to rural and frontier settlers. "Just as the natural world of northern forests became lumber for sale," write the authors, "western nature was transformed to become bread and meat for eastern markets. The railroad was at the heart of all those transformations."

Concurrent with the railroads' conquering of time and space, the familiar screech of the locomotive's whistle heralded an era of change described by the authors as "the ubiquitous sound of modernity." And just as farming irrevocably changed the western landscape, the railroads transformed the physical appearance of the West, as well. In addition to the cultivated fields, windmills, barns, and fences wrought by the agricultural frontier, the ever-expanding western railroad network contributed its own intrusions to the countryside. Iron and steel rails, telegraph poles and wires, wooden trestles, water tanks, and depots, around which the railroad towns were platted, all provided indelible reminders of the railroads' part in western development.

Minnesota represents a typical example of commercial expansion founded on the railroads. Following the Civil War, the state's economy grew through the mining of iron ore and the marketing of agricultural produce expedited by a growing network of intrastate railroads. The completion of the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad in 1870, connecting St. Paul and Duluth, was the key to this success and a vital link to midwestern markets and Great Lakes shipping. It facilitated the transport of iron ore mined in regions west and north of the Great Lakes to iron mills in the East. Furthermore, it transformed Duluth into a regional



entrepot for the agricultural commodities of the northern Great Plains.

The West the Railroads Made is good history, well written, and an expertly mated coalescence of period quotes and railroad documents, ephemera, and literature from the St. Louis Mercantile Library's Barriger National Railroad Library and the Washington State Historical Society collections. The seemingly endless examples of railroad handbills, posters, maps, lithographs, brochures, and advertisements from these institutions add an extremely colorful, complementary visual dimension to this scholarly monograph. This outstanding collection of historical documents, paired with concise, informative text, yields a wonderful addition to the historiography of western railroads.

Reviewed by Michael W. Vogt, curator at the Iowa Gold Star Military Museum, Camp Dodge. Vogt's research interests are in Gilded Age Iowa and midwestern and military history. His latest article, "From Cornfields to Cuba: The 49th Iowa Volunteer Infantry in the Spanish-American War" appeared in The Iowan (November/December 2007).

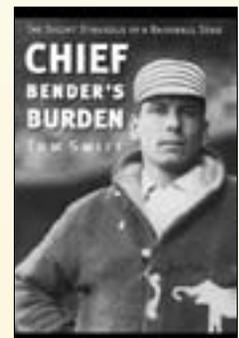
Chief Bender's Burden: The Silent Struggle of a Baseball Star Tom Swift

(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.
339 p. Cloth, \$24.95.)

Charles Albert Bender was born May 5, 1884, in Crow Wing County some 20 miles east of Brainerd, on the White Earth Reservation. His father, Albertus, was of German American descent, and his mother, Mary, was a member of the Mississippi band of Ojibwe. Her Ojibwe name was Payshaw de o quay.

Charles, better known to the general public as "Chief" Bender, began playing professional baseball with the Philadelphia Athletics in 1903 and remained with them until the end of his major-league career in 1917, except for a brief sojourn in the Federal League in 1915. He carried on as a player and player-manager in the minor leagues through 1927 and then in various capacities as coach and scout through 1953, when he was named to the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

In *Chief Bender's Burden*, Minnesota journalist Tom Swift has written a compelling and fascinating biography of this



remarkable man. Although a Minnesotan by birth, Bender was shaped by his educational experiences in Pennsylvania. The first of these was a five-year stay at the Educational Home near Philadelphia, and the second was his sojourn at the Carlisle Indian School. Both of these institutions were founded to educate young Indians in a boarding-school setting and designed to “civilize” them in the ways of the dominant culture that took their inferiority for granted. Charles’s experiences shaped him in ways intended and unintended, but in the end he both incorporated and transcended a worldview that could have limited him.

In a number of ways, the life of Charles Bender is a wonder. His triumph over economic disadvantage is inspiring. His cultivation of self-esteem and human dignity in the face of a racist culture was a clear victory over those who would deny him his full humanity. His ability to overcome the pressures laid on him by the taunts of fans, combined with the high stress of elite athletic competition, represented the achievement of a strong will coupled with extraordinary self-control.

Tom Swift does a very good job of telling Bender’s story and recounting the achievements of his baseball career. The narrative is set within the framework of the first game of the 1914 World Series, which Bender pitched—one of the poorest performances of his career. The story moves slowly through the pre-game and game structure, as each half-inning provides an entry into the larger narrative of Bender’s life. This device works well, providing both structure and drama to the biography.

What is lacking in *Chief Bender’s Burden* is a sufficient explication of the burden. More straightforward description of social attitudes toward Native Americans and the impediments

of government policy in the larger cultural context would strengthen the story. There are examples of the racism Bender faced, but a larger canvass is needed for a full appreciation of the burden.

Another oddity stems from Swift’s addressing of Charles Bender’s problems with alcohol. The book’s first 200 pages refer a number of times to health issues that sometimes incapacitated Bender. These are never identified as stemming from alcohol. Then, late in the book, Swift notes that by 1914 it was “no secret to anyone close to the team that Charles Bender was a drinker of some repute.”

Another irritant, at least for me, is Swift’s tendency to offer Bender’s reactions to particular situations by using psychological and sociological theory and speculation, without any evidence that Bender himself shared these reactions. These are hedged by the use of “perhaps” and “maybe” and add little to an understanding of Bender’s actual mental state.

The book includes a chapter-by-chapter discussion of sources, which is very useful. By taking one more step and adopting conventional historical citation methods, however, the author would have made the work even more useful.

Despite these reservations, this is a book worth reading and owning. It is well written and the research is extensive and impressive. It is clearly the definitive biography of Charles Albert Bender and should be read and enjoyed by all those interested in baseball and all those who find human tragedies and triumphs both inspiring and instructive.

Reviewed by Richard C. Crepeau, professor of history at the University of Central Florida and author of Baseball: America’s Diamond Mind. He has written extensively on the history of sport in America.

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