

**Finnish American Rag Rugs: Art, Tradition, and Ethnic Community**

**Yvonne R. Lockwood**

*(East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010. 249 p. Cloth, \$29.95.)*



There are many ways to make rugs from fabric that has been recycled from garments or household textiles. Of those ways, weaving is arguably the most complicated method. Through a study of the complex of materials, equipment, aesthetics, and skills, Yvonne Lockwood offers a revealing look into immigrant history and culture in the Midwest in *Finnish American Rag Rugs: Art, Tradition, and Ethnic Community*.

Before 1860 rags were an economic commodity in Europe because they were in great demand for papermaking. Rugs made at this time from rags were a status symbol. Even after wood pulp replaced rags as the primary raw material in paper, women continued to save, use, and value rags in rural Scandinavia. Rag rugs gained new respect as a folk art during a wave of nationalism that was gathering momentum at the turn of the twentieth century. Because of utilitarian and cultural value, rag rugs and the skills to make them came with immigrants from Finland, who settled in greatest numbers in Michigan and Minnesota.

Lockwood, a folklorist, was raised in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and had long been curious about rag rugs, a Finnish American icon. In order to find Michigan rug weavers for the Smithsonian Institution's American Folklife Festival in 1987, she began to survey traditions surrounding weaving. Through public meetings and rug "discovery" days, Lockwood met and later interviewed more than 100 weavers and loom makers. The project developed into an exhibition at Michigan State University Museum in 1995 and now into this fascinating book.

Lockwood profiles eight Finnish American weavers and, more briefly, ten loom makers whose stories illustrate both the commonality and diversity of this living tradition. Throughout the profiles, Lockwood discusses some of the dynamics of tradition, such as the seemingly oppositional forces of creativity and conservatism, utility and beauty, and ethnic and American identity.

Many Finnish Americans, women and men, grew up with handwoven rugs in their homes and with mothers and grandmothers who wove. Many have childhood memories of helping prepare rags. However, Lockwood's informants did not usually learn how to weave until later in life. Rag rug weaving is physically challenging; it takes the strength of an adult to create a quality rug. Finnish Americans in Michigan

adhere to a shared aesthetic, a standard of appearance and excellence. Quality rugs are tightly woven rugs, the result of careful planning of materials and "beating" the rug on the loom with controlled force.

Weavers often learned from non-relatives. Rug weaving was a common, though specialized, task. Communities value this textile tradition and have willingly shared their knowledge. Although it is more common for men to build looms or make adaptations to commercial looms, many men learn to weave, and some work together with their wives as what Lockwood calls team weavers.

There is a great diversity in the types of equipment, materials, and weaving patterns used. Some weavers prefer old, handmade "tree" or "root" looms with supports made from naturally curving pieces of wood. Weavers use all kinds of fabric, often recycled from garments contributed by community members. In Finland today, rugs are more often made from new fabric and even from commercially prepared strips. Michigan weavers are aware of the differences between Finnish and Finnish American rugs but often prefer the artistic challenge of using rags and the personal satisfaction of following the tradition of making something from nothing.

There is a close connection between rag rugs and another icon of Finnish culture: the sauna. Rag rugs commonly cover the floor of the dressing room and the benches where the bathers sit or recline to relax after their hot-air bath. Some weavers create rugs specifically for their saunas, but it is more common to place older and often cherished rugs there. Lockwood explains that rag rugs and their aesthetics, memories, and sense of heritage contribute to the ambiance that helps to make a good sauna experience.

The book focuses on Michigan, but Lockwood's research will apply to Finnish populations in other parts of the United States, particularly northern Minnesota. Lockwood gives some examples from Minnesota and frequently cites the work of Janet Meany of Duluth, who has documented looms, many made or used by immigrants, in Minnesota. She also collects and shares stories of weavers in a biannual newsletter.

Beautifully illustrated with diagrams and photos of rugs, looms, and rug-making processes, the book's most significant feature is the depth of information to further our understanding of ethnicity and tradition in the Midwest.

*Reviewed by Laurann Gilbertson, author of "Textile Production in Norwegian America," in Norwegian American Women: Migration, Communities, and Identities, edited by Betty Bergland and Lori Lahlum (May 2011). She is chief curator at Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa.*

## The Dutiful Son: Louis W. Hill

Biloine W. Young with Eileen R. McCormack

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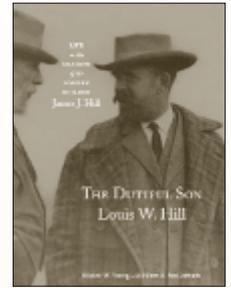
On January 6, 1922, newspapers across the United States reported that Louis Warren Hill had been deposed from the presidency of one family-controlled company and had resigned from another, thereby “marking another step in the controversy over settlement of the \$12,000,000 estate of Mrs. James J. Hill, widow of the ‘Empire Builder.’” This merely constituted a follow-up revelation in an ongoing legal battle over the Hill estates, one that commenced following the Empire Builder’s death in 1916, when local papers reported that James J. Hill had not only “intended” to leave Louis \$40,000,000 (8/13ths of his estate) but had also failed to sign a will.

Family squabbles and legal wrangling over the estates have long dominated discussions about Louis W. Hill and his siblings. Young argues that there are better reasons to study Louis (1872–1948), the third of ten children and the second son of James J. and Mary T. Hill: Louis’s role as successor to his famous father in running the Great Northern Railway (GNR), his prominent place in St. Paul’s social life, and the development of the eight-state region served by the GNR. Among his capstone achievements, his admirers count Glacier National Park, the Northwest Area Foundation (now focused on poverty reduction, particularly in the Native American communities that lost their land to Euro-Americans and on whose “removal” Hill and other Gilded Age hustlers built their fortunes), and the revival of St. Paul’s Winter Carnival. Louis was also the son who remained in St. Paul, in the shadow of his famous father, while most of his siblings left the Twin Cities.

This sympathetic biography, which seeks to reframe the life of a complicated and misunderstood figure, will appeal to those with an interest in the Hill family’s legacy within the region. Collaborator Eileen McCormack catalogued and read some 700,000 personal and business documents contained in the Louis Warren Hill Papers (now housed at the Minnesota Historical Society), and the biography is largely based on this one collection. As a result, these papers serve as both the strength and weakness of the book.

The Hill papers afford Young the opportunity to glimpse one of St. Paul’s wealthiest families through Louis’s lens. She argues that, despite his less-than-stellar career as a scholar, the papers reveal an important regional artist, philanthropist, and “master promoter” who saw in the West opportunities that even his father failed to appreciate. Glacier National Park stands as Louis Hill’s “visible legacy,” but Young also depicts him as the savvy investor who expanded

the GNR’s holdings, diversified the Hill family portfolio, and carefully managed his parents’ estates despite family feuds and the greed and sniping of his selfish siblings. Louis also appears as a family man, deeply involved in the lives of his children.



Unfortunately, personal papers tend to privilege the views of their author over context. We rarely see Louis Hill operating within a broader frame—of international business developments, economic booms and busts, the rising and diminishing fortunes of U.S. railroading, larger conservation or tourist movements, and American philanthropy. Relying on traditional biographies of James J. Hill also reinforces many of the myths about father and son: that they were family men who made their fortunes on the strength of market perceptions and hard work rather than back-room deals, political maneuvering, and the sacrifices of Native Americans and laborers on the family’s investments. Even a cursory glance at the GNR records, as well as other sources at the MHS, exposes another side of the Hill empire—including rivalries and animosities with other regional nabobs and their family members—and reveals more about James J. Hill and his other sons (particularly James N. and Walter) than about how Louis managed the GNR and the family’s investments after his father elevated him to the presidency of the railroad and banking empire.

Although Young seeks to portray Louis as the “dutiful son,” she often (inadvertently) reveals a man obsessed with position, a master manipulator and entitled child willing to undermine talented brothers-in-law, gobble up the family fortune by the simple (and complicated) act of staying in St. Paul—next door to his domineering father, then widowed mother—attempt to outdistance James J. in competitive and cut-throat business undertakings, and exploit the region for personal gain. Young hints at these traits but quickly dismisses them. She also hints at, but fails to develop, other family traits and legacies, including controlling fathers, alcohol abuse, mental illness, failed marriages and relationships, obsessions with health, and the entitlements and petty squabbles resulting from inherited wealth. By the end of the biography, it seemed that “the entitled son,” or “his father’s son,” better described Louis Hill’s life and legacy. Still, this is an important biography, and its omissions point to fruitful research topics, including those centered on children of privilege.

*Reviewed by Jocelyn Wills, associate professor of history at Brooklyn College, City University of New York, and author of Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators: Entrepreneurial Culture and the Rise of Minneapolis and St. Paul, 1849–1883.*



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