

Archaeology of Minnesota: The Prehistory of the Upper Mississippi Region

Guy Gibbon

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.
263 p. Cloth, \$34.95.)

Archaeology, like all disciplines, has its own rhythm and pace. Knowledge accumulates gradually, in small quantities, and is stored in the files—and minds—of archaeologists in places as diverse as universities, private firms, regulatory agencies, and institutions such as the Minnesota Historical Society. Every investigation generates another collection of artifacts, another set of conclusions, and it ends with another small advance in our understanding of how people have lived in Minnesota over the past 10,000 years.

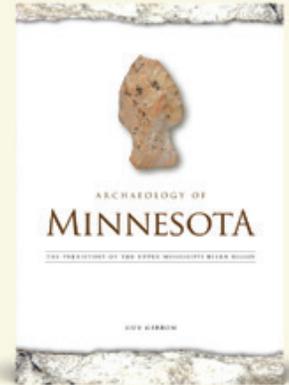
In *Archaeology of Minnesota*, long-time University of Minnesota faculty member Guy Gibbon has tackled the daunting task of assembling all of those tiny bits of information into a coherent picture of human life as it was lived here before the arrival of Europeans. He admits in his preface that this effort faced some challenges: “Much of the recent information is in cultural resource management (CRM) files or, more likely, in someone’s head—places that are hard to access.”

For the most part, Gibbon succeeds in synthesizing the information gleaned from thousands of archaeological sites over the course of 150 years. Some very recent research—including some funded in the past four years by the Legacy Amendment’s Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund—is not reflected in this book. But such omissions are inevitable when constructing a narrative about an actively researched topic, and the author cannot be faulted for those absences.

Gibbon sets the stage for his story by providing an in-depth portrayal of the climates and environments that have existed in Minnesota since the end of the Ice Age. This background is critical to subsequent discussions of how environmental conditions and changes influenced human decisions over time. It also calls out a principle that is central to modern archaeology: to understand any human culture, it is necessary to understand the environment in which it thrived—or failed.

The book alternates between descriptions of regional cultural traditions and discussions of how cultural trends identified in Minnesota can be viewed through a theoretical lens that shows them to be examples of global trends. The author chose to apply a theoretical framework devised by the prolific but controversial anthropologist Lewis Binford. Gibbon did exactly the right thing in going beyond the dates and facts of a simple culture history, but the use of a less esoteric framework might have made discussion more accessible for most readers.

It is, overall, difficult to know what audience Gibbon wrote for. He seems to assume that the reader has only a generalized understanding of archaeology and little knowledge of the specifics of human cultural history in Minnesota. Descriptions of the various archaeological cultures that existed in the state are presented in a straightforward manner, but details are, for the most part, presented in technical language that is probably obscure for the general reader. An example is the description of Laurel Tradition ceramics: “Techniques of decoration include dentate stamping, incising, push-pull bands, pseudo-scallop shell stamps, bosses, and punctuates.” I suspect that few nonprofessional readers would have an idea of what all these terms mean. To help the reader understand the jargon, a glossary would have been a useful addition to the book.



The use of highly technical language probably amplifies the sense that the full sweep of information presented in the book is somewhat overwhelming. The volume might be best used as a reference work, consulted when needed and digested in small doses.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this book is not the wealth of detail it contains about the various cultural traditions that have existed here, but the fact that Gibbon is explicit about the underlying and frequently unspoken assumption that drives all archaeology: We can learn something from the past. The challenges faced by many societies today are not new; they have been faced by other societies, worldwide, again and again. Climate change, dwindling resources, overpopulation, political strife, economic disparity—these are not solely modern issues.

The last general-interest publication that covered the range of Minnesota’s human history prior to European contact was *Prehistoric Peoples of Minnesota*, written by long-time State Archaeologist Elden Johnson. This brief and basic volume from MHS Press was first published in 1968 and revised several times, most recently in 1990, and is now out of print. Despite its faults, a volume such as Gibbon’s is long overdue.

Reviewed by Patricia Emerson, who has been practicing archaeology in the Upper Midwest for 40 years and has been director of archaeology for the Minnesota Historical Society since 2005. Her areas of interest include human-landscape relationships and public education in archaeology.

The Farmers' Game: Baseball in Rural America

David Vaught

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,
2013. 214 p. Cloth, \$29.95.)

Baseball has a long tradition of being “America’s pastime.” Many books have been written about the sport; volumes on players, the World Series, professional teams, and statistical analysis continue to fill shelves and find avid readers. Yet few of these examine the rural origins of baseball and its significance for small towns and agricultural communities. *The Farmers’ Game*, by Texas A&M history professor David Vaught, seeks to correct this imbalance.

The origins of baseball, Vaught reminds readers, were contentious back in the nineteenth century, when the sport we recognize today first emerged and blossomed. Debates about the place of Cooperstown and legendary founder Abner Doubleday occupied historians and enthusiasts for decades. After these myths about origins were effectively laid to rest in the early-twentieth century, however, the focus quickly became the urban, professional game, played in large stadiums by teams in the major leagues of the current era. This emphasis distracts historians and fans alike, Vaught contends, from “the world of rural baseball.” And this is the world we need to examine, he believes, for it’s here that the sport forged a long and significant relationship, becoming a key element of life in America’s small towns and countryside.

The Farmers’ Game explores baseball’s long-neglected rural importance with six case studies. In Cooperstown and California, Minnesota and North Carolina, the cornfields of Iowa and the cotton fields of Texas readers embark on a journey through the rich diversity of America’s small-town past. Chapters are organized chronologically and share common themes: an exploration of unique historical backgrounds and, importantly, an understanding of how and why baseball “has long had a special resonance with rural people.” Yet each chapter stands alone and they can be read individually, in any order.

“The Milroy Yankees and the Decline of Southwest Minnesota” may be of special interest to readers of this magazine. Milroy, a small town in Redwood County, near Marshall, grew thanks to agriculture and the arrival of the railroad. Baseball, Vaught writes, enjoyed strong regional popularity even prior to Milroy’s founding in 1902, but it was after the difficult years of the Great Depression and World War II that the town’s team enjoyed its greatest success.

The optimism of the immediate postwar period—thanks again to agriculture—was matched by a successful team

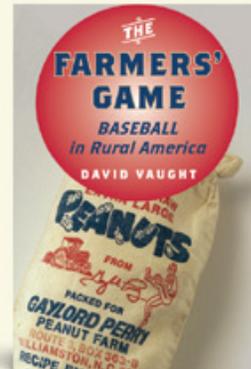
that brought the town together and generated local pride and confidence. Players of various ethnic backgrounds took the field together, and residents, often of Norwegian, German, or Irish heritage, had no difficulty supporting “their” team. And not merely in Milroy: Vaught demonstrates throughout the book how, for numerous small towns across the country, baseball teams became both a focal point and community-building vehicle.

Milroy’s postwar success culminated in 1954, when the Yankees won the Minnesota small-town state championship. Home crowds that summer numbered in the hundreds (for a town whose population never exceeded 300) as the team stormed through the Redwood County League, regional playoffs, and state title game.

A new stadium came in 1955 and, with it, new expectations for continued success. But the 1954 title remained the only one. Milroy slowly declined over the following decades, and the team did too; young people drifted away and many residents elected to watch professional baseball instead, on television. By the end of the 1970s, many downtown businesses were shuttered, and the all-important railroad had ended service. But decades later townspeople still recalled 1954 fondly, and that magical year remained a source of community pride.

Vaught’s *The Farmers’ Game* is a solidly researched and well-written piece of history, one that fills a large void in our understanding of baseball’s significant role in American life, particularly away from the big city lights. The book has strong regional appeal, too: in addition to the excellent chapter on the Milroy Yankees, another explores the depression era in Van Meter, Iowa, and the saga of Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Feller. Baseball enthusiasts should find this book of interest, and university instructors of U.S. cultural history courses could use chapters as supplementary reading. Recommended.

Reviewed by Thomas Saylor, a professor of history at Concordia University, St Paul. He has authored or co-authored three books on twentieth-century American history, most recently Minnesota in the 70s (MHS Press, 2013).





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