The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History

Jon K. Lauck
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Novelist Jon Hassler often wondered why John Cheever was called a “writer” while Hassler was a “Midwestern writer.” Responding to the same American tendency to universalize the experiences of some and regionalize (and thereby diminish) those of others, Jon K. Lauck—historian, attorney, and political aide—has issued this manifesto.

Lauck reminds us that for half a century Midwestern history and historians occupied center stage in the study of American history. Since 1965, however, when the Mississippi Valley Historical Association became the Organization of American Historians, the Midwest as a field of study has virtually vanished. This book sets out to explain what was lost and the need to revive it.

His book is divided into four sections. In “Why the Midwest Matters” he focuses on the Midwest’s contribution to republicanism, the evolution of capitalism, and U.S. military strength. In the second—the longest and most heartfelt—he pays homage to the “Prairie Historians,” as he calls them (all now deceased) from Frederick Jackson Turner to Merle Curti, John D. Hicks, and Alan Bogue and including Minnesotans Theodore Blegen and Solon Buck. These men and their work dominated the study of American history and, as he argues in “The Case for Midwestern History,” “they once made the practice of history . . . better, more complete, and more balanced.” In his final chapter, “Toward a Revival of Midwestern History,” Lauck cites three main reasons for the Midwest’s decline: the rejection of Sinclair Lewis’s Midwest (who wants to celebrate Main Street?); the triumph of urbanism (and the decline of rural life, values, and identity); and the rise of fragmenting trends in the historical profession.

One especially vexing trend is the profession’s turn away from the “grand narrative” of “growth and progress of American democratic institutions” and of American exceptionalism and its turn toward “counternarratives” that in their criticism and focus on the Other “have become, ironically, the main story in American history in recent decades.” These counternarratives, the study of the multiple others, the emphasis on “unmasking” and “demythologizing,” he continues, “once made sense as a corrective . . . but in recent years [have] come to dominate the historical imagination.” This approach to history not only “inhibits the study of the Midwest,” he argues, but “obscures the complexity of the past.” The revival of Midwestern history, he concludes, offers a way out of this “chaos.”

Lauck’s book doesn’t define Midwestern history. Is it studies set in the Midwest, or of the Midwest’s contributions to, or role in, the nation? Is it a category of analysis? A specifically place-based approach? The language of “revival” and of the “lost” region implies a return to the “good old days” when we all agreed on what and who was important and on how history ought to be done. Those bygone days are past, and reviving them as they were could well invite charges of a Babbitt-ian parochialism and further marginalization of our work.

Perhaps, instead, we can re-imagine Midwestern history. What happens if we put multiplicity rather than singularity at its center, if we take advantage of the energy these trends have unleashed and the new voices that have emerged? Yes, the current state of the discipline may feel chaotic, but what if we adopted Bob Dylan’s philosophy “Chaos is a friend of mine” and explored where that would take us? It could yield exciting, indeed revolutionary, results.

Lauck’s impassioned urgings to do, to appreciate, to take seriously the power of Midwestern history are the book’s real value. To start and to pursue these conversations is helpful, indeed inspiring. To call on the national press to take heed of a Midwest consciousness that is not “Main Street” is vital. Lauck has nearly single-handedly whipped up enthusiasm and national visibility for Midwestern history. He spearheaded the founding of a new organization, a scholarly journal, panels at professional meetings, a national conference. He is reenergizing the whole field. I’m grateful. Jon Hassler would be, too.

—Annette Atkins

ANNETTE ATKINS, professor emerita of history, St. John’s University/College of St. Benedict, is the author of four books including Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out (2007) and a long-time teacher of Minnesota and Midwestern history.
Aaron Shapiro has undertaken a broad challenge in *The Lure of the North Woods*: to trace the development of tourism in northern Minnesota, northern Wisconsin, and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Tourism continues to play an important role in the economy of this region, and Shapiro provides a welcome look at its evolution.

He begins his investigation in the 1920s and continues through the 1960s. The earliest chapters describe the regional transformation, in the 1920s and 1930s, from economies dependent on logging and mining alone to a small but growing tourism economy based on the creation of a scenic North Woods image. As Shapiro aptly points out, tourism was not solely a post-World War II phenomenon but had roots in the 1920s and even earlier.

The third chapter presents the sometimes conflicting economic roles in the three states of labor by residents and leisure for vacationers—the latter of which, among other things, helped further establish a voice for outsider tourists in local affairs. Chapter four examines the promotional materials used by resorts and tourism associations and the differing roles of state government in each locality.

The book then moves on to the transformations in tourism across the North Woods, beginning immediately after the end of World War II and continuing into the 1950s. The final chapter tries to place the North Woods within larger regional and national trends, such as those for outdoor recreation and wilderness conservation in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Throughout the book, a wonderful set of photographs from various archives helps illustrate the themes, trends, and places described. Eight pages of color photographs and images are a nice addition.

Though generally useful and informative, this book also has some drawbacks. First, the narrative is a bit disjointed, jumping between Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan within each chapter. This extensive geographic sweep may have been too broad to sustain a narrative without choppiness. As a result, the book appears to be more a collection of anecdotes than a smooth and complete analysis.

Also, the transformation of the North Woods forests from resources for extraction to destinations for tourists was not as simple or complete as the book suggests. Logging and mining continue there; they have not been replaced by tourism in any of these states. Examples certainly exist of the resource-based and tourism economies coming into conflict even today. In addition, the tourism economy has internal conflicts as well, such as the push for wilderness conservation in the Superior National Forest of Minnesota at times clashing with that area’s resort economy. The economic complexities were and are far more textured than this book suggests.

The story of wilderness conservation in northeastern Minnesota is also chopped up and incomplete. There is only passing reference, for example, to the significant struggles in the late 1940s to pass the 1948 Thye-Blatnik Act to buy up privately owned lands in what is now the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) and restore them to public ownership. The related campaign to convince President Harry S. Truman to establish the still-unprecedented airspace reservation over the BWCAW in 1949 receives only a bare mention. Since these efforts affected all the subsequent wilderness struggles in northeastern Minnesota, skipping this important story makes it more difficult for readers to understand the wilderness conflicts of the 1960s in the book’s final chapter.

Finally, in a perhaps minor issue, the index is flawed. Of 11 index entries for Minnesota author and conservationist Sigurd F. Olson, for example, only five lead to Olson in the text. Despite these challenges, *The Lure of the North Woods* gives an informative look at the development of the tourism industry across the three states. Tourism continues to support local economies and provide important experiences for visitors today. This book helps explain how that came to be.

—Kevin Proescholdt

**KEVIN PROESCHOLDT**, Minneapolis, is the conservation director for Wilderness Watch, a national wilderness conservation organization. He has written extensively about the topic, including articles in *Minnesota History*, the book *Troubled Waters: The Fight for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness* (co-author), and a 2015 collection of essays, *Glimpses of Wilderness.*
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