

Our readers write . . .

“Crazy Man’s Castle,” Lacey Prpić Hedtke’s EyeWitness feature (Winter 2014–2015), stirred curiosity and prompted memories. Jeff Sauve, an archivist at St. Olaf College, Northfield, confided

“One of the great joys that history provides is the opportunity to sleuth and learn more about a subject. Lacey Prpić Hedtke offered such an opportunity when she wrote, ‘No one knows how the house met its demise—through fire, flood, or general neglect.’

“The demise of J. Putnam Gray’s celebrated Crazy Man’s Castle took place on Tuesday, July 18, 1905, at 10 A.M. A tornado struck with little warning along the Mississippi River near Minneiska. The steamer *Clyde*, bound for Stillwater with a crew of 27 men, was nearby as the violent storm struck. The *Clyde* overturned in 18 feet of water. The entire crew survived, but the twister destroyed most of the famous landmark. The following week, yet another ferocious gale leveled what remained standing.

“Undeterred or in denial, the 72-year-old Gray briefly contemplated rebuilding. Travelers on the river noticed him ‘pining amid that part of the ruins not carried away by the river.’ The August 22, 1905, *La Crosse Tribune* headline announced, ‘Miser Will Rebuild Crazy Castle.’ This brief note stated that Gray intended to erect a new building that would accommodate ‘old-settlers of Wabasha and Winona counties, where they can bring their families in the summer season and spend a few days or weeks.’

“By December, Gray’s intentions of a future summer resort had evaporated. Heartbroken, he relayed his acceptance of losing his novel structure, assembled over 40 years, to a St. Paul reporter (newspaper now unknown). In a trembling voice and with tears, Gray said, ‘I can’t finish it now. . . . I’m too old and feeble, and it was almost completed.’

“In his final years, Gray lived at the Old Soldiers Home in Minneapolis, pass-

ing away at age 88 in 1921. He is buried at Hillside Cemetery in Minneiska, not far from the site of his beloved and once-fanciful home.”

On the same topic, R. Jean Gray (note the last name) of Excelsior told the author:

“I enjoyed the article on Putnam Gray (I think he was my great-grandfather). I have sent the article on to family and am copying . . . my message.

“This is where Aunt Flossie Belle Gray (and girlfriends) cavorted in white nightgowns on the rooftop at night in the beams of light coming from river boats searching for the crossing markers to alter course from one side of the Mississippi to the other. They were known to the river men as the ‘ghost of Gray’s castle.’

“Two huge cottonwood trees mark the now-empty site across the railroad tracks from US Highway 61—if I have the site correctly located. The river-crossing markers are still in use there today. I came down the Mississippi on a steamboat in the 1980s and watched how the pilot played his light on the shore to find and illuminate the markers to determine when he should steer from the channel along the eastern shore across the wide river to the channel which moved to the western shore.”

On another topic entirely, Jon Wefald, former president of Southwest State University, chancellor of the Minnesota State University system, and then president of Kansas State University for more than 20 years, wrote that Steven Dornfeld’s article, “Gordon Rosenmeier: The Little Giant from Little Falls,” also from the Winter issue, is “one for the ages.”

“I learned so much about the great state senator, Gordon Rosenmeier, and the unending litany of political accomplishments during his years in office—including the expansion of Camp Ripley, the constitutional amendment expanding the terms of the governor and other

state officers from two to four years, the enactment of the 1965 State Planning Agency, the passage of the historic Pollution Control Agency in 1965, and his role in the formation of the Metropolitan Council.

“I loved how [Dornfeld] explained Rosenmeier’s ability to get things done; how much respect he had from conservatives and liberals alike; and his incredible analytical abilities and problem-solving skills. His legislative skills mirrored those of Lyndon Johnson when he was the majority leader of the U.S. Senate—except I believe Gordon had more unquestioned integrity and decency. Indeed, Gordon seemed to treat everyone he met with total and complete respect.

“No question, Gordon Rosenmeier became . . . a true and authentic Minnesota statesman of the highest order.”

■ Combing through the archives of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* for interesting news published in its predecessor papers, Ben Welter selected a collection of odd stories ranging from a kidnapped nun to a runaway sea lion and the last red squirrel to haunt Loring Park. The result of his foray is *Minnesota Mysteries: A History of Unexplained Wonders, Eccentric Characters, Preposterous Claims and Baffling Occurrences in the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2013, 159 p., paper, \$19.99). Dating from 1883 (*A Woman in Man’s Clothes*) to 1971 (*The D. B. Cooper Hijacking*), the articles are introduced by a short note and then quoted *in toto*, sometimes accompanied by their original illustrations.

■ A second edition of James H. Howard’s *The Canadian Sioux*, first published in 1984, is now available with a new foreword by Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014, 195 p., paper, \$30.00). Garnering good reviews in its first edition, the book presents the “least

studied of all the Sioux groups,” whose members live on eight reserves in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. They are the descendants of the Santee, Yanktonai, and Teton from the United States who sought refuge in Canada in the 1860s and 1870s, most of them in the aftermath of the U.S.—Dakota War of 1862. Among other points, the book shows that the Canadians have retained some traditions no longer practiced by their U.S. relatives.

■ In 1972, after encountering years of prejudice in the child-welfare system and hostility in urban public schools, the American Indian Movement and Native parents in the Twin Cities founded two community schools: Heart of the Earth in Minneapolis and the Red School House in St. Paul. In *Survival Schools: The American Indian Movement and Community Education in the Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 307 p., cloth, \$69.00, paper, \$22.95), Julie L. Davis recounts the story of these schools, which successfully educated Native students while enabling them (in the words of one founder, Pat

Bellanger) “never to forget who they were.” Drawing on the voices of activists, teachers, parents, and students, the book not only chronicles the schools’ history but also the story of AIM’s founding and early years in the Twin Cities.

■ Longing for summer? For a taste of July’s past, readers might enjoy a look back at *Seventy-Five Years of the Minneapolis Aquatennial* (Minneapolis: Nodin Press, 2014, 167 p., paper, \$19.95). Written mostly by Pam Albinson, the festival’s 1962 Queen of the Lakes, the book also includes essays by the men and women who built the parade floats, served as royalty, or judged the contests. Organized by decade, *Aquatennial* both appeals to nostalgia and offers a chronological perspective on cultural change, as rodeos and canoe races gave way to triathlons and speedboat races and as choral singing vanished in favor of happenings. Two chapters on parades by float makers from in the same company (now married) provide an especially fascinating peek behind the curtain, revealing, for example, the woes of ap-

plying diamond dust to Grain Belt Brewery’s 1973 wooden Trojan Horse float and the concealed motor that relieved the “slaves” from actually pulling the horse along the parade route. The book is amply illustrated with vintage photos from the Hennepin County Museum.

■ Back in print, an enhanced edition of Frederick L. Johnson’s *The Sea Wing Disaster: Tragedy on Lake Pepin* (Red Wing: Goodhue Historical Society, 2014, 160 p. cloth, \$24.95) offers 50 percent more content than the 1986 edition. More than 185 photos, maps, and images and careful endnotes enhance the recount of the horrific day in July 1890 when the pleasure steamer capsized and 98 of 215 passengers died, many of them women and children returning from a pleasant day trip from Red Wing to Lake City. The book details not only the sudden storm and the terror on Lake Pepin but the long, sad aftermath of recovering and burying those lost, as well as the investigation into the quality of life preservers and the competence of the captain, crew, and boat owner. The disaster remains one of the most deadly accidents on the nation’s inland waters.

■ *Shadows of Time . . . Minnesota’s Surviving Railroad Depots* (Woodbury, MN: Woodbury Heritage Society, 2013, 264 p., cloth, \$34.95) is a well-illustrated compendium of 168 of the state’s 200-some extant buildings. Half of the book is devoted to depots on the National Register of Historic Places, which are presented by region: northeast, northwest, central, west central, metro, southeast, south central, and southwest. The remainder documents “noteworthy surviving depots” not on the Register, again by region. Principal author Bill Schrankler also provided all of the color photography, while Frederick L. Johnson contributed his expertise to text and historical interpretation.

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