

BOOK REVIEW

**The Big Marsh: The Story of a Lost Landscape**

Cheri Register

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016, 288 p., Paper, \$17.95.)

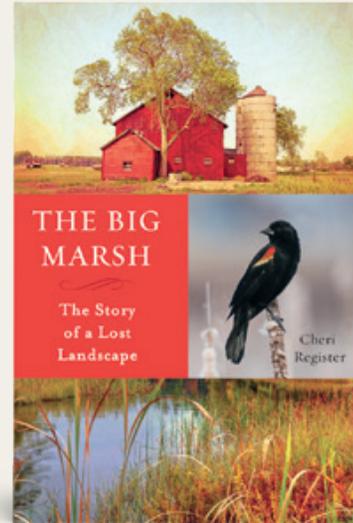
Surprised to hear she was the winner in the Minnesota Non-fiction category at the Minnesota Book Awards ceremony in April, author Cheri Register threaded through the banquet tables to collect her prize for *The Big Marsh: The Story of a Lost Landscape*. The work chronicles the drainage of an 18,000-acre wetland between Albert Lea and Austin, what Register describes as an “obscure but vital piece of Minnesota’s agricultural history.”

Clogged with details of ditch engineering and Machiavelian maneuverings around the Freeborn County Board, the story’s treatment by a lesser author may have commanded a narrow audience of environmental historians and southern Minnesota history buffs. Instead, Register has crafted a broadly appealing history of an early twentieth-century conflict through the lens of a memoirist. Plumbing the particulars of people and place, Register’s gift for sensory detail sets the reader smack in the middle of the landscape: “Spiky balls of pinkish purple peek up like polka dots through the grass, come loose in my fingers, and ooze sweetness between my teeth.”

Register casts her net of nuanced observations over the complex historical record. What emerges is a timely tale of an antique age that seems perennial as grass. A decade in the making, *The Big Marsh* debuted as the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation’s demonstrations against the Dakota Access Pipeline brought renewed attention to issues of water quality, rights-of-way, and public support for private endeavors. Register has a clear point of view. When out-of-town real estate investors ultimately win the day, she observes, “The sanctity of private property didn’t protect local farmers from having ditches reamed through their fields over their objections.” Yet Register demonstrates a knack for evenhandedness.

While researching a different writing project, Register came across an editorial written by her great-grandfather Elbert H. Ostrander with the attention-grabbing headline, “Connivings of Dishonest Men/Cheat Nature As Well As/Fellow Beings, Writer Avers.” She left the Minnesota History Center library that evening with his “ghostly presence hovering.” Knowing that her great-grandfather would like her to “expose those dishonest connivers and tell the people’s story,” she “set out to look for the truth of the matter.”

Never one for cartoon villains or cardboard heroes, Register draws round characters, centering the narrative on two individuals. Championing the marsh is her great-grandfather Ostrander, a small-time Freeborn County farmer with a big family, a pet bear, and a penchant for fiery writing. Representing



the out-of-town land speculators is a young Albert Lea lawyer, John F. D. Meighen.

When virulent public objection frustrates Meighen’s first campaign to drain the marsh, the attorney tailors legislation to de-fang county authority and advance his client’s interest. He brands the project as the “Farmer’s Ditch” and perhaps arranges a payoff to flip the sympathies of a drainage opponent. Meighen is effective in court, but a failure at courting. His mother’s meddling in his romantic misadventures and his continuing struggle to be paid by his wealthy client make him hard to hate.

Register chooses a chronological structure for *The Big Marsh*. Periodic tangents are brief and entertaining. Who knew that access to binding twine was a thing? Her chapter titles are pithy and topical; the chapters short and tidy. Still, the history may be thorough to a fault. The average reader may wish to skim pages in which the political bickering gets thick. Register herself admits, “I often found my fascination drifting from legal wrangling and the mechanics of ditching to imagining what eighteen thousand acres of wetland might look like.” She wisely forgoes formal footnotes in favor of extensive endnotes, although the work lacks an index.

Readers can be assured that the next time they travel north from Iowa on Interstate 35, they’ll look right at the Alden exit. Maybe they’ll even tell their fellow travelers the story of the Big Marsh. If they do, Cheri Register will have received the best prize of all.

**MARY JANE LaVIGNE** is a writer and independent historian. Her work has appeared in *Water-Stone Review*, *The Sun Magazine*, and most recently, the digital journal *Slag Glass City*. A past winner of the Loft Mentor Series and a former student of Cheri Register, LaVigne teaches writing at the White Bear Center for the Arts.



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