

Book Reviews

Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair. *By Karal Ann Marling.*

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990. 328 p. Cloth, \$39.95; paper, \$24.95.)

TO MY MIND, one of the most remarkable things about folklore and anthropological field work is that genuine folk activities, no matter how intricate and obvious to outsiders, are performed unselfconsciously. That, in fact, is a touchstone in determining what is and is not folklore. The moment a "folk" artist or craftsman steps on a stage or appears on the screen or writes in his book that he uses only genuine, traditional materials and is one of the few to preserve the authentic way this process—banjo playing, storytelling, bread baking—was done "a hundred years ago," you know with absolute certainty that what you are about to see is *not* authentic. It is contrived, practiced, deliberate—an imitation of folklore.

On the other hand, when your "resource"—we used to call them "informants" before that label sounded like someone cornered by a drug enforcement agent—looks askance when you suggest that he or she is a "folk artist," or when that person plays, in sequence, "Blue Skirt Waltz" (a neo-Welkian opus), "Goodnight, Irene" (a raunchy, black prison song), and a medieval ballad never before transcribed or recorded, or when he insists that what he does is neither art nor craft but simply the way this thing is done, you know you have hit pay dirt.

What's wonderful about folklore is that we need not go to some Iron Age people in Malaya to find unselfconsciously performed traditional culture. Or to Africa, an Arizona reservation, or an Eskimo village. Permanently mainstream, hopelessly plain, terminally middle class, and embarrassingly rural Americans do the same thing. We really do. We perform rituals that may once have had some sort of superficial economic function but now have taken on an even richer cultural, social, or religious value. We do them simply because we do them. They are what people do, in our minds.

One of the things we "do" anywhere between the Hudson and Sacramento rivers is go to the fair. It doesn't matter if we are not farmers; we still go to the fair. For a remarkable number of communities, the county or state fair is the biggest cultural event of the year. If not to see the winners of quilting competitions and to consider the very serious implications of prize animals, then to take in the headline acts we would never dream of being able to see—Willy Nelson, Barbara Mandrell, Randy Travis—right here at our own fairgrounds, on *our* turf.

But a fair is more than entertainment and agricultural competitions. A lot more. Take corn dogs and pineapple whips, for example. I never eat those foods except at a fair, and I always eat those foods at a fair. It's ritual. It is a kind of agricultural communion. I have a path I follow at our county

and our state fair, a specific path—like a pilgrimage. I do like to see the hogs and sheep and draft horses—especially the draft horses, because they remind me of me—but what's important is that in following my path this year, just like last year, just like every year, I find a kind of stability.

In a world of unpredictability, distressing change, and horrifying loss, some things stay the same. One way we can insure that they do is to embed them firmly in ritual. And that is what has happened to fairs, not only for me but for hundreds of thousands of others, too. Fairs are harvest festivals, celebrations of thanksgiving, the official close of the agricultural summer, rituals of success.

Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair by Karal Ann Marling is not simply a tabletop book, although, heaven knows, it is a delight to page through, relish, and reminisce with. It is a significant documentation of a major American folk ritual. I suppose Minnesotans, or agricultural historians, or people interested in the history of clothing or automobiles or farm machinery will also find the book useful, but to my mind this book is an important folkloric collection.

I read the book twice—once just to look at the over-300 pictures and delight in the memories of fairs I have visited, and then again to consider what a wonderful documentation of a remarkable human activity the collection gives us. I enjoyed and profited from both readings, and I have every expectation of reading it again.

Whether you look through *Blue Ribbon* seriously or casually, you will find yourself examining the details in photograph after photograph from the 150-year history of the Minnesota State Fair. *Blue Ribbon* is a delight to look through, page by page, and a valuable resource, too. It captures America in one of those unselfconscious moments when we are nothing but ourselves.

In fact, isn't that you looking at the hot tub display in the photo on page 285?

Reviewed by ROGER WELSCH *of CBS News, who is also Adjunct Professor of English, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.*

The Days of Rondo. *By Evelyn Fairbanks.*

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990. 182 p. Illustrations. Cloth, \$19.95; paper, \$12.95.)

THERE are books you love because they sneak up on you. The pleasure is in the surprise, in fact. Who would have thought of *that*, you say, putting down a strange, beautiful novel like Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*.

Then there is the other kind of book. The book you've been waiting for, it seems, for years, wondering when somebody would, please, write it. And then somebody finally does. Such a book causes you to feel not only delight but a kind of relief: at last, it's *here*, this book that we needed and knew we

needed. Evelyn Fairbanks's memoir of the 1930s and 1940s in St. Paul's black neighborhood is that second kind of book, the one we needed all along.

"Urban renewal"—a term that can only be read ironically in relation to the Rondo neighborhood—erased Evelyn Fairbanks's community in the 1960s. We ditched a neighborhood and bought ourselves a freeway (Interstate 94). But in this vivid series of recollections, the highway is deconstructed and the neighborhood is built up again.

Any historian, amateur or academic, of St. Paul or Minnesota, or indeed of urban America, will find this book essential reading. Where else can you find descriptions of neighborhood houses long demolished, church parties and picnics that capture a whole social milieu, or telling episodes that display the exact nuances of racism in a "liberal" northern urban high school of the period?

But this isn't a history book. It is the full-hearted, open-eyed story of a life in a neighborhood that understood itself to be a community. Toward the end of the book, Ms. Fairbanks says, "I don't want to leave readers with the impression that I have been sitting on the sidelines, observing, all my life."

There is no need to apologize to the reader—not to this one anyway—about her extraordinary talent for observation. That ability is entirely active, even urgent, in this memoir. Ms. Fairbanks's attentiveness is never random; it is always in service to the characters she brings alive and who *are* her Rondo days and nights.

But even that doesn't quite get at the spirit of this winning book: Ms. Fairbanks doesn't write "characters," she writes people. The force of her memory brings bright to the page figures who refuse to fade: George Edwards—"Daddy"—the gentle father who worked as a janitor at the Great Northern commissary; Willie Mae—"Mama"—who "weighed at least three hundred pounds. . . a warm breathing mountain of power and womanhood."

And perhaps most hauntingly, Aunt Good and cousins Morris and Oscar, transplanted to cold St. Paul from Macon, Georgia, because of "the conditions," as Mama and Aunt Good so delicately say in simultaneously introducing their children to and attempting to protect them from racism.

Mama brings to the book the rich life of the Sanctified church; Morris and Oscar bring the book to the streets, to the dances, card-sharking, and the getting-and-spending part of life. Through it all glides the steady, vibrant presence of Evelyn Fairbanks, a young girl looking for life—and finding it.

This is a loving book, but not a nostalgic one. Ms. Fairbanks is far too wise, her memory too acute for anything so soft focus. Her eye is keen for detail, her ear attuned to the voices and language of those about her.

No doubt, the best memoirs are sustained partly by the strength of their stories, but ultimately by the richness of the voice telling those stories. Evelyn Fairbanks has the stories, and she sings right on pitch.

Reviewed by PATRICIA HAMPL, *the author of A Romantic Education, a memoir of her family in St. Paul's Czech neighborhood. She is completing a new memoir, about growing up Catholic in St. Paul, to be published in 1992. A recent recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, Ms. Hampl teaches at the University of Minnesota.*

Astoria & Empire. By James P. Ronda.

(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. xiv, 400 p. Cloth, \$25.00.)

IN 1808 John J. Astor wrote about his plans "for carrying on the furr trade in the United States even more extensive than it is done by the companys in Canada." He envisioned gaining control of the whole of the trade and extending it to the western ocean. Six years later he wailed, "Was there ever an undertaking of more merit, of more hazard and more enterprising, attended with a greater variety of misfortune?"

James Ronda, writing in an eloquent style, describes Astor's determined attempt to found an establishment on the Pacific shore that would dominate the northwestern fur trade, supply the Russian colonies in Alaska, develop the China trade, and, if unable to win the co-operation of the British, to thwart the energetic North West Company.

Astor, in his extensive relations with the merchants of Montreal, studied the explorations of Peter Pond, Alexander Mackenzie, Alexander Henry the Elder, and others in Canada. Ronda contends that the ideas and discoveries of these men had a greater influence on Astor's political and commercial plans than the successes of the recent Lewis and Clark expedition. An extraordinary lobbyist, Astor cultivated relations with powerful men in Washington, including Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn, and Secretary of Navy and State Robert Smith. Although Washington leaders were leery of lending support to what might become a monopoly, they encouraged Astor's designs. In 1810 the Pacific Fur Company was organized; Wilson Price Hunt of St. Louis became the leader of the overland group; and Astor prepared to acquire a ship for the ocean journey.

Ronda devotes one chapter to "The Russian Connection." Here he skillfully describes how Astor took advantage of the United States's disinterest in dealing with the Russian American Company, advancing his Pacific Fur Company and trading schemes to both the Russian ambassador in the United States and, through his son-in-law, the imperial court in St. Petersburg. While Astor's agreement with the Russians promised "very fair" business, the War of 1812 and other misfortunes aborted it.

Succeeding chapters describe the trying voyage of the *Tonquin* to the mouth of the Columbia and the overland adventures of Hunt's party. Although a small map inadequately shows the pioneering route taken by the Astorians, Ronda's profuse inclusion of present-day place names allows the reader to trace the path by use of a current atlas. There are incidents along the way for which the reader might wish the text supplied more detail.

When the exhausted, starving parties almost met doom on the middle of the Snake in December, 1811, Ramsay Crooks became too ill and weak to travel farther. Hunt left him behind in the care of two companions. Not until 50 pages and four months later does one learn that Crooks survived the wilderness and finally reached the Columbia. How did he survive the winter?

Following "Life at Fort Astoria," which describes the fort, its occupants, the Indians, and the trade, the text turns to the War of 1812 and to Astor in New York struggling to keep his

scheme of empire intact. At one point the British navy unknowingly escorted Astor's ship *Forester* toward Astoria (it failed to reach the Columbia). Toward the end of 1813 a vessel of the Royal Navy crossed the bar. Captain William Black landed, ran the Union Jack up a pole, and rechristened Fort Astoria (which the Astorians had already turned over to the North West Company) Fort George. When Black first saw the fort he "nearly doubled over in laughter" at its small size. (Earlier in the text Ronda describes the fort as "an impressive fur trade establishment.")

Astor finally gave up in his efforts to regain his Pacific coast enterprise when the Joint Occupation Treaty was announced in 1818, saying he was too old (55) to resume that trade. Although he did not achieve this particular empire, the idea of Astoria lived on. American statesmen and politicians "kept alive the dream of American empire."

Ronda concludes his account with a short chapter on Astoria's chroniclers: Washington Irving, H. H. Bancroft, Kenneth W. Porter, and, more recently, David Lavender (*The Fist in the Wilderness*). While one might wish there were more personal material on Astor, his life, and his family, Ronda has written the definitive history of this epoch in Astor's long, active life.

Reviewed by ERWIN N. THOMPSON, *retired National Park Service historian, who has written on the fur trade, including the North West Company's Grand Portage and the American Fur Company's Fort Union trading posts.*

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area: Wilderness Values and Motorized Recreation.

By James N. Gladden.

(Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990. 156 p. Cloth, \$19.95.)

THE Boundary Waters Canoe Area is written more for political scientists than canoeists. Mr. Gladden's book is a cogent analysis of the conflict that surrounded attempts to eliminate motorized watercraft and snowmobiles from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) of northern Minnesota. He tries to answer the question of "how human beings should relate as a society to the natural environment" by examining the concerns and values of the group that proposed eliminating motors and the group that defended motors. Gladden's account is filled with perceptive insights and observations, but his answer to the question is abstract and disappointing.

The first three chapters trace the history of the BWCA and explain how it was included in the 1964 Wilderness Act even though it was the only wilderness area to allow motor vehicles, logging, mining, and other intrusions. The law allowed motor boats on lakes where their use was already "established" and logging in about half the area. Gladden leaves no doubt that Congress created the controversy by ducking the hard political questions and delegated its solution to the U.S. Forest Service. The BWCA exception led local residents to believe that their accustomed use of the lakes was protected, while it gave wilderness advocates hope and a rationale for working for full wilderness protection for the canoe area.

Gladden examines the values and motives of two major groups, the pro-wilderness Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness ("Friends") and the pro-motorboat Boundary Waters Conservation Alliance ("Alliance"). The conflicting objectives of these two groups came to a head in 1975. The Friends launched a bill to give the BWCA full wilderness protection, free of motors. The Alliance opposed this. The local congressman tried to craft a compromise, but it was not supported by either group. The bills reflected the differing perceptions, values, and objectives of urban-based environmentalists and small-town and rural Alliance members.

A representative from each group actually negotiated a compromise measure, but the Alliance members rejected it and set up a roadblock to protest. This made the environmentalists look reasonable and eased the passage of their bill.

The book does not dwell on the details of political maneuvering nor the personalities involved. Its best parts are the identification and discussion of the inherent advantages and disadvantages of the Friends and the Alliance and how these advantages and disadvantages affected the course of events. Political science is more of an art than a science, and Gladden's work is artful in its analysis of actual events.

Unfortunately, this is not true of the last chapter. Here the author attempts to answer the question of how human beings as a society should relate to the natural environment. Instead of simply summarizing his findings and conclusions based on the facts he presents, Gladden begins with an abstract discussion of paradigm shifts in environmental perception. Readers are challenged to grasp and apply to this controversy the "Human Exemptionist" paradigm that puts humans in a special category of life forms as well as the "New Ecological" paradigm that holds humans are but one of many life forms and subject to natural limitations. The concepts are too abstract, and the reader is left with a conclusion that seems artificial and ethereal.

Much of the raw material for this book is drawn from voluminous press reports of the controversy, but the role of the press is not discussed. How the press presented and interpreted the events was critical to the shaping of public opinion. For some reason, the author did not examine the role of the press and treated it as if it were a mirror that simply reflected public opinion. This is a serious omission.

At other points in the text, the author provides intriguing insights but does not develop them. For example, he notes that the local citizens perceived the environmentalists as "elitists" but does not offer information about the very real "class" or cultural origins and implications of this perception.

Readers will find this book easy to read, but some may object to lapses into excessive objectivity. The author is objective but goes overboard in couching statements in tentative terms ("apparently," or "it seems that") when the facts he has already presented cry out for a simple declarative statement.

Aside from these criticisms, *The Boundary Waters Canoe Area* is a valuable contribution to the growing literature about the politics of wilderness policy and protection.

Reviewed by R. NEWELL SEARLE, *the author of Saving Quetico-Superior, A Land Set Apart (1977) and numerous articles about conservation and environmental policy. He is a public affairs counselor at Cargill, Inc.*

Why Don't They Give Them Guns? The Great American Indian Myth. By Stephen E. Feraca.

(Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990. 231 p. Cloth, \$32.50; paper, \$19.75.)

STEPHEN FERACA, a former Bureau of Indian Affairs employee, has written a book that is not a federal Indian policy history nor a "bow and arrow" military narrative, but rather a survey of and commentary on the national guilt and contempt for Indians that pervades the attitudes of people at all social and economic levels of American society. The author maintains that Americans are afflicted with a "form of blindness" when confronted with situations involving Indians. The book is filled with humorous anecdotes and heartfelt recommendations to deal with contemporary Indian questions.

The author came from an Italian background, grew up in an urban environment, and attended schools ethnically dominated by Jewish and Irish classmates. Beginning in 1959, he spent 25 years working for the BIA, assigned to the central office in Washington, D.C. There were two years with the Seminoles in Florida during the 1960s, but most of his time was spent processing Indian claims awards cases in the nation's capital. His other tie with Indians is his wife, a member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, who was born and raised on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation in South Dakota.

The bulk of the book concerns stories that Feraca has heard while in the employ of the BIA. He claims that 80 percent of the bureau's personnel is Indian, and thus his narrative encompasses what they talk about and what other people say about them. While many of the stories poke fun at Indians, the author stresses that natives must be treated with respect as "responsible contributors to the cultural polyglot that is America." He concerns himself with such topics as how to determine who are Indians and comments on reservations, treaties or agreements, land allotments, Indian employment, and a special interest of his centering on the Indian Preference Policy of President Richard Nixon's first term. This pol-

icy, which the author calls the "Honkey Out Act," led to his retirement in February, 1985.

Feraca's chapter on great American Indian myths adds little to his story. He addresses such topics as smoke signals, the war bonnet misconception, the ideas that Indians will never kill an eagle and that they did not kill off the wood buffalo. In addition, he concerns himself with Buffalo Bill Cody's combat with a nonexistent Cheyenne Indian chief, Yellow Hand, and uses as his source Ripley's "Believe It or Not" column from the *Washington Post*. Blood pacts, Sacajawea, Tonto, and Black Elk are other topics that fascinate him.

Of more value to the reader are Feraca's suggestions for improved Indian-federal relations. He calls for the elimination of the dole, especially the surplus food program. He suggests that the reservation system is "bankrupt" and that, in general, Indian dependency must be lessened and transferred to the tribe. He calls for legislation that would define the tribe, its membership, and its relationship with the federal government. He concludes that states should shoulder the responsibility for all grade- and high-school education and for jurisdiction in hunting and fishing treaty rights and tribal civil and criminal matters. Feraca denounces the American Indian Movement takeover of the BIA building in Washington, D.C., in 1972 and the AIM activities at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, the following year. Finally, the author feels that Indians should demand only what the rest of the citizens of the U.S. require.

Finding an audience for this book might be difficult. It is sometimes humorous and informative but lacks the writing style and intellectual content to draw a large following. It has no index and only a few source citations. It does relate the observations and conclusions of one person who served on the firing lines in the BIA for some 25 years during the 1960s, the 1970s, and the early 1980s.

Reviewed by JOHN W. BAILEY, professor of history at Carthage College, Kenosha, Wisconsin. He is a specialist in the history of the American West.

News & Notes

READERS in the land of sky-blue waters will enjoy Moira F. Harris's *The Paws of Refreshment: The Story of Hamm's Beer Advertising* (St. Paul: Pogo Press, 1990, 81 p., \$15.95). The small book, profusely illustrated in black and white, chronicles the brewing company's successes and relative failures in promoting both its product and beer drinking. The renowned bear is only one in a line of symbols associated with the brew over the years. *Paws of Refreshment* may be ordered from the publisher, 4 Cardinal Lane, St. Paul 55127. Minnesota residents should add 6

percent sales tax, and a shipping and handling charge of \$2.50 per book applies to all buyers.

THRESHING DAYS: The Farm Paintings of Lavern Kammerude, with text by Chester Garthwaite, is the latest publication from the Wisconsin Folk Museum (Mount Horeb, 1990, 103 p., cloth, \$20.95). Text accompanying the 21 full-page, color reproductions of the farmer-artist's paintings explains the tools and techniques portrayed and describes the activities or social events. According to folklorist James P. Leary's introduction,

"Kammerude expressed appreciation of his lost world by concentrating on the seasonal occasions when neighbors gathered to work, play, trade, worship, and work some more. His portrayal of the intricacies of communal labor and of the equipment used to carry it out was extraordinarily precise. Through painting, he could recollect and relive the past." Paintings include "The Cheese Factory," "A House Party," "Spring Planting," and "Sweet Clover School." The book may be ordered from the Wisconsin Folk Museum, 100 South Second Street, Mount Horeb 53572.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).