

# Book Reviews

## **The Story of Minnesota's Past**

By Rhoda R. Gilman.

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991. 231 p. Paper, \$22.50.)

THE MINNESOTA Historical Society has always maintained a strong commitment to public education. The staff of its education division has frequently organized and participated in workshops and courses for teachers and students, not just in the Twin Cities but throughout Minnesota. Marshaling whatever resources were at hand (census reports, maps, photographs, manuscripts), these education "circuit riders" have worked diligently over the years to serve the cause. The participants in their courses were usually elementary or middle-school teachers, who, "charged up" and strengthened by the experience, returned to their classrooms to pursue Minnesota history with their students. As valuable as the workshop had been, however, the missing ingredient seemed to be a comprehensive curriculum—a base from which to begin and to which other materials could be added.

Enter Rhoda Gilman. In 1989, the Minnesota Historical Society Press published her *Northern Lights*, just such a curriculum for children in the upper elementary and middle-school grades. *The Story of Minnesota's Past* was part of that three-volume package. The curriculum caught on like wild-fire, and well-deserved kudos and awards followed.

This new edition of *The Story of Minnesota's Past*, now published separately from *Northern Lights*, will serve an older reading public as well. The state does not have a modern, comprehensive history text for adults. Though discussions have been held periodically about the need to fill this void, few efforts have advanced beyond the preliminary stage. Gilman's book, while not the entire answer for a more mature group, contains a vast amount of information that is appropriate for readers of any age. And if a new adult history of the state is published, it could well incorporate many of the features of Gilman's format. For example, the book is well endowed with photographs, maps, and drawings, most of which are captioned with more information than just the usual credit line.

The striking feature of *The Story of Minnesota's Past*, however, is the photographs of people who have figured prominently in the state's history. Each photo is accompanied by a minibiography detailing that person's contribution. Of course, all the well-known personalities are there—Frederick Weyerhaeuser, James J. Hill, Harriet Bishop, and Maria San-

ford. But we also learn about such luminaries as Doctor Martha Ripley, Clara Hampson Ueland, and Abigail Hunt Snelling (you'll have to read the book to find out more).

This is a superbly crafted book. We have only begun to explore its uses. Gilman closes with a couple of Guindon cartoons (how appropriate!) and a list of oft-quoted remarks about this state: "Have you jump-started your kid today?" This reviewer's answer is, "YES, kids of all ages got a boost when this book was published."

*Reviewed by ROY HOOVER, who teaches Minnesota history at the University of Minnesota, Duluth.*

## **Testaments in Wood: Finnish Log Structures at Embarrass, Minnesota.**

Photographs by Wayne Gudmundson. Text by Suzanne Winckler.

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991. 83 p. Paper, \$16.95.)

TESTAMENTS IN WOOD is a book of forty-eight photographs, primarily of log structures built by Finnish Americans in and around Embarrass during the first decades of the present century. Focusing on a portfolio of forty-two duotone photographs (six others, three of them duotones, illustrate the narrative sections), the book also features an essay by writer Suzanne Winckler; an introduction by Eric Paddock, curator of photographs at the Colorado Historical Society; and a notes section by Michael H. Koop, an architectural historian. Photographer Wayne Gudmundson, an assistant professor of mass communications at Moorhead State University, also provides a preface.

The preface and introduction clearly state the photographic agenda of the work. Paddock details the project that ultimately led to the book and examines the relationship of photography to historic-preservation efforts. An extended discussion of the history of landscape photography argues Gudmundson's lineage within that tradition. Paddock's assertions that the buildings themselves speak volumes to alert and sensitive viewers and that Gudmundson's photographs speak forcefully for themselves about the things depicted establishes an attitude that is reflected in the rest of the book.

Winckler's essay, "Buildings of Skill and Grace: The Finnish Legacy," is a well-crafted piece that portrays Finnish and

Finnish-American history and culture. Drawn entirely from secondary sources, Winckler's wordsmithing ability is evident in the skillfully meandering narrative, which seems to draw inspiration from the beautiful Embarrass River. The text begins with early Finnish history in Minnesota, flows quickly by the construction of log buildings, wanders back to a brief history of Finland, then returns to pioneering on the Minnesota landscape. The essay continues with a cultural and religious perspective on the Finns in the New World, finally concluding with a section on the contemporary Embarrass landscape.

Gudmundson's portfolio seems to start where Winckler ended, then wanders visually toward more focused views. The photographs commence with messy views of modern Embarrass: highways, road signs, powerlines, remodeled buildings, more roads, and more powerlines. The fifth plate of the series, a view of the Four Corners Cafe, is the most visually striking and best reveals the aspect of the Embarrass settlement that Gudmundson characterized as a dotting of "the green coniferous sea like islands." The collection then exhibits movement toward greater detail, from a few broad rural landscape views to several of individual log buildings. The portfolio, however, stops at the scale of the individual building and never moves closer to show wood grain or joinery details, a scale at which true testaments of skill and character in log carpentry are revealed. Each image is accompanied by a brief caption.

The final section consists of Michael Koop's architectural and historical notes on the photographs. Concise, informed, and to the point, these extended captions provide data on the buildings depicted in each photograph. Koop's fieldwork formed much of the basis for Gudmundson's and Winckler's work.

The book is handsome and interesting, but seems contrived to a fault in its format. The decision to cast this as an art book was an uncomfortable one, which severely limited its impact. The subject, Finnish-American log structures, is left in limbo. Regardless of the power and competence of some individual images, as a group they do not comprise a repertoire of the sort that can stand alone, as can the work of a Frederick H. Evans or a Walker Evans. The group is so topically focused and visually repetitious as to demand greater explanation. Some of this perception may be influenced by the quality of the duotone reproductions, in which the black and dark-gray tones are compressed. This problem is especially acute when depicting log buildings, where the rich wood tones fall into the lower zones of the photo. Bright white highlights, more obvious in the snow scenes, suffer as well.

The essay produced a work of greater literary than historical merit. While background information is present, the brief section on the buildings tells little beyond the fact that they are built with logs. The "Notes" section cannot overcome this deficiency, since its mission is descriptive rather than interpretive. Winckler's essay nevertheless is so crucial to the book, so truly collaborative, that it seems she should be credited with co-authorship.

The remainder of the text also follows the art-book format. But the result of the whole is less compelling, both visually and intellectually, than this fascinating subject deserves. Perhaps the book would have better informed had a brief explan-

atory essay on the buildings and farms accompanied Winckler's (replacing the introduction and notes sections). Then the reader-viewer would not have to wonder about the role of the sauna in Finnish-American culture; about the character of the house, inside or out; or why stables, hay, and cattle barns were built instead of just barns. The interested novice would not have to be quite so "alert and sensitive" in order to read the information in the photographs. Other readers—those already familiar with the cutover landscape, with Finnish-American culture, with the buildings—will enjoy the essay and photographs of *Testaments in Wood*. This audience will find the book a labor of love, one to be treasured by many northern households.

*Reviewed by* DAVID MURPHY, *an architect with the Nebraska State Historical Society who has published on vernacular architecture and photographed extensively. His architectural exhibit, Dreams in Dry Places, toured Nebraska for a decade.*

### Settlers' Children: Growing Up on the Great Plains.

*By Elizabeth Hampsten.*

(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. 252 p. Cloth, \$22.95.)

*SETTLERS' CHILDREN* is Elizabeth Hampsten's most recent scholarly revision of North Dakota pioneer history. As in previous works on women and families (*Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* and *Families of the Westward Journey*, with Lilian Schlissel and Byrd Gibben), Hampsten brings her skill as literary critic to private documents, providing a new lens through which to view daily lives.

This time the focus is on children, one of the more neglected groups of pioneer settlers. The results are startling—frequently disturbing. Using diaries, letters, reminiscences, and oral histories, Hampsten describes childhoods at stark variance with romanticized pictures of the West. This is not a land of opportunity for anyone—most particularly not for the children who frequently provided the motive, or the justification, for their parents' decisions to move to North Dakota. Hampsten dedicates *Settlers' Children* to the North Dakota Coalition of Abused Women's Services and its founding leader, Bonnie Palacek. It is a particularly apt and poignant recognition. The pioneer children Hampsten found endured hardship, brutality, and enormous losses. Death, desertion, and separation fragmented their families. Work, beginning at a very early age, was their primary activity. There was precious little time for play; school was a respite from labor. Corporal punishment began in infancy, even by otherwise doting parents, to break children's willful spirits. The instances of physical brutality and neglect that Hampsten documents fit any current standard of domestic abuse.

The picture Hampsten draws is grim, but not unremittably so. Mothers, in particular, she says, often focused attention and care on their children. Some pioneer children and their descendants achieved higher levels of education, professional opportunity, and economic security than first-generation settlers. The most successful left their rural North

Dakota communities, an escape that Hampsten renders understandable and desirable. The ambivalence of their retrospective accounts, Hampsten concludes, explains their exodus more satisfactorily than romanticized and abstract memories of the settlement period.

As always, Hampsten's astute analysis of language, her attention to context, and her explication of the rhetorical strategies that differentiate class and gender provide a provocative read. Provocative and troubling, *Settlers' Children* tugs at a reader partly because it documents dark undersides of even the happiest childhoods. It is troubling, too, in the questions of meaning and interpretation it provokes. There are, understandably enough, few contemporary accounts of pioneer childhoods produced by children. Instead, we see their lives through their parents' contemporary accounts and filtered through reminiscences recorded much later. It is difficult to know, therefore, how childhood felt at the time, as lived experience. Do elderly pioneers offer stories of deprivation, hardship, and estrangement because these are their most enduring memories, or to emphasize their subsequent success, or to entertain their descendants, assuming that daily detail would be less interesting? Hampsten, always attentive to the contexts of language, recognizes the issues posed by her sources. Their limits mean that this is a book that frequently describes childhood from every perspective but a child's.

Equally provocative is the author's conclusion that the unhappy experiences of pioneer children caused rural decline. Here the strength of the book is also its limitation. Relying on the careful explication of texts, Hampsten de-emphasizes historical contexts that might also help explain subsequent adult choices—such as the effects of industrialization on family farms and the general trend of migration to urban areas in the last century. There is also the question of how much the pioneer experience itself created unhappy families and grim childhoods. Certainly, times were often harder during the pioneer period than later. But were they harder than in the homes immigrants had left? Was parental discipline less harsh in Russia, New York, or Norway than in North Dakota?

That *Settlers' Children* evokes such questions is testimony to its power. Hampsten raises important and haunting experiences too long buried in happier accounts of western adventure, of idealized pioneer families, and of western boosterism. She provides new documents, dimensions, and textures to a growing historical literature on childhood and on woman and child abuse. We need to explore further the troubling questions raised in these accounts to unravel their meaning for histories of childhood, of rural America, and of the West. Like flashbacks of long-repressed abuse, we ignore these "historical flashbacks" at the risk of allowing long-buried national secrets to fester. Unexamined, they leave us servants to family fictions that distort the past. Acknowledged, they not only document victimization and cruelty. They can provide an eloquent entry to collective survival as well.

*Reviewed by* ELIZABETH JAMESON, *associate professor of history at the University of New Mexico, whose publications include The Women's West (1987) with Susan Armitage and the introduction to the reprint edition of The Checkered Years: A Bonanza Farm Diary, 1884–88 (1989).*

## Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota.

By H. Elaine Lindgren.

(Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1991. 300 p. Cloth, \$25.00.)

WHAT A LOVELY book *Land in Her Own Name* is, beautiful to look at and a delight to read. The pages are peppered with pictures of young women, their homes, their work, their relatives, and their friends. The big, clear print interspersed with pictures is arranged aesthetically on the page. The language is simple and direct. It is the perfect gift to adorn a coffee table, a book that all will enjoy reading.

Author Lindgren discusses who North Dakota women homesteaders were, where they came from, and what they did on the land. Specific stories of individual women are balanced by tables of simple statistics, which in themselves are a welcome encounter, bringing as they do fascinating information. Sources for the book come from women homesteaders, their friends and descendants, and land records. The use of living memory gives the stories an immediacy and makes them very personal; however, it also means that most of the women included in the book homesteaded in the twentieth—not the nineteenth—century, in the far western, less fertile, part of the state.

Two of the women homesteaders are still living. One is Mary Dooley, who entered a lottery for homestead land. She described the results this way: "When I got to the house, my mother, my sister Margaret and my brother Bert all stood looking at me and then looking at each other. The *Des Moines Daily News* which they received that day carried the names of the early winners and 'sure nuff,' my name Mary A. Dooley, drew No. 663. Well I was a really surprised gal! This was probably October 23, 1908. The registering closed October 17th. I had registered October 16th. . . . 114,679 persons had registered for the 6,000 homesteads."

Nora Pfundheller, who now lives in a nursing home not far from the land she homesteaded, explained what brought her to her decision. "Well I was 21 and had no prospects of doing anything. The land was there so I took it." She described the land and her experiences on it. "It was all prairie as far as you could see. And then here and there were the little shacks of the other homesteaders. . . . There were wild herds of horses that roamed over the prairies, and cattle. I remember one time a herd of cattle came and rubbed on the shack. We thought they were going to tip it over."

Ninety-four percent of the homesteaders managed their property themselves, but generally they did not do the farm work. Men did that. Women kept to the tasks they usually did in the gender-divided society in which they lived: cooking, housekeeping, food preservation, sewing, and the like. It comes as no surprise, then, that 60 percent of them left their land within five years. Most of these women homesteaded with an eye to the profit they would make when they sold, rather than with the intention of making farming their life's work. Pfundheller was one of the few who farmed all her life. Her husband had been gassed in the First World War. He could not do heavy field labor, and Nora became the farmer.

Three hundred and six women are included in this book. A table in the appendix gives information about each, includ-



ing the location of her land, when she filed, and the date of her birth. The information stored in the book and the pleasure of reading it makes *Land in Her Own Name* a valuable addition to the growing number of works on white and Native American women who settled in the Dakotas.

*Reviewed by ANNE B. WEBB, professor of history at Metropolitan State University, St. Paul, who writes and speaks on frontier farming women. She is currently completing a book on pioneer and Native American women farming across the Upper Midwest.*

### **From the Northern Prairies.**

*Compiled by Mark Strand and John E. Bye.*

(Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1991.

Videodisc and guide, \$50.00; guide only, \$15.00.)

IT IS always a joy to look at a picture collection for the first time. Thanks to *From the Northern Prairies*, any library or person with a videodisc player can see twenty thousand pictures from the North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies located in the North Dakota State University Library, Fargo. This collection is particularly strong in agriculture, homesteading, and settlement images. Town scenes from North Dakota and Minnesota are abundant, and the Fargo-Moorhead area is represented extensively. In addition, the disc contains some significant picture collections from other places: the Flaten-Wange collection at the Clay County Historical Society, Moorhead; the Chippewa Indian Collection at the Becker County Historical Society, Detroit Lakes; and historian Elaine Lindgren's collection picturing women who filed for homesteads in North Dakota.

For those unfamiliar with this technology, the system is comprised of a twelve-inch disc, a television monitor, and a laser disc player with a remote control. Using the remote, the viewer calls up the frame number of the photograph he or she wishes to see. The image is projected on the television monitor. Hundreds of images may be viewed in a few minutes, or a single one may be studied at length.

A helpful guide describes each collection that is on the disc and indexes most images by geographic location or by person's name. Unfortunately, some of the collections from other

institutions are not indexed. If the viewer has a certain place or person in mind, however, the guide makes the disc relatively easy to use. A good overview of the Institute for Regional Studies' photograph collections, the guide is a wise purchase.

After the first few minutes of enjoyment, however, viewing the disc becomes frustrating. There are no captions or descriptions for each picture, so one is constantly wondering, "Where is that?" or "Who is that?" The viewer can go from the place and name indexes to the disc frame, but cannot view a frame and then locate the personal or geographical name in the index without a great deal of searching. For example, in the series called "Minnesota towns A-W," the viewer sees streets and buildings but cannot be sure which town is shown on the screen. The series on Chippewa Indians and women homesteaders are totally unidentified.

Typical of most historical picture collections, *From the Northern Prairies* includes many mediocre images, pictures that only have meaning when viewed with full captions in the context of the collection. The disc would have much more national usefulness and appeal if only the best of each collection were included. In the Minnesota towns A-W sequence, for example, one expects to see street scenes, but sixty unidentified portraits also appear. Archivist John Bye and Project Director Mark Strand should be commended for seeking out and including other collections, but they should have done more to fill the disc with outstanding images. In addition, the disc has some quality-control problems: some frames out of focus, some with too much contrast, resulting in loss of detail, and some repeated two or three times.

No doubt this videodisc is a successful research tool at North Dakota State University, where it is paired with a database; researchers there can request information on any frame number and receive the description instantly. However, picture researchers in Minneapolis or Washington, D.C., must call or write the repositories for descriptions of images that interest them. Only the most intriguing images would cause one to do so. Thus, *From the Northern Prairies* is not a useful tool for long-distance picture research. I do not recommend purchasing any videodisc that has not solved its captioning problems. A pictures does not require a thousand words, but at least ten would be helpful.

*Reviewed by BONNIE G. WILSON, curator of sound and visual collections at the Minnesota Historical Society.*

# News & Notes

THE SOLON J. BUCK Award for the best article published in this journal during 1991 goes to Laura E. Weber for her study, "'Gentiles Preferred': Minneapolis Jews and Employment, 1920-1950," which appeared in the Spring issue.

The Theodore C. Blegen Award for the best article by a member of the MHS staff goes to Rhoda R. Gilman for her work, "How Henry Sibley Took the Road to New Hope," from the Summer issue. Both awards carry a prize of six hundred dollars, which will be presented at the Minnesota Historical Society annual meeting in October.

The judges for this year's awards were Pamela Brunfelt, director of the Crow Wing County Historical Society; Roland Dille, president of Moorhead State University; and Mary Cannon and Anne Kaplan, editors of *Minnesota History*.

THE JAMES J. Hill Reference library will award a number of grants of up to \$2,000 to support research in the James J. Hill and Louis W. Hill papers. The deadline for applications is October 1, 1992, and the recipients will be notified in early 1993. For more information, contact W. Thomas White at the James J. Hill Reference Library, 80 West Fourth St., St. Paul, MN 55102.

IN *The Electric City: Energy and the Growth of the Chicago Area, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 381 p., cloth, \$34.95), Harold L. Platt details a technological change of far-reaching economic and social impact. Beyond the scientists and inventors who managed to harness electricity, it was the utility brokers and politicians who crafted policy that eventually resulted in our urban-based, energy-intensive, "networked" society. Tycoon Samuel Insull, president of Commonwealth Edison, looms large in these pages. So, too, do the social ramifications of

mass energy use, as electricity became the ultimate symbol of material progress, social status, and conspicuous consumption. Charts, graphs, and period illustrations flesh out this well-researched, well-written, and thoughtful analysis.

*ABORIGINAL RESOURCE Use in Canada: Historical and Legal Aspects* is a new addition to the University of Manitoba Press's series, Manitoba Studies in Native History. Editors Kerry Abel and Jean Friesen have gathered eighteen essays, which they group around five major themes: the early abundance of resources, such as wild rice, fish, plants, and buffalo; fur trade economics and resource use; governments and resource access; the "St. Catherine's Case," between advocates of Indian land rights and a lumber and milling company; and courts and claims. The 343-page, clothbound book was published in 1991 and is available for \$34.95 from the press, Winnipeg, Canada MB R3T 2N2.

LATVIAN kokles, Ojibway dance drums, and Hmong two-stringed violins are just a few of the instruments being made by artisans within the region's vital ethnic communities. The work of 17 past masters and new instrument makers is depicted in the Cedarburg Cultural Center's *In Tune with Tradition: Wisconsin Folk Musical Instruments*, a 72-page catalog that accompanies a traveling exhibit organized by the center. Edited by curator Robert T. Teske, the publication includes a scholarly essay by folklorist James P. Leary and photography by Lewis Koch. It is available from the Cedarburg Cultural Center, P.O. Box 84, Cedarburg, WI 53012.

IF JUST listening to Garrison Keillor's stories about Lake Wobegon on the radio isn't good enough, fans can read an analysis of his comic genius in a

book from the University Press of Mississippi. In *Garrison Keillor: A Voice of America* (1991, 230 p., cloth, \$30.00, paper, \$14.95), Judith Yaross Lee traces the early days of the Lake Wobegon phenomenon ("The Matter of Minnesota") and examines the humorist's rhetoric in both his broadcasts and published works. The book may be ordered from the press at 3825 Ridgewood Road, Jackson, MS 39211.

IDYLIC photographic views of Minnesota are featured in *Minnesota on My Mind* (1989, 120 p., \$35.00), a large and lavish book with many full-color images, quotations from well-known writers (Sinclair Lewis, Sigurd F. Olson, and Carol Bly, among others), and an introduction by Paul Gruchow. The book, which purports to present "the best of Minnesota in words and photographs," is mostly devoted to the beauties of wilderness and countryside that fill the dreams even (especially) of people who choose to live in towns and cities. It is published by Falcon Press, P.O. Box 1718, Helena, MT 59624.

"BEFORE the crowded airlines and crowded highways, before electronic sorting aids and zip codes, and unknown to most postal patrons, most of the out-of-town mail was sorted en route by the U.S. Railway Mail Clerks, distribution experts, in especially constructed railway post office cars." D. J. Rohrer, himself a retired mail clerk, has written a series of articles describing the Railway Mail Service, the job it accomplished, and some of its veteran employees. *There Were Stars in Those Cars* (Lexington, Ga.: Mobile Post Office Society, 1992, 24 p.) includes seventeen brief reminiscences that relate the details and capture the flavor of this fast-paced job and the men who worked it. The book may be purchased for \$5.00 from the author, 2190 N. Pascal St., Roseville, MN 55113. The price includes postage and handling.



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