

Building Community, Keeping the Faith: German Catholic Architecture in Rural Minnesota

By Fred W. Peterson

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1998. 224 p. Cloth, \$39.95; paper, \$19.95.)

OLD BUILDINGS AND HISTORIC LANDSCAPES can help tell the story of who we are individually and communally. In his latest book, *Building Community, Keeping the Faith*, Fred Peterson continues a career-long commitment to examining vernacular architecture and commonplace landscapes of rural Minnesota as reflections of cultural values. Peterson is a learned and thoughtful observer whose work is well respected by academics; hence, this extensively footnoted volume will be useful to researchers of the built environment, preservationists, historians, and rural sociologists.

Perhaps more importantly, Peterson considers historic architecture from perspectives that make sense to a much broader audience seeking to understand social relationships based on what we observe around us. Casual readers will appreciate the cultural-history orientation from which Peterson, an art historian, approaches a fascinating group of "ordinary" buildings.

This book is a well-crafted analysis of a particular set of farmhouses in Stearns County that express the consistent values of an ethnically distinct rural community over time. In his foreword, Peterson promises to show how conservative cultural values are reflected in material culture and buildings constructed by German-American Catholic families from the 1850s through 1915. The book goes well beyond descriptive analysis of simple buildings to pose and help focus questions about cultural meanings that are legible in human-made objects, like these commonplace houses. People inevitably make aesthetic choices, often without realizing or thinking very consciously about them. The red brick farmhouses built by German-American settlers in St. John the Baptist parish surrounding Meire Grove, Minnesota, reflect a conservative aesthetic rooted in orderliness, ritual, permanence, and religious faith.

This patiently developed and readable text, well supported by suitable illustrations, rewards the reader with both understanding and insight. The book's detailed descriptions of house-plan arrangements and brick-production processes may require more patience than some casual readers are prepared to accord, but these details underscore the strong conclusions drawn in the book's final two chapters. At times, the author necessarily speculates about what the builders of these houses were thinking. His writing puts a human face on the details and circumstances of rural life. Peterson's ability to "read" his-

torical photographs—carefully discerning important details of the story they tell—is especially impressive.

Throughout the book, I found myself trying to evaluate whether this group of vernacular buildings was distinct and unusual or typical of patterns we might discover elsewhere in the rural landscape. Certainly, many of the buildings and institutions which Peterson illustrates in this particular rural parish can be recognized in many other locations, often informed by similar social expectations. In the concluding chapter he shows how this unified, dairying enclave in Stearns County reflects patterns of ethnicity, religious affiliation, and cultural relationships comparable to those we find in many other locations throughout the rural Midwest. This book celebrates the subtleties of a distinct ethnic and religious tradition at a time when the rural landscape is being re-engineered for efficiency and obscured by sameness.

It seems that the only way this kind of research is likely to be accomplished is as a labor of love. Fred Peterson clearly enjoys getting close to the subject matter of his investigations, relishing the foodways, language, and other customs as much as the buildings as artifacts. Peterson's book is refreshing in the way it treats conservative subject matter and the people who shared their knowledge with him in developing an intimate view of their heritage and faith. By treating common buildings and ordinary people with dignity and respect, Peterson celebrates enduring social structures that are as meaningful as they are admirable.

Peterson characterizes the organization of this book as being like the brick houses it scrutinizes, with each chapter built upon the foundations of the preceding parts. It is tempting to extend his analogy further by considering the unified and structurally sound walls of the farmhouses as a metaphor for the kinds of communities that once thrived throughout the midwestern countryside, communities where individuals saw themselves as useful and necessary parts of a more unified and purposeful composite. This book shows how communities are often the product of durable and carefully evolved traditions with origins in remembered homelands. As we embark on a new century and new millennium, Peterson's latest book poses an intriguing framework for critical self-assessment. Today, what factors and values bind together communities like Meire Grove (or the community where you live)? Ideas introduced in *Building Community, Keeping the Faith* are well worth considering in terms of rapidly changing rural landscapes. We can appreciate these brick farmhouses not just nostalgically but perhaps as a measuring scale for the kinds of values that enable us to build and renew communities today.

Reviewed by Steve C. Martens, who teaches architecture and historic preservation at North Dakota State University in Fargo. A

practicing architect with an abiding interest in the German-American brick architecture of Carver County, Minnesota, he is writing a book on Minnesota Cooperative Creamery buildings.

Stopping the Presses: The Murder of Walter W. Liggett

By Marda Liggett Woodbury

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 271 p. Paper, \$18.95.)

ON A COLD DECEMBER NIGHT in Minneapolis in 1935, death awaited Walter Liggett, a muckraking journalist seeking to expose corruption in Minnesota's Farmer-Labor government. Unloading groceries from his family car, he was shot to death, literally in front of his wife and daughter, by an assailant seated in a car that sped down the alley next to their apartment building.

Ever since, this crime has been a mystery. The assailant identified by Edith Liggett, the author's mother, was Kid Cann, a Minneapolis gangster (and later a big-time mobster who associated with Meyer Lansky and Bugsy Siegel). But Cann was acquitted by a trial jury. After the murder, Liggett's reputation was smeared by leading Farmer-Laborites, including Governor Floyd B. Olson, and by the Communist Party in its national newspaper—which led to a successful libel suit and judgment against the author of the libellous articles and the publisher. Nonetheless, by the time the first serious histories of the Farmer-Labor Party began to appear in print, Liggett was almost forgotten. The professional scholars who remembered him called him a blackmailer, in effect accepting the smear against his reputation.

Liggett's daughter was determined that her father and mother not go into memory like that. Thus she offers, in part, a fond memoir of a very interesting couple and their life in radical, grub-street journalism. Their kind of journalism hardly exists anymore, but for decades it was a major force in American politics. Historians of American journalism will profit enormously from reading this book.

Through her reconstruction, Woodbury also lets the Liggetts give witness to their lives before the murder, how they gradually became caught up in frightening events, and how they nonetheless sought to maintain their dignity and their courage. For her mother, the aftermath of the murder was a nightmare of confusion, perjury, and bungled investigation. The acquittal of Kid Cann left Edith Liggett horrified at how the event lived on under a cloud of unresolved factual disputes.

For Liggett and her two children, the murder was not what so many people said it was: a gangland slaying of a shakedown artist. It was an act of revenge by people angry with Walter Liggett for insisting on his investigative journalism. Woodbury tells us that she does not really know, beyond a shadow of doubt, why her father was murdered

(though she has strong suspicions, as you will see). But she does know that Liggett believed he would be silenced for his muckraking and that her mother believed that Governor Olson was an accessory to the crime.

In a sense, then, this book is her parents' testimony before the bar of history. For many of us, the Farmer-Labor Party is a fascinating example of a strong radical group led by determined politicians—the most successful such party at the state level in American history. But Woodbury wants to make sure that we never forget that for her mother and her father, at least, the party was little better than a criminal racket.

Here we get to a genuinely disconcerting feature of this book. Because it offers her parents' testimony with regard to the Farmer-Labor Party, the book is also an indictment. It is an indictment of all the people who slandered the Liggetts and of all the people who accepted the slanders, either eagerly, for political reasons, or thoughtlessly, including all the scholars who lazily recycled the slanders. Most important, it is an indictment of Floyd B. Olson and the Farmer-Labor Party. Woodbury pictures Olson as a mobbed-up politician who talked the radical talk but who actually cared little for getting anything done. He simply wanted to get ahead and have a good time with low-life companions along the way.

In her shocking analysis of the Farmer-Labor Party and its famous leader, Woodbury claims that Walter Liggett's murder was not just a murder, but a *political* murder, the kind one expects to see in, say, Ciudad Juarez or Belgrade. Liggett had grown too persistent and too loud. Some people with a lot to lose, or, perhaps, brutally impatient with people they didn't like, decided to get rid of him once they learned that he couldn't be bought off or scared away from his determination to expose their corrupt conspiracies.

In the view of the Farmer-Labor Party offered here, its inner circle—Olson and a few trusted advisers—made three separate compromises with various pre-existing structures of power when they took over state government in the 1930s. One pact was with the legitimate business class of the Twin Cities. Olson would give fiery speeches but otherwise do nothing to create a legislative majority that could enact major policy changes. The second sell-out was to the illegitimate business class of the Twin Cities, namely, organized crime, of which there was plenty. This set-up was brokered by Olson himself who, among other things, turned the state liquor commission into a creature of the old liquor racket, giving it a monopoly on distribution after the repeal of Prohibition. The third pact was between Olson and the New Deal. Olson would talk as if he meant to lead a national third party, but in fact he craved a seat in the United States Senate and had no real desire to stir up a broad-based social movement.

In this context, Woodbury suggests, someone like Walter Liggett was a real problem for the new political order in Minnesota. Liggett believed in the old, radical farmer-labor vision. During the 1920s he had enjoyed a

quite successful career as a novelist, newspaperman, campaign publicist, and political investigator. Thus he had a lot of national contacts, he knew how to run a paper, and he knew how to find the damning facts that would win his newspaper readers. Finally, he wouldn't shut up. He wouldn't take money, and he couldn't be scared away through physical or legal assaults.

When it became clear that Liggett would not go away of his own volition, he was killed. Who benefited? Governor Olson did—no longer was there a muckraker pointing out his corruption. So did the Minneapolis mob. So did the Minneapolis police, who were closely tied to the mob. So did the Communist Party, which wanted a secret "Popular Front" alliance with the Farmer-Labor Party. So did all the office holders and beneficiaries of state patronage, for whom Lincoln Steffens-style muckraking was a threat. In other words, by the night of his death Liggett had accumulated a lot of enemies, some of them very powerful and willing to break rules.

The political character of the murder was further revealed, Woodbury suggests, by the poor quality of the state's investigation and by the rush to judgment within the Farmer-Labor establishment. Party leaders protested both their innocence—and Liggett's guilt as a blackmailer and extortionist—far too loudly. They got away with their suspicious loud-mouthing because Liggett's defenders in the press and among radical or libertarian organizations like the ACLU were too far away, too financially strapped themselves, or just muddled and indecisive. To this day, therefore, reputable opinion has held that Liggett died because he was playing a dangerous game of blackmail with criminals.

At this point, you may be thinking, "Wow!" This is the same Floyd Olson after whom a Minnesota state highway is named and whose statue graces one end of the capitol lawn in St. Paul, a politician whom many considered presidential material. In this book, Olson bears a close resemblance to someone like Slobodan Milosevic. The implications of Woodbury's account are truly sensational. Even if only a small portion of the evidence assembled here is correctly interpreted by Woodbury, then one has to accept that Olson quite possibly knew exactly why Liggett was killed and deliberately chose to avoid pressing for justice in the case.

What she *really* appears to believe is quite eye-popping, though she concedes she cannot prove her views. The appendix to the book seems to suggest that Woodbury suspects that Minneapolis gangsters arranged for Liggett's murder because they knew they could get away with it. They knew that they were not only doing themselves a favor, they were also doing one for Olson. They knew that Olson was fundamentally corrupt and that Liggett's investigative reporting threatened to expose this corruption. The first effort to stop him was nonviolent, a sexual assault frame-up. During this trial, furthermore, he was severely beaten by local Jewish gangsters in a way that could be portrayed as their self-defense against a drunken

attack by Liggett. When he failed to "get the message," the local mob decided to kill him.

Ultimately, then, this book asks something quite extraordinary from its readers. As it shades from memoir to testimony and then to indictment, it in effect says: "Believe that this was a political murder, one predicted by Liggett himself. Don't believe the Farmer-Labor leaders' spin that Liggett was a blackmailing newspaperman, a former radical gone bad."

At first you hardly notice that this is what the book is doing. But pretty soon you are deep into a conspiracy theory, and it's surprising how easy it is to slip into it. After all, books like this are far more credible than they used to be. It is now an article of popular faith that politics is a dirty business and that politicians who get anywhere make terrible compromises as their careers prosper. We had a president, Richard Nixon, who really did conspire to intimidate his opponents in a most unsavory way. We also had a president, John F. Kennedy, who was murdered while in office, and ever since there has been a light industry focused on whether his murder was a political one.

In the end, though, one realizes that Woodbury is not exactly playing fair with her readers—although I hardly think that the confusion is deliberate. (For the record, many years ago Woodbury and I had lunch in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and talked for an hour or so about the Farmer-Labor Party.) But here is why there's a serious problem with this book: Most readers will want very much to take this book seriously. Something horrible and unjust happened to the author and to her family. Her father's memory has been besmirched unfairly, the Liggetts' side of the story should have been told earlier, and it is proper for it to be told now. Also, the extensive research and documentation invite serious consideration.

Woodbury's book asks us to transfer our sense of decency and fair-mindedness to her analysis of the Farmer-Labor Party and to accept that account, given the research and documentation that support it. I wonder, though, if those readers who will want to accept at least *some* of Woodbury's political analysis will be completely aware of what is entailed by their apparent fair-mindedness.

At no point, for instance, does Woodbury ever deliberately signal to the reader that she is writing a history that just so happens to pack several bombshells, a revision that, if it were true, would require other histories to be modified substantially. Since that is the case, the ethics of historiography require her to provide the reader with a thorough treatment of what the other histories say and why other scholars apparently have very different views of Olson and the Farmer-Labor Party. Because Woodbury never discusses the literature, one can easily come away from this book thinking, "Gee, How did anybody ever end up thinking that the Farmer-Labor Party was a decent organization that did any good?" Here I think Woodbury's understandable (if inexcusable) anger at the scholars of the party led her astray. Her resentment shows up, for instance, in her quite unflattering and deeply irritating treatment of Arthur

Naftalin. She may consider all of us bozos, but there is a large literature that she is obligated to summarize if she intends to make a mark on the scholarship.

Second, although Woodbury researched this book extensively, she apparently never looked for evidence that could directly contradict any of her claims about Olson or the Farmer-Labor Party—as is required by ordinary canons of historiography. All of the evidence that makes Olson and the Farmer-Labor Party look bad she apparently accepted as *prima facie* correct. Thus, for instance, she never actually researched the records of the state liquor commission, which in her view was the hub of much of the political corruption in Minnesota, nor did she consult Governor Olson's official papers.

Third, there is the matter of the book's conspiracy theory. Everyone knows that, in principle, some conspiracy theories can be true because there are conspiracies in the real world. But there is also a reason why we should distrust conspiracy theories. History hides its tracks very well. Only the tiniest—and quite possibly unrepresentative—slivers of evidence, relative to the entire record, are left behind for researchers. Therefore, simple causal inferences are always preferable to more complicated hypotheses. Analysts need to assume that events and processes have observable, not hidden, causes and must provide direct, verifiable evidence of such causes. Unfortunately, Woodbury offers readers no such direct evidence of a political conspiracy—only sheer speculation that a close

associate of Governor Olson, Charles Ward, a wealthy businessman, bankrolled the murder.

In short, Marda Woodbury could have been much clearer about her purposes with this book. She could have emphasized that her reconstruction of the murder's political context is deliberately one-sided so that the reader will see the context *as her parents saw it* at the time. Periodically, she could have stepped back and said, "Here are the facts that will allow you to see why my parents were so exercised, although I recognize that there are other facts, x, y, and z, that support an alternative understanding of the context." She could have added, if she had offered such passages, why she accepted certain facts and not others.

Why she didn't do this is, in my view, obvious: This book is first and foremost an act of love for her family and her parents. She wanted to make sure that history did not swallow them up in the way that her father's enemies intended. Here she succeeded. This book's mistakes notwithstanding, she has rescued her father and mother from an awful aspect of her father's murder: namely, that her father's political enemies were, for a long time, able to define what it meant.

Reviewed by Richard M. Valelly, associate professor of political science at Swarthmore College and author of Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy (1989).

NEWS & NOTES

OUR READERS WRITE: Larry G. Osnes, president of Hamline University in St. Paul, responded to the Winter 1998–99 issue, "Making Minnesota Territory," by clarifying an important point in Hamline's history:

"The special tribute to the making of Minnesota Territory . . . is a great accomplishment. I am proud to be a citizen of a state that so richly recognizes its heritage through the efforts of the Minnesota Historical Society.

"I am also proud to be the current president of Minnesota's first university. I must point out that the article ['Territorial Imperative: How Minnesota Became the 32nd State'] needs clarification . . . It stated: 'On the town square in Red Wing in 1856 Hamline University laid stone foundations for the first four-year college west of the Mississippi. The next year it opened its doors, admitting women as well as men.'

"In fact, Hamline University held its first class on November 16, 1854, meeting on the second floor of the store building of Smith Hoyt & Co. in Red Wing. Seventy-three students were enrolled that first year, 30 females and 43 males. The brick building on the town square . . . opened in January 1856. Hamline had its first graduates in 1859: Emily R. Sorin and Elizabeth A. Sorin."

MARY D. CANNON, who edited this magazine with grace, skill, and wit, died August 28, 1999, in St. Paul. A graduate of Rockford College, she joined the Minnesota Historical Society in 1963. As an editor in the Publications and Research division, she not only clarified and polished the work of others but also wrote articles, compiled and edited, with Patricia Harpole, the invaluable *Minnesota Territorial Census, 1850*,

and composed concise and accurate historic markers, such as the one in St. Paul's Rice Park. An assistant editor of *Minnesota History* from 1964 to 1969, she went on to a career as a book editor before being named editor of the magazine in 1981, a post she held until her retirement in 1991. She set the standard for precision and clarity that her successors are proud to uphold.

A REVISED and expanded edition of William E. Lass's original bicentennial publication, *Minnesota: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998, 335 p., cloth, \$27.50) brings this handy volume to the doorstep of the twenty-first century. Intended as a survey that emphasizes the interplay of all Minnesotans with their ever-changing environment, the book looks at the land, the people, the varied economy (with a special focuses



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