

# BOOK REVIEWS

## **The Tootin' Louie: A History of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway**

**By Don L. Hofsommer**

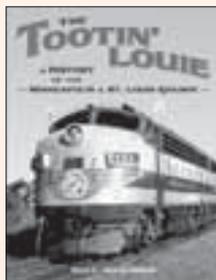
*(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.*

*374 p. Cloth, \$74.95; paper, \$39.95.)*

Of the many railroad books Don Hofsommer has written, this may be his most personal effort. The Minneapolis & St. Louis (M&SL) was his hometown line, the one that inspired his lifelong love of railroads. Clearly, he still mourns its passing into the graveyard of consolidation that has swallowed the identity of most American roads. He explains his relationship to the company in a brief but touching preface before narrating its history in considerable detail.

The M&SL's history followed a pattern familiar to many American railroads. From the beginning it was "the tender handmaiden of the Minneapolis flour millers." It began as a local road extending to Albert Lea and ultimately reached Des Moines to the south and Watertown, South Dakota, to the west. A third line ran from Winthrop toward Council Bluffs but got no farther than Storm Lake. Its lines intersected and connected with larger roads that reached Chicago, St. Louis, Omaha, and points west. Like most ambitious lines, the M&SL aspired to extend its track to more distant points to secure longer hauls, but a succession of managements failed at this loftier goal. Meanwhile, roads on every side of it transformed themselves into large systems, dooming the M&SL to serve as a smaller bridge between its larger neighbors, several of which seemed poised to swallow the company. On two occasions, in 1888 and 1923, it lapsed into receivership and hovered on the brink of being dismantled.

Yet it survived. The remarkable thing about the M&SL is not that it was ultimately absorbed by the Chicago & North-western in 1960 but that it survived for so long as a mostly independent road in a volatile railroad landscape that witnessed the rise and fall and reshaping of whole systems. Within its ranks the company developed an intensely loyal and dedicated work force that continued to identify strongly with the road through every crisis it faced. In an industry steeped in tradition, the M&SL occupied an even more insular universe than most; it retained much of the character and many of the characteristics of a local road in an age when such lines were vanishing. Hofsommer describes it as "a homely hometown railroad, pedestrian, unassuming, plain, a work-a-day old road as tightly tied to its many constituents as they were to it."



It is this clear identity as a local road that makes Hofsommer's study so useful. Most histories of railroad companies deal with larger roads and systems, not their smaller cousins that vanished. Hofsommer tells the M&SL story in a straightforward narrative groaning with the weight of detail that is at once crushing and illuminating. He is meticulous in recounting the mix and flow of traffic on the road as well as its efforts to extend lines in several directions. A shortage of executive papers hampers his efforts to depict the inner landscape of the road's management, and he does not always set the M&SL's saga fully or sharply enough in the broader landscape of national events. The wealth of detail often makes it difficult to follow the larger story, and the reader may struggle to keep hold of the narrative thread. But the detail has its rewards. It provides a feel for the "stuff" of rail operations and a strong sense of whom the railroad served and how its role shifted over time.

The result is a book that should appeal to a wide variety of readers. Railroad scholars and buffs will relish Hofsommer's labor of love precisely for the fullness of its data. The casual reader may find it hard going but will be rewarded with an unusually rich case study of a quintessential American railroad.

*Reviewed by Maury Klein, professor of history at the University of Rhode Island and the author of 13 books, including several on railroad history. His two-volume history of the Union Pacific Railroad will be reissued by the University of Minnesota Press this spring.*

## **Women of the Northern Plains: Gender and Settlement on the Homestead Frontier, 1870–1930**

**By Barbara Handy-Marchello**

*(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005.*

*205 p. Cloth, \$32.95.)*

This long-awaited volume will become the standard treatment of women on the northern plains. It is significant not only for its history of farm women but also for its contribution to the history of family farming and community in the Upper Midwest. The book will appeal to scholars of women's and rural history and their students and to general readers interested in their forebears on the plains.

Handy-Marchello argues that women were the "mainstay" of farming on the homestead frontier of North Dakota from 1870 to 1930. In the early years women helped their



husbands break the land, sow crops, and build sod houses, all while caring for the children they bore with regularity. The boom years of wheat production in the 1880s and late 1890s attracted waves of immigrant settlers hungry for free land. Women were then the mainstay in their communities, a diverse mosaic of immigrant settlements spread out over the broad plains. The fates of Dakota farm families in the twentieth century became more vulnerable to fluctuations in the market, which turned downward in the 1920s. By 1930 the average size of a farm was nearly 500 acres, proof of robust production of wheat for market. But wheat was not the whole story.

Women's production of butter and poultry was essential to the family economy, especially in times of market downturn. With the proceeds, women procured food, clothing, and household supplies. Their work was largely invisible to men, who devalued women's financial support of the farm. Ironically, once the productivity of women's dairy work was recognized in the 1920s, men took over its management and claimed the profits, depriving women of control of their income. The centrality of women's work was also threatened by the Country Life Movement's well-meaning but unsuccessful attempt to introduce an urban model of women as consumers, not producers. Thus, rather than presenting a progressive view of women's history that saw them achieve greater levels of prosperity and comfort, the book portrays women's power as diminished by the commercialization of agriculture.

Handy-Marchello writes in a clear, strong voice that highlights the argument while supporting it with evidence carefully culled from a wide array of public and private sources. She relied most heavily upon interviews carried out by the Works Projects Administration Writers' Project in 1939–40 and interviews done by women's clubs from 1938 to 1953. These sources complement her findings from the mute statistics of agricultural censuses and government reports. The reliance on interviews and memoirs may account for her generally positive portrayal of women's lives, since people tend to filter out negative experiences as they reconstruct their past. The fact that these are the stories of those who were successful, not those who failed and left, may contribute to the optimistic tone.

This book challenges bleaker histories of women of the northern plains that saw their lives as characterized by physical abuse and deprivation. Handy-Marchello does discuss abuse, but the women in her stories resist the violence. One woman dumped a pail of cold water on her husband, another called in the sheriff. Divorce laws were liberal, and the divorce rate steadily increased, although it was lower for immigrant women. She disputes the idea that farm work drove women into insanity by using mental hospital records

to show that "overwork" was rarely the reason for confinement. While the author recognizes the subordination of women in law and custom, she argues that the productive work of pioneer women allowed them to challenge their subordinate status.

One might have wished for more attention to class as a factor in women's experience, or for a more complex treatment of Yankee women. I found it curious that the author referred to studies of colonial women but not to studies of farm families in other parts of the Midwest that might have offered a more relevant comparative framework. These are minor complaints that do not diminish the author's achievement in presenting an insightful and elegantly written history of women on the northern plains.

*Reviewed by Susan Sessions Rugh, an associate professor of history at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. She is author of Our Common Country: Family Farming, Culture, and Community in the Nineteenth-Century Midwest (2001) and various articles on midwestern agrarian culture.*

## Immortal River: The Upper Mississippi River in Ancient and Modern Times

By Calvin R. Fremling

(Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.  
429 p. Cloth, \$70.00; paper, \$29.95.)

*Immortal River* is an ambitious book. Fremling wanted to create "a primer" for recreationalists, planners, technicians, and river scientists that would cover the Upper Mississippi's natural and human history from the river's glacial origins to current issues. His objective was to assemble, simplify, and condense this information so that others wouldn't have to "reinvent the wheel." His hope is that his book will lead people to care for the river so that future generations can enjoy it as he has.

Fremling organized his book into five major parts: The River Primeval, Exploration and Early Exploitation, Caging the Giant, Ecological Relationships, and The River Today and Tomorrow. The first part summarizes the upper river's early formation, especially by glaciers, and ends with a brief chapter on the native people along the river before European contact. Although glacial history can get quite technical, this account is readable and provides helpful illustrations.

In the second part the author tells the river's human and natural history from its "discovery" by Father Jacques Mar-



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quette and Louis Joliet, in 1673, up through the twentieth century. He provides brief descriptions of the landscape and environment along the river and short sections on the forces that began undermining its ecosystem: the fur trade, logging, farming, and the button-making industry that decimated the river's mussel population. He notes the extinction of passenger pigeons and the disappearance of buffalo and elk that once drank from the Mississippi.

In Part 3 Fremling jumps into a long summary of river navigation, from canoes and keelboats through the end of the steamboat era. As steamboat traffic began waning after the Civil War, Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to undertake a series of navigation-improvement projects. From 1878 to about 1930, the Corps tried to narrow and deepen the river with wing dams and closing dams. When this failed, Congress authorized most of the locks and dams for the Upper Mississippi, and the Corps built them during the 1930s. The author's forte is the river's biology, and we begin seeing that as he discusses the impact of navigation projects on the river's ecosystem. He tends to repeat, however, common misunderstandings about why Congress authorized the various navigation projects.

Fish and wildlife populations, decimated by pollution and overuse before 1930, initially rebounded in the new reservoirs behind the locks and dams. But, as Fremling details in Part 4, the river's ecosystem gradually declined as a result of problems created by the reservoirs and by pollution and the loss of its floodplain to agriculture.

Mayflies, Fremling explains, are the canaries-in-the-coal-mine for the Mississippi River, and he spends an entire

chapter on them. As pollution became too great, mayflies, which once hatched in such numbers that they could close roads, disappeared. When the river's water quality began improving after strong environmental laws were passed in the 1960s and 1970s, the mayflies started coming back.

The Upper Mississippi River is managed by a web of federal, state, and local agencies. Only someone like Fremling, who has spent decades working with representatives at every level, can begin to explain it all. In Part 5 he attempts to do this, with a brief summary of the roles played by key organizations. He sees the river as torn in too many directions by too many interests; a river as complex as the Mississippi, he contends, needs to be managed as a whole and not by a gaggle of agencies with different goals. While he insists he is being objective, he clearly argues that the river's ecosystem should take precedence over navigation and agriculture.

*Immortal River* is more a compendium of historical and current information than a scholarly analysis. By covering everything from the river's glacial origins to the current system of management, Fremling has little time to go into much detail about anything. But his goal was to present the breadth of the river's history, rather than its depth. As such, this book is a valuable introduction to the Upper Mississippi River.

*Reviewed by John O. Anfinson, an historian with the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area, a unit of the National Park Service. He is author of The River We Have Wrought (2003), River of History (2003), and many articles on the Mississippi River.*

■ *Our Readers Write: "Save the Lady," the tale of preserving the Winona County Courthouse (Winter 2005-06) by Greg Gaut and Marsha Neff earned praise from New Ulm reader Denis J. Warta, who added:*

"Very often, anti-preservationists will argue that the skills of long ago, necessary to create beautiful buildings, are no longer available. This argument was used in discussing the restoration of the Winona County Courthouse. There were claims that stone-carved facades could not be duplicated.

"Fortunately . . . there exist artists and artisans who could and did duplicate the gargoyles and other carved stone features. Without this expertise, the preservation that is so lauded in the article would not have been possible. The American Artstone Company of New Ulm rose to the challenge and received the Manufacturing Excellence Award for the most difficult project of 2004 from the Cast Stone Institute, a national trade organization. Hats off to a Minnesota company that enabled the Winona County Courthouse to live again in modern times."

*At the same ceremony, Kane and Johnson Architects of Rochester won the institute's National Design Excellence Award for the courthouse's exterior restoration, which had already received the 2004 Preservation Alliance of Minnesota Award.*

■ In January 2005, Minnesota's State Capitol celebrated its one-hundredth birthday. A few months earlier, one of Minnesota's most beloved citizens had died—Elmer L. Andersen, the state's thirtieth governor and lifelong civic leader. These two Minnesota legends join together in *Elmer's Tour: A Former Governor's Loving Look at the Minnesota State Capitol* (written with Lori Sturdevant, Minneapolis: Nodin Press, 2005, 20 p., paper, \$9.95). Appropriate for young readers or adults, this quick read is a personal tour of Andersen's favorite items in the Capitol. From the Reception Room's oval table to the plaque commemorating women's suffrage advocate Clara Ueland, each item has a story to tell. In these

enjoyable anecdotes, each accompanied by a color photo, readers will learn tidbits of Minnesota history and glimpse the human side of this legendary man. A portion of the proceeds from sale of this book will go to the Friends of the Minnesota State Capitol.

Another look at Minnesota's Cass Gilbert-designed statehouse is the heavily illustrated *Minnesota's Capitol, A Centennial Story* by Leigh Roethke (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 2005, 119 p., cloth, \$24.00). Written to appeal to schoolchildren and general readers alike, the book is not a detailed history of the building or the events that transpired there. Instead, it provides an overview of the making of the capitol as a work of art and a powerful symbol.

■ Detailing a wide array of sites from Coon Rapids to Hastings, the Mississippi River Field Guide website, [www.fmr.org/fieldguide](http://www.fmr.org/fieldguide), is a treasure trove for armchair—or computer chair—travelers. Sites are arranged by river mile, starting at the upstream end of the Twin Cities metropolitan stretch with the Coon Rapids dam (river mile 866.2) and ending downstream at Lock and Dam No. 2 in Hastings (river mile 814). In between is a wealth of fact and folklore, information on ecology, natural history, and industry, plus tips for river explorers and recreational users alike. An interactive overview map and more detailed area maps pinpoint the towns, islands, trails, brickyards, bars, and other points of interest, both natural and constructed. Friends of the Mississippi River created the user-friendly website to hold information gathered by local historian and river enthusiast Stephen Lee.

■ The charming collection *Sketches*, by Anton Gag, recreates an autograph book the German Bohemian artist filled in 1878-79, soon after his immigration to America (New Ulm, MN: Brown County Historical Society, 2004, 38 images, paperback, \$9.95 plus \$1 shipping). The watercolor and crayon images inspired by people and places in St. Paul and New Ulm are helpfully annotated by Julie

L'Enfant. This small book is available from the German-Bohemian Heritage Society, PO Box 822, New Ulm, MN 56073-0822.

■ Immigration and politics are the subjects of two new and sizeable works of Scandinavian scholarship. *Scandinavians in Old and New Lands: Essays in Honor of H. Arnold Barton*, edited by Philip J. Anderson, Dag Blanck, and Byron J. Nordstrom (Chicago: Swedish-American Historical Society, 2004, 302 p., hardcover, \$24.95 plus \$3.50 shipping), brings together a host of scholars in a festschrift to Dr. Barton, the leading historian of Swedes in the United States. Essays by Scandinavians and Americans alike tackle topics as varied as labor, religion, place names, and leisure reading. Available from the SAHS, 3225 West Foster Avenue, Box 48, Chicago, IL 60625-4895.

Wisconsin's Scandinavian immigrants in particular are the focus of *Ethnic Leadership and Midwestern Politics: Scandinavian-Americans and the Progressive Movement in Wisconsin, 1890-1914* by Jørn Brøndal (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 2004, 380 p., hardcover, \$44.95 plus \$3.00 shipping). This monograph explores not only the roles of ethnicity and cultural values in developing political leadership but also the challenges this politics of tradition faced from the rising progressive movement.

■ Delivering more tales from the Badger State, the anthology *Women's Wisconsin: From Native Matriarchies to the New Millennium*, edited by Genevieve G. McBride with a foreword by Shirley G. Abrahamson (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2005, 486 p., paperback, \$37.95), collects articles and women's letters, reminiscences, and oral histories previously published in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*. Editor McBride offers context for this tribute to women—native and immigrant, famous and anonymous—and the important roles they have played throughout Wisconsin's history.

■ The longstanding and evolving arguments over the authenticity of the Kensington Runestone are ably summarized and presented in a lucid, evenhanded manner in Rhoda R. Gilman's recent article, "The Kensington Runestone: A Century of Controversy" (*Journal of the West*, Summer 2005). Gilman walks the reader through the stances, both pro and con, introduces revisionist theories and new scholarship as it arose, and concludes that, although "forces are arrayed against any final settlement. . . the controversy itself has secured a firm place in Upper Midwest folklore."

■ The rise and decline of Ely's neighbor, Winton, is the focus of a new illustrated history by Margaret Sweet, *Winton, The*

*Town That Lumber Built* (Ely-Winton Historical Society, 2005, 80 p., paper, \$20.00). Long-time area residents, Boundary Waters visitors, or readers with family ties to the area will find a detailed story of the town's most active years, 1885 through 1922, when Winton hosted a thriving white pine lumbering industry. Railroad and lumber company maps are included. Books may be ordered from the Ely-Winton Historical Society, 1900 E. Camp St., Ely, MN 55731; phone, 218-365-3226, email [ewhs@vcc.edu](mailto:ewhs@vcc.edu).

■ Well-known to Minnesota readers for his lively columns in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Jim Klobuchar has gathered the best of his recent pieces in *Walking Briskly Toward the Sunset*

(Minneapolis: Nodin Press, 2005, 185 p., cloth, \$18.95). He offers moving tributes to beloved Americans—Bob Hope, Walter Payton, Paul Wellstone; vivid descriptions of the Minnesota north woods, where he watches wolves romping on a frozen lake; and the gripping tale of the Lutheran missionary who faces and destroys a man-eating lion that is terrorizing an African village. He shows the reader both the snowfields of the Himalayas and the Nepalese village where barefoot capitalism is lifting women out of crushing poverty. Perhaps most thought provoking are his perceptive and impassioned discussions of modern America, its sports, politics, world position, and future. Here the Minnesota populist challenges the marketing and spin of the twenty-first century and reminds America of the resources and aspirations that constitute its true strength and greatness.

■ Although only a new state on the western frontier, Minnesota provided the Union Army with more than 20,000 troops who participated in major battles. Some troops also fought at home in the U.S.-Dakota conflict, which broke out in 1862. Mary Hawker Bakeman's *A Genealogist's Guide to Researching Civil War and Dakota Conflict Ancestors in Minnesota* (Roseville, MN: Park Genealogical Books, 2005, 60 p., paper, \$15.95 plus \$4.00 shipping and tax) offers a "new road map for documenting family history" for both wars. Beginning with federal and Minnesota state census records, the author informs researchers about locating compiled service records for veterans and their units, online resources, published records, and manuscripts. Included is a chapter about civilians who were at home during the Dakota conflict. Whether your ancestor was in a Minnesota regiment or from another state, this guide by a well-known genealogist lays out a research methodology and explains often-confusing aspects of government records in order to speed your investigations. The book is available from Park Books at PO Box 130968, Roseville, MN 55113-0968.

## MINNESOTA HISTORY

Publisher, *Gregory M. Britton*; Editor, *Anne R. Kaplan*; Design and Production, *Percolator*

*Minnesota History* is published quarterly and copyright 2006 by the Minnesota Historical Society, 345 Kellogg Blvd. West, St. Paul, MN 55102-1906; [www.mnhs.org](http://www.mnhs.org). Membership in the Society includes a subscription to *Minnesota History*. Basic individual memberships are \$55.00; for information, write the Membership Office at the address above or at [membership@mnhs.org](mailto:membership@mnhs.org). Subscriptions to *Minnesota History* are \$20.00 per year. Back issues are \$5.00 each plus tax and \$2.75 postage; add 50¢ for each additional copy; call 651-297-3243 or 1-800-647-7827. Magazine text is available in alternative format from the editor.

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Periodicals postage paid at St. Paul, MN. Postmaster: Send address changes to Membership Office, 345 Kellogg Blvd. West, St. Paul, MN 55102-1906. Publication number 351660.

Printed on recycled paper with soy ink.



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