

A Love Affair with Birds: The Life of Thomas Sadler Roberts

Sue Leaf

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 271 p. Hardbound, \$29.95.)

Thomas Sadler Roberts may not be a familiar name to most Minnesotans, but Sue Leaf's book, *A Love Affair with Birds*, is a notable effort to change that. Roberts's own two-volume book, *The Birds of Minnesota*, has been a treasure amongst natural history enthusiasts since it was published in 1932. And, if you have visited the Bell Museum of Natural History and admired the spectacular dioramas depicting moose at Gunflint Lake or tundra swans in the Minnesota River Valley, this too is part of Roberts's legacy.

Leaf's book is the story of this remarkable man's life. Birds were Roberts's passion and he kept detailed journals documenting his statewide travels and observations. Penelope Krosch, former archivist at the University of Minnesota, transcribed these journals 20 years ago and catalogued all of Roberts's letters and memorabilia. Leaf creatively weaves these materials together with her own extensive research to present an engaging biography of one of Minnesota's earliest conservationists.

Thomas was nine years old when his family moved from Philadelphia to Minneapolis in 1867, a journey designed to restore the health of his father, who suffered from tuberculosis. With a fortune made in real estate, Thomas's father now had time to tend to his health and pursue his interest in natural history. Minnesota's frontier was the perfect antidote, and he spent countless days with his sons exploring the forests, prairies, and lakes just beyond their home. Birds were always the focus of their sojourns, and shotguns their essential tool for field identification. Leaf does an excellent job recounting these outings, as well as the personal friendships, professional contacts, and summer field jobs that filled Thomas's early years and established his reputation as an authority on Minnesota's bird-life.

Despite his keen interest in nature, Thomas left for Philadelphia at the age of 24 to study medicine. When he returned to Minneapolis, he married his long-time sweetheart, Jennie, and began building his medical practice. A devoted physician, he shouldered many responsibilities: serving on the staff of several city hospitals, teaching pediatrics at the university, and ministering to his private patients, including many of the city's prominent businessmen.

Often working to the point of exhaustion, Roberts had little time to pursue his passion. But, at the age of 57, an old friend and colleague offered him an opportunity to teach ornithology and curate the Natural History Survey's collections at the University of Minnesota. Retiring from his full-time practice,

Roberts spent the next 30 years transforming a poorly managed, badly infested collection of animal skins into an outstanding collection documenting Minnesota's diverse fauna.

Many of the specimens were displayed in three-dimensional exhibits, or dioramas, depicting birds and mammals in their natural settings, each prepared with Roberts's fastidious eye for accuracy. There were radio shows, nature movies, public talks, ornithology classes, and publications. Indeed, Roberts was so successful that the building that housed the collections and displays was soon inadequate. With the financial backing of James Ford Bell and the Public Works Administration, plans to construct a new museum began. Completed in 1939, the building stands at the corner of University Avenue and Church Street and still houses some of the finest dioramas in North America.

Roberts's one life-long ambition was to write a definitive account of Minnesota's bird-life. By the early 1900s he already was witnessing profound changes as prairies were plowed, wetlands drained, and woodlands logged. In his late 60s, he felt time was running out. So, at the age of 67, he launched a seven-year labor of love to write *Birds of Minnesota*. In an era that preceded field guides to aid field identification, Roberts undertook the daunting task of describing more than 300 birds in prose that accurately captured the unique qualities of each species. He was a masterful writer, and his delightful accounts continue to be cited today.

Leaf skillfully transports the reader back into the late 1800s and early 1900s of Roberts's life. Occasionally the accounts wander from sequential events, leaving the reader briefly confused about the timeline, but this is a minor distraction. Roberts and his significant contributions to Minnesota conservation come to life in an entertaining read that will engage anyone with an interest in our state's history.

—Lee Pfanmuller



LEE PFANMULLER is an ecologist and ornithologist who worked at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for 30 years as well as with The Nature Conservancy and Audubon Minnesota. She currently serves on the advisory board of the Bell Museum of Natural History and Planetarium.

BOOK REVIEWS

Minneapolis Madams: The Lost History of Prostitution on the Riverfront

Penny A. Petersen

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 228 p. Paper, \$24.95.)

In her preface to *Minneapolis Madams*, Penny Petersen tells about the day she was biking on West River Parkway when she turned off at Eleventh Avenue and came upon an impressive Richardsonian Romanesque building. “It appeared to be the residence of a wealthy family or an elegant apartment building dating from the 1890s, but its proximity to the west bank flour milling district was disconcerting,” Peterson recalled. “It was in the wrong place, to my way of thinking.”

Intrigued, Petersen decided to check the building records for the Eleventh Avenue address. To her surprise, she discovered that the building permits listed the property as a “Sporting Hse” and a “Hse of Ill Fame.” That discovery prompted Petersen to delve into the history of an illicit but surprisingly visible industry that flourished in Minneapolis during the late-nineteenth century. Using property and court records supplemented with contemporary newspaper accounts, Petersen was able to reconstruct, according to her book’s subtitle, the lost history of prostitution on the riverfront.

That lost history was populated with a series of colorful businesswomen who prospered at a time when more respectable middle-class women were not expected to involve themselves in the male-dominated world of commerce. These energetic entrepreneurs included women like Nettie Conley and Ida Dorsey, whose brothels were well-known riverfront landmarks.

Conley, who used several aliases during her 25-year career, worked her way up from the proprietor of a rowdy saloon serving lumberjacks to become the madam of an elegant bordello catering to the socially elite. One newspaper account described her as “the wealthy proprietress of a pretentious resort overlooking the river.” Most likely, the pretentiousness was added by John Bradstreet, a well-known decorator whom Conley hired to furnish her riverfront establishment.

Dorsey’s brothel on North Second Street was housed in a building described as a “shabby, weather beaten frame house” by the *Minneapolis Journal*. But the looks of the place were deceiving. On the inside “the shabbiness disappears,” the *Journal* reported. “The front hall is handsomely carpeted and the walls covered with costly paper—plush upholstered furniture gives an air of richness to the rooms.”

Dorsey offered her clients the allure of interracial sex, with a collection of black prostitutes who were available to service her all-white clientele. Later this Minneapolis madam, of mixed-race parentage herself, would enter into a long-term relationship with one of her clients: Carleton Pillsbury, a mem-

ber of the one of the city’s most prominent families. Publicly acknowledging her involvement with the local socialite, Dorsey began calling herself Ida Pillsbury.

Conley, Dorsey, and the city’s other madams often found themselves buffeted by the ongoing debate between city leaders who wanted to control prostitution and others who wanted to eliminate it.

One group of women reformers also got caught up in this controversy. Known as the Sisterhood of Bethany, the organization sought to rescue “fallen women.” It operated what today would be called a shelter for former prostitutes. Directed by the wives of some of the city’s leading citizens, the Sisterhood had a curious symbiotic relationship with the sex industry it sought to suppress. During its most active period, the organization was funded, at least in part, with the proceeds of the fines the local madams paid at City Hall.

These fines, levied on a regular, monthly basis, made prostitution a quasi-regulated activity within a clearly identified red-light district along the Minneapolis riverfront. The system of fines continued until 1910 when Minneapolis adopted a zero-tolerance policy toward prostitution, and the red light district was finally shut down.

In her meticulously researched work, Penny Petersen takes a clear-eyed look at this long-ignored chapter in Minneapolis history. She concludes her book on a feminist note, declaring, “We deserve a complex civic history that gives voice to a class of women who engaged in a morally problematic lifestyle and an account that does not hide the stark economic choices faced by women in the nineteenth century.”

Minneapolis Madams may promise an X-rated exposé, but it delivers a thoughtful analysis of social and cultural life during a formative period in the development of a modern American city. Students of local history will want to add this well-written and engaging book to their reading lists.

—Iric Nathanson



IRIC NATHANSON writes about local history. He is the author of *Minneapolis in the Twentieth Century—The Growth of an American City*. His pictorial history of the Minneapolis riverfront will be published this year.



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