

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

A Lynching in St. Paul?
Almost—in 1895, an Era
of ‘Vigilante Justice’

Page 11

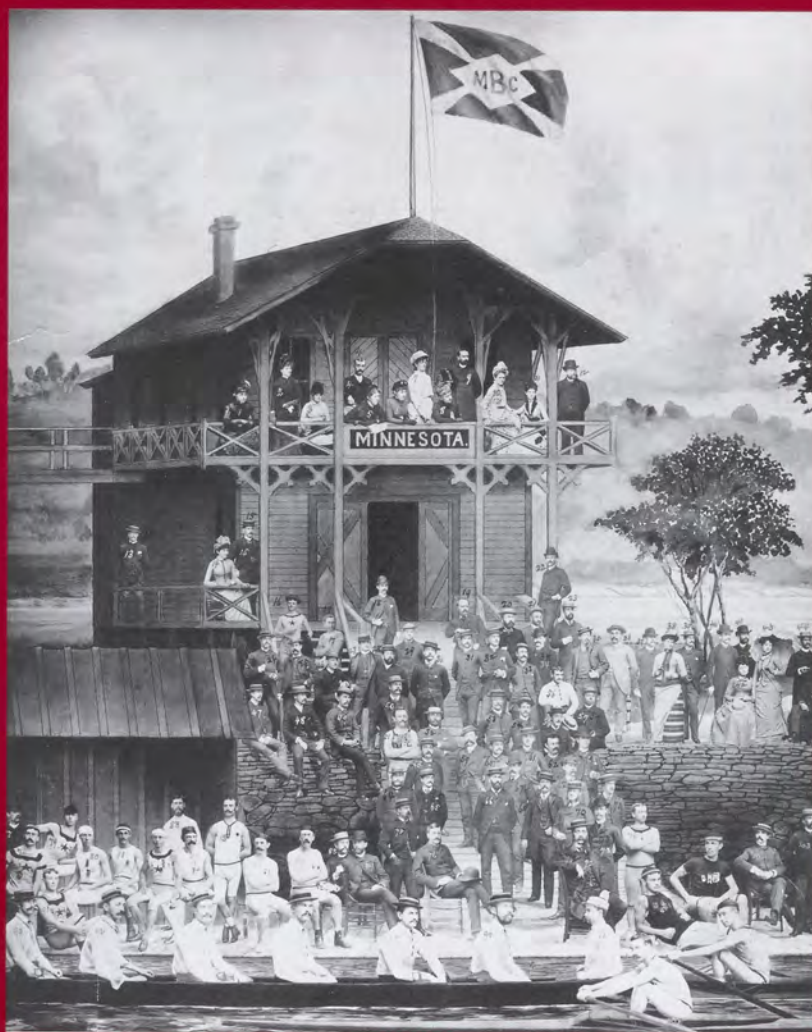
Summer, 2002

Volume 37, Number 2

Life on the Mississippi:

Singles, Doubles and Pairs, Fours and Quads—
The Minnesota Boat Club’s 132 Years

—Page 4



The home of the Minnesota Boat Club, circa 1880s. This photograph by C. A. Zimmerman “was one of the most remarkable pieces of photography ever accomplished,” according to an article in a 1903 issue of *The Razoo*, a Boat Club publication, adding that it “and has been commented upon by photographers all over the country. . . . In order to get it, Mr. Zimmerman had to keep a sketch of the boat-house in his mind while he took photographs of the members and the ladies. These he afterward arranged in groups so that they appear in the completed picture to be all posing together.” From the Minnesota Historical Society archives. See article on the Minnesota Boat Club’s history beginning on page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Executive Director

Priscilla Farnham

Editor

Virginia Brainard Kunz

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Howard M. Guthmann

Chair

James Russell

President

Marlene Marschall

First Vice President

Ronald J. Zweber

Second Vice President

Richard A. Wilhoit

Secretary

Peter K. Butler

Treasurer

Charles L. Bathke, W. Andrew Boss, Peter K. Butler, Norbert Conzemius, Anne Cowie, Charlotte H. Drake, Joanne A. Englund, Robert F. Garland, John M. Harens, Joan Higinbotham, Scott Hutton, Judith Frost Lewis, John M. Lindley, George A. Mairs, Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Richard Nicholson, Marvin J. Pertzik, Glenn Wiessner, Laurie Zenner, Ronald J. Zweber.

EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chair; James B. Bell, Henry Blodgett, Thomas H. Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Mark Eisenschenk, Pat Hart, Thomas J. Kelley, Tom Mega, Laurie Murphy, Richard H. Nicholson, Paul D. Nelson, G. Richard Slade.

HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

Elmer L. Andersen, Olivia I. Dodge, Charlton Dietz, William Finney, William Fallon, Otis Godfrey, Jr., Robert S. Hess, D. W. "Don" Larson, George Latimer, Joseph S. Micallef, Robert Mirick, Marvin J. Pertzik, J. Jerome Plunkett, James Reagan, Rosalie E. Wahl, Donald D. Wozniak.

RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner James McDonough, chairman
Commissioner Susan Haigh
Commissioner Tony Bennett
Commissioner Rafael Ortega
Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt
Commissioner Janice Rettman
Commissioner Jan Wiessner

Paul Kirkwold, manager, Ramsey County

Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 2002, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Fax 651-223-8539; e-mail address admin@rchs.com.; web site address www.rchs.com

RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 37, Number 2

Summer, 2002

CONTENTS

- 3** Letters
- 4** Singles, Doubles and Eights, Fours and Quads
Life on the Mississippi: The 132 Years of the
Minnesota Boat Club and Its Rich History
Jim Miller
- 11** 'Hang Him! That's the Best Way'
A Lynching in St. Paul? Almost, in 1895—
An Era of 'Vigilante Justice' in America
Paul D. Nelson
- 15** Is This Houston Osborne?
Paul D. Nelson
- 16** The Road to the Selby Tunnel: Or, How
To Make It Up the St. Anthony Hill
Virginia Brainard Kunz
- 18-20** Lost Neighborhood: A Story in Pictures
- 21** Growing Up in St. Paul
Manager, Fight Promoter, Minnesota Game Warden—
Johnny Salvator and his Impact on Boxing in St. Paul
Paul R. Gold
- 24** Book Reviews

Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

A Message from the Editorial Board

Given this summer's 90-degree temperatures, Jim Miller's history of the Minnesota Boat Club provides a refreshing glimpse of an early St. Paul athletic enterprise. Founded in 1870 by a number of the city's leading men, rowing at the MBC was strictly for amateurs. It also afforded an opportunity to attend social events on the Club's yearly calendar. In addition, Miller's research greatly increases our understanding of the value of Raspberry Island, where the MBC is located, to the city's cultural heritage and riverfront beauty.

In contrast, Paul Nelson's account of the near lynching of an African American, Houston Osborne, in St. Paul in 1895 is tense and suspenseful. Nelson not only explains what happened in 1895, he also shares the steps through which he went in uncovering this shameful and forgotten piece of the city's history. Unlike the Houston Osborne saga, the existence of the Selby Tunnel is well known today. What's less well known is its origin and how its construction changed the neighborhood around it. With words and photos, Virginia Brainard Kunz provides a brief history of this St. Paul landmark. "Growing Up in St. Paul," about boxer Johnny Salvator, is written by an avid promoter of St. Paul boxing history, Paul R. Gold. After Minnesota legalized boxing in 1915, St. Paul became the second largest center for training and supporting boxers in the United States. Johnny Salvator was one of the many St. Paul boxers who contributed to the city's athletic prominence in the first third of the twentieth century.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Books

Barrios Norteños, St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican American Communities in the Twentieth Century

Dionicio Nodín Valdés
University of Texas Press, Austin,
2000

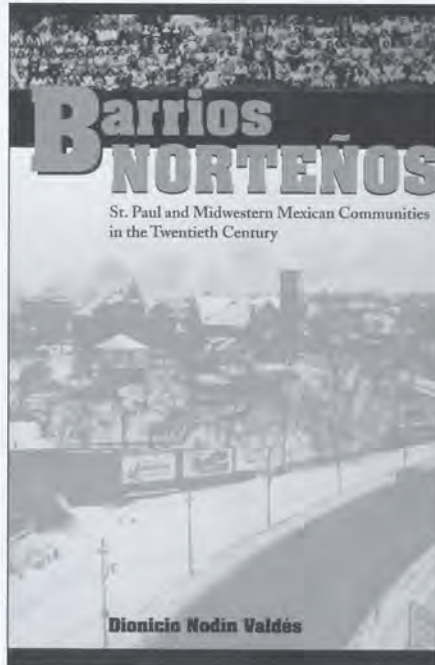
278 pages, paper, with notes, bibliog-
raphy, and index

Reviewed by Paul D. Nelson

B*arrios Norteños* (“northern neighborhoods”) is the most ambitious, thorough, and comprehensive account of the Mexican American experience in Minnesota and St. Paul ever written. The bibliography alone, the product of what must have been a long and dedicated effort, constitutes a fine achievement.

But who will want to read this book? It is an academic work, as Valdés makes clear on the first page. He aims to “reconstruct the twentieth-century history of Midwestern Mexican urban communities” and “discuss group inequality.” In pursuing these goals, he states, he will “examine interactions among race, class, gender, physical spaces, and the ethnic organizations and other cultural activities in which Midwestern Mexicanos participated,” and his examination will be informed by Chicano social science literature and theory. The general reader is thus put on notice: those not at ease with such terms as “assimilationist and deficiency theories” of immigrant adjustment will often find this book hard going.

This book presents another challenge to the non-academic Minnesota reader: less than half of it deals with St. Paul, the historic center of Mexican American settlement and life in our



state. The author uses St. Paul from time to time for closer examination of some aspects of the Midwestern Chicano experience, but St. Paul is in no way central to the overall topic of “Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century.” The reader who comes to the book looking to find the story of the Mexican American experience in our city can find it, but only with patience.

Valdés chose St. Paul as the most prominent community for his book because he had good sources here, but this actually presents something of a problem. Because other cities, especially Chicago, were and are far more important to the topic as a whole, putting St. Paul front and center so often makes the book feel at times like a wheel out of balance. Chicago is the Chicano metropolis, St. Paul just a prominent province. It is like writing the history of the Roman empire and giving more ink

to Gaul than to Rome itself.

The best thing any prospective reader of *Barrios Norteños* can do is to read the final segment, “Retrospective,” first. There in just eight pages Valdés ably summarizes his whole book. To boil it down still further (a perilous task) for the purposes of this review: The forces of capital—first national, then international—have brought Mexicans and Mexican Americans to the Midwest to serve as a cheap pool of surplus labor. The immigrants have come for economic reasons too, some wishing to stay only temporarily, others permanently. Those who settled in the Midwest, and their descendants, pursued the American promise of prosperity, freedom, and inclusion. In this they have been persistently thwarted: by capital, which wishes to keep them powerless and pliable; by the racist majority culture inclined to reject all things non-European; and by all levels of government (including the public schools), which both serve capital and reflect majority culture. Of course not everyone will agree with the ideological elements of Valdés’s analysis, but he pursues the argument openly, and it gives the book a clarifying edge.

Barrios Norteños begins with a discussion of recent Chicano social science literature and the author’s theoretical framework. The general reader can safely skip Chapter One. From there the book’s organization is mostly chronological, beginning with the early migrations into the Midwest from Mexico and the Southwest in the first two decades of the twentieth century; then through the sufferings and dislocations of the depression; the slow improvements in material conditions and community building during World War II and in the post war era; the Chicano

militancy of the 1960s and 1970s; and concluding with an examination of where Mexican Americans in the Midwest find themselves at the end of the last century, still struggling with issues of employment, identity, and inclusion.

The book proceeds chronologically, but also horizontally, in this sense: Because the author covers the entire Midwest, from Ohio to Minnesota to Kansas and Missouri, he deals with every topic and era by going from place to place. Thus for example we learn about labor and living conditions during the depression in Chicago, then Milwaukee, then Detroit, then Toledo, then St. Paul, etc. This approach gives the reader a complete picture and, through the notes and bibliography, excellent directions to the relevant sources. It also deprives the book of a central narrative, making parts of it a plodding tour.

There lies within *Barrios Norteños* a tremendous and timely story of a unique immigrant/ethnic people trying to find their way and place in the United States against persistent obstacles. Few immigrant groups have come to the Midwest so distinct culturally and physically, and also from so near geographically. Thus both for the immigrants and for those who disliked them the prospect of return to Mexico—voluntary or forced—retained genuine plausibility. Mexican and Chicano immigrants have also been the victims of bad timing: both of their first two waves coincided with the World Wars and both were followed by intense and hostile Nativist reactions. Between these two waves came the Great Depression, when many were forced out of the country against their will. The message these people received during their first half-century in the Midwest was, “We want your labor sometimes, but we never really want you.” And according to Valdés that message has been repeated at the end of the century in another anti-immigrant reaction.

Valdés tells his story best when he concentrates on St. Paul. This is so partly because he found the best source mater-

ial there, and it was enlivened by eloquent reminiscences from St. Paulites who lived through the early decades of the Mexican Midwestern immigrant experience. Chapters Two and Three, “Reckoning with Winter” and “Memory of Hunger,” are the book’s most readable and most informative. When Valdés focuses on the human experience in St. Paul—surviving the winters, the terrible housing, the depression, government hostility and indifference, and cultural isolation—he draws the reader in and lets St. Paul serve as a proxy for similar experiences in other towns and cities in the region. This is effective and sometimes eloquent, but because the book sets out to cover so much territory, St. Paul has to give way to other places. The organization gets horizontal again.

The latter chapters have less drama because things were a little better for Mexican Americans in the Midwest in the second half of the twentieth century. With little immigration (until recently), communities matured, home ownership increased, and some succumbed to the lures of the suburbs and assimilation. The Brown Power movement arose, then waned, and left a legacy of scholarship in colleges and universities around the country. This movement and the late-century renewal of immigration have stiffened resistance to assimilation. It is vital to chronicle these events, but difficult to turn them into a satisfying narrative.

The current resurgence of immigration to the central cities of the Midwest makes this book timely. Valdés gives us a century of recent history against which to compare the ongoing experience of today’s immigrants. The St. Paul reader of this book cannot help but look around and see (or perhaps imagine) a contrast between the experience of the recent Hmong immigrants and their Mexican predecessors. By appearances, some of them confirmed by recent 2000 census data, St. Paul’s Hmong citizens are progressing much faster, economically, educationally, professionally, and in social acceptance, than Mexican Americans

have. This despite the fact that in some ways the Hmong arrived bearing even greater disadvantages—their culture more foreign, lacking a tradition of literacy, and suffering the shattering experience of forced displacement by war.

Could there be, one wonders, cultural differences that play a part in the disparate adaptations to life in the Midwest? Valdés dismisses any such suggestion as a discredited “culture of poverty” hypothesis. This may be enough for his academic audience, and he may be entirely correct, but for the general reader the dismissal is not enough. Of course, comparing Hmong Americans with Mexican Americans is not within the scope of his book, but a few pages of engagement with the question of the role (if any) of Mexican culture in the maladies of Mexican adaptation to the Midwest would have made the book better.

The reader who desires a brief treatment of the Mexican experience in Minnesota can get a good one in Minnesota Historical Society Press’s *They Chose Minnesota*. Those who want more—more detail, more context, more analysis—will find it in *Barrios Norteños*. It is not an easy read, but this book belongs in every Midwestern public library and every college and university across the country.

For the past eleven years Paul Nelson has directed a summer language and culture experience Spanish immersion program in Mexico for elementary and secondary students and their families.

* * *

We Will Remember by Lisa Lovering is an historical account of Minnesota police officers who died in the line of duty. Beginning in 1882, the book chronicles the events surrounding the deaths of 216 officers from around the state, including those from all city, county, state, and federal offices. It is available from Lovering at P.O. Box 2, Cambridge, Minnesota 55008 (612-750-1496).

*Jewish Pioneers of St. Paul,
1849–1874*

Gene H. Rosenblum
Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, Inc.,
2001

128 pages, photos
\$19.99 paperback

*The Lost Jewish Community of
the West Side Flats, 1882–1962*

Gene H. Rosenblum
Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, Inc.,
2002

128 pages, photos
\$19.99 paperback

Reviewed by John M. Lindley

Gene H. Rosenblum, a retired St. Paul real estate attorney, has published two helpful books on the Jewish community in St. Paul. Both books are very accessible to the general reader and contain a substantial number of photos that tell the story of the early years of Jews in Minnesota's capital city.

Although Rosenblum's first book covers only the initial twenty-five years that Jews have been in St. Paul, it does bring out the complexity of being Jewish in a city that was predominantly settled by Catholics and Protestants. As Rosenblum explains, there were among these early Jewish settlers some who "were descendents of a long Jewish ancestry" but who either converted to Christianity or refused to acknowledge their Jewish heritage.

In addition to the valuable photographic materials that are a part of this book, Rosenblum's text explains where these early Jewish settlers lived, how they made their livings, and where in the city they built synagogues, such as Mount Zion and the Sons of Jacob temples, for corporate worship. In a number of places, the long captions that accompany many of the photos add information that goes beyond what's in the text in telling the varied stories of these Jewish pioneers.

The Lost Jewish Community of the West Side Flats is a more complex book. In this second book, Rosenblum's

primary focus is on how urban renewal in St. Paul in the 1950s and '60s led to the destruction of the entire 320-acre West Side Flats and the forced relocation of its predominantly Jewish residents. City leaders supported clearing the Flats, in part, as a way to avoid the continuing dislocation, safety, and health risks to the populace of the Flats every spring when the Mississippi River overflowed its banks and flooded the area. Although Rosenblum doesn't make a comparison between St. Paul's West Side Flats and Minneapolis Bohemian Flats, which was also located on the Mississippi's west bank, urban renewal in Minneapolis at about the same time had a similar justification and a comparable result in bringing an end to a small community of residents who were typically found on the bottom rungs of the city's economic ladder. The biggest difference between the residents of Bohemian Flats and the people who lived on the Flats in St. Paul was, however, the substantially greater percentage of Jews who made up the population on the West Side.

Rosenblum starts out with an account of the unexpected arrival of Jewish immigrants from Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe who were forced to flee in 1882 from governmental pogroms and other civil, economic, and political discriminations. These new Jewish settlers in St. Paul differed greatly from the typically middle class Jews then residing in St. Paul who were accustomed to living within a cultural milieu derived from Germany. The Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe were different in culture, appearance, and language. They were also impoverished. Their arrival presented a genuine challenge to St. Paul's Jews and the city's leaders in the community's ability to absorb such different newcomers, especially when subsequent chain migration led to the number of new Jewish immigrants quickly exceeding the existing population of St. Paul Jews.

The Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe settled on St. Paul's West Side Flats, where housing was poor, rents were the lowest, and land was available.

By 1910, according to Rosenblum, an estimated 70% of the population of the West Side Flats was Jewish and State Street and Fairfield Avenue were the main roads in the heart of the Flats community. Beginning in 1895 the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society founded an Industrial School on the Flats to help these latest settlers to adjust to their new country. By 1903 this school had become Neighborhood House, a non-sectarian community asset that helped anyone in need, regardless of their religion or country of origin.

Many photographs in this book document the houses, families, commercial establishments, schools, synagogues, and even streets (for example Texas, Eva, Chicago, and Eaton) that once existed on the Flats but are no longer there. Over time in the first half of the twentieth century, many of the Jews who had prospered began to move off the Flats for other areas of St. Paul, particularly around Fourteenth Street, Summit Avenue, and Highland Park. Urban renewal in mid-twentieth century subsequently forced the remainder to leave as well. Today the area is the Riverview Industrial Park.

Anyone who wants to know more about the history of St. Paul, or the Jewish community in the capital, or about the city's West Side Flats will enjoy reading these books.

John Lindley is a freelance writer and editor and chairman of Ramsey County History's Editorial Board

Also in Print

Four recent books from the Afton Historical Society Press, three of them published since January, 2002, add much to our knowledge of Minnesota history, and particularly its ethnic and artistic culture. All are handsome, beautifully designed and heavily illustrated publications, with authors of major standing in their own professional communities.

The Gag Family: German-Bohemian Artists in America, by Julie L'Enfant traces the influence of European family traditions on the art of three enterprising Minnesota artists and places their

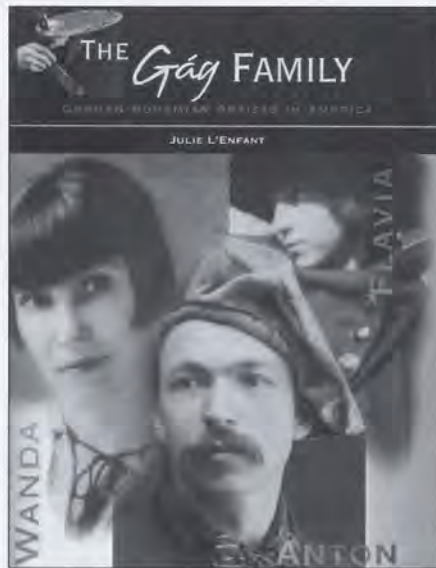
work in the context of American art. While this book will have major appeal for art historians, it also integrates the art of the Gag family with their history as Minnesota pioneers. Anton Gag, a German-Bohemian immigrant, settled in New Ulm in 1879. He established himself there as an artist, formed a family business, and produced two famous daughters.

The older of the two, Wanda, made her reputation in New York as a printmaker and children's book author and illustrator; her younger sister, Flavia, became a prolific writer, illustrator, and painter. All three Gags were driven by their love of nature, and especially for the two women, their awareness of the beauty of the countryside carried them through struggles with extreme poverty, illness, and the distress of not being understood.

Author Julie L'Enfant is an associate professor of art history at the College of Visual Arts in St. Paul. Born in Louisiana, she holds a doctorate in English and American literature from Louisiana State University and a doctorate in art history from the University of Minnesota.

A chronology tracing the Gag family from Anton Gag's birth in 1858 in Bohemia through Flavia's death in Florida in 1978 opens the book. With its many reproductions of the artists' work this is an enchanting book about a remarkable Minnesota family. (204 pages, 200 color and black-and-white images, index, \$35 hardcover).

Ralph Rapson's *Sketches From Around the World* is a lively, colorful and highly personal feast for the eyes in its broad appeal for readers interested not only in art and architecture but also in travel and geography. Rapson, now in his eighties, has been known throughout his career as one of the most influential Minnesota architects of the twentieth century and a leader in the practice of modern architecture and design. He is noted for his residences and for such public buildings as the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis and United States embassies around the world.



While this spritely collection offers the readers hundreds of color illustrations—watercolors, paintings, sketches, and renderings of his own work—it also includes many scenes that apparently simply caught his fancy as he traveled—El Castillo, the four-sided pyramid at Chichen Itza, for instance, or the Simplon Pass in Switzerland or a grain elevator in Minnesota.

During the thirty years Rapson was head of the University of Minnesota's School of Architecture, he transformed both the school and the status of the design profession in Minnesota. The new Ralph Rapson Building at the university recognizes his contribution to his profession. Cesar Pelli has contributed the Foreword to the book. (120 pages, \$29.95 hardcover)

Ojibwe: Waasa Inaabidaa (We Look in All Directions) by Thomas Peacock with Marlene Wisuri combines a narrative that captures the realities of historical and contemporary Ojibwe life with black-and-white photographs, artwork, and maps that illustrate it.

In her foreword to the book, Winona LaDuke writes that:

The story—*dibaajimowin*—told here is a story of Indian country. It is the story of land-based cultures and our histories. It is also an amazing and wondrous set of stories told by those who dearly love their history and peoples—a great gift to us all: the scattered and dispersed leaves of our

stories brought together with this generation's faces and living words.

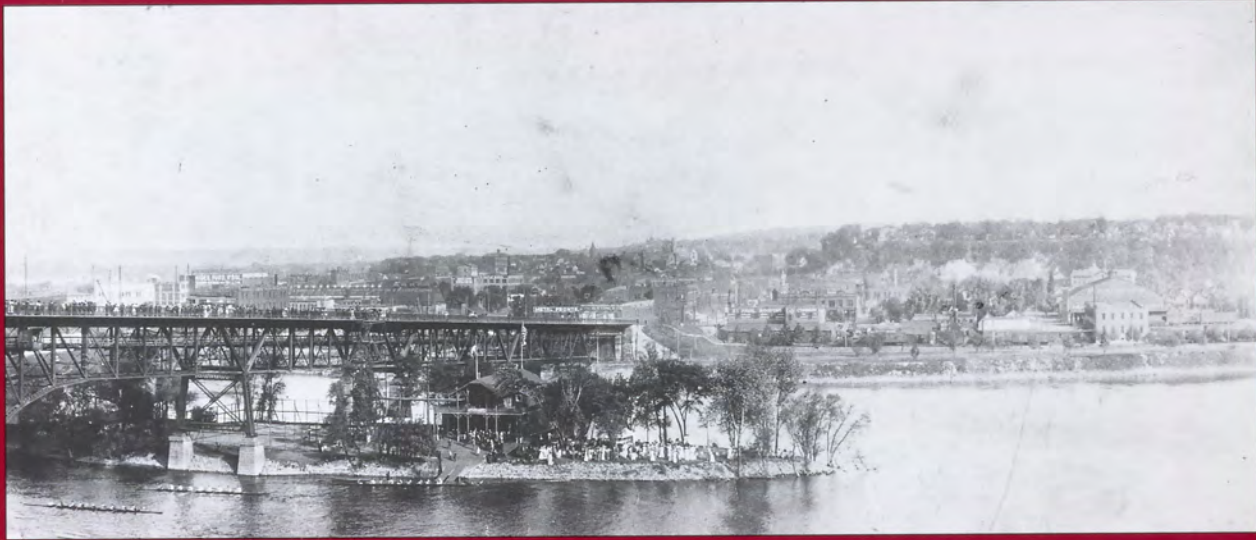
This is the story of the Ojibwe people, the *Anishinaabe*, who lived for thousands of years in the St. Lawrence River valley (present-day Newfoundland) before embarking on a 500-year migration that finally took them to *Moningwunakauning* the place of the golden-breasted woodpecker. Known today as Madeline Island, it is the spiritual homeland of the Ojibwe people who now live in Michigan, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and southern Canada, as well as Minnesota.

This is a uniquely personal story. Peacock's narrative is based on much new material, he notes, and on taped interviews with more than sixty Ojibwe people. He also examines some contemporary issues facing the Ojibwe, such as tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, casino gambling, and education. (160 pages, 200 color and black-and-white images, \$39 hardcover)

American Ruins: Ghosts on the Landscapes by architectural photographer Maxwell MacKenzie and published in 2001, presents thirty haunting photographs of out-of-the-way places in Minnesota, Wisconsin, South and North Dakota, Montana, and Idaho. MacKenzie has exhibited his subjects in eight-foot-long prints in such venues as the American Institute of Architects in Washington, D. C. In the book, however, each duotone photograph is spread across two pages and includes short prose selections by well-known authors and others. For example, the words of Frank Lloyd Wright accompany plate 26 from New Carlisle, Minnesota: "The true basis for any study of the art of architecture is in those indigenous structures, the more humble buildings everywhere that are to architecture what folklore is to literature or folksongs are to music."

This is a book for architectural historians and for photographers, professional and amateur, but it also should draw readers who are attuned to the often-stark landscape of the Upper Midwest (80 pages, \$39 hardcover, \$24 for softcover).

V.B.K.



The Minnesota Boat Club on Raspberry Island below the Wabash Street bridge in 1908. Across the river: St. Paul's west side. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

Address Service Requested

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul, MN
Permit #3989

