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## Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out

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the background of Jesse James, and the lives of other western figures, such as Wyatt Earp, who shared an Iowa connection. The accounts are compelling but disjointed. Some anecdotes about James are related in more than one place in the book, as is a lengthy quotation from James's nemesis, detective Allan Pinkerton.

Koblas reaches his stride when he provides detailed narratives of three robberies attributed to the James Gang in or near Iowa. The first of these was the 1871 robbery of the bank at Corydon, Iowa, while most of the townspeople were away listening to orator Henry Clay Dean. The second was the daytime robbery of a train near Adair in 1873, which, Koblas notes, was not the first train robbery in the West, as is often stated. The third incident involves James's escape through Iowa following the robbery of the bank at Northfield, Minnesota, in 1876. Koblas's meticulous research suggests that little new information remains to be uncovered about these events.

This book represents careful research but, unfortunately, less careful editing. An entertaining read, its lack of focus and historical contextualization and perspective limit its effectiveness.

*Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out*, by Annette Atkins. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007. xvi, 319 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, timeline, index. \$27.95 cloth.

Reviewer Patrick Nunnally, research associate, University of Minnesota, coordinates the Telling River Stories project, which tells stories of how people have shaped the Mississippi River and been shaped by it.

Annette Atkins undertakes a brave foray into the often undervalued field of state history. What identifies the distinctive characteristics of a particular state? Is there anything that marks an Iowan, say, from a Minnesotan or a South Dakotan? Recent historical scholarship has tended not to concern itself with questions such as these, focusing instead on smaller or larger aggregations of population, or on groups defined in ways other than political geography. But Atkins makes a compelling case that close examination of a state's history can indeed be illustrative of many aspects of that state's past that remain important in the present. If, ultimately, her book is not fully satisfactory for all readers, that isn't because it is poorly written or sloppily thought out.

The notion that there can be an "inside out" to Minnesota history, presumes, of course, that there's an "outside in." For Atkins, the traditional biases of state history toward a "march of progress" narrative emphasizing political and economic triumphs unduly narrow the

complexity of lived experience in time and place, and are therefore the “outside in.” Furthermore, the traditional narrative doesn’t really explain what most people’s experience was, say, in the rural nineteenth-century Midwest. Accordingly, Atkins borrows theoretical insights from the folklorist Henry Glassie and posits her narratives as “looking over the shoulder” of historical figures, some well known, others obscure. In the process, Atkins very self-consciously turns her back on a mode of historical writing that seeks to “cover” a previously defined “important” subject or take an incontrovertible position on a matter of historiographical controversy. The reader won’t find some of the most well-known and contentious incidents in Minnesota’s history here.

Instead, Atkins treats her readers to a series of well-crafted, highly particular miniatures, studies of a particular family, person, or community that shed light on critically important large-scale changes characterizing the state, region, and nation. Her writing achieves a specificity and vividness that make her work accessible to non-historians, even non-scholars. For the most part, these miniatures work. Her essay on the Scott Campbell family and its wide net of descendants is one of the best accounts of the mix of family, race, and culture in the turbulent decades prior to the Dakota War of 1862 that I have ever seen. Her treatment of the 1920s follows a fairly conventional historiography of a growing split between urban and rural lives, but her way into this divide, through an examination of historic photographs, is unconventional. She argues that cameras had become inexpensive enough by the 1920s that they were widely accessible and could be used as a lens through which to understand everyday life as well as the lives of the elites who had been photographed for decades.

Ultimately, Atkins’s sketches provide interesting and plausible insights about how particular people in a particular place made a life for themselves in the past. That said, there are some omissions that are interesting, if not puzzling. Between 1880 and 1930, more flour was produced and shipped at St. Anthony Falls on the Mississippi River in Minneapolis than anywhere else in the world. Household brands such as Pillsbury and General Mills had their origins there. James J. Hill’s Great Northern Railroad, headquartered in nearby St. Paul, played an important role in the manufacturing and transportation hub of the Twin Cities that fueled growth across the northern plains. Yet Atkins tells the stories of the 1880s by “looking over the shoulder” of Mary Gillett, an office worker in Red Wing. It’s true that Gillett’s story is illustrative, and perhaps the flour-and-railroad story is so well known as not to bear retelling, but, still, Atkins’s choice of subject invites questions.

And I think that is exactly her intent: to inspire questions about the people and places that have made Minnesota what it is today. Every state should have a history like this, which recalls the WPA guides, sometimes idiosyncratic accounts but always conveying a particular voice and a distinct perspective. Readers don't rely on volumes such as these for "The Truth," but for a way into the complex reality of a state, which is a problematic concept right now. Despite the academic "interrogation" of the term "state," many people think of themselves as "Minnesotan" or "Iowan." A book like this, then, might almost be seen as the start of a wiki on Minnesota history, where others can add the milling material to supplement Atkins's basic perspective.

Annette Atkins may have modeled a twenty-first century state history. But this book isn't for everyone. If readers are looking for the "definitive word" on a subject, or for systematic coverage, then they should consult earlier systematizers such as W. W. Folwell, Theodore Blegen, William Lass, or Clifford Clark. But because those books do exist, there's no need to do them again. For generalists interested in vivid stories and informed reflection on what historical patterns become "Minnesotan," this is your book.

*Minnesota 150: The People, Places, and Things that Shape Our State*, by Kate Roberts. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007. xv, 224 pp. Illustrations, essay on sources, index. \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Kristin Elmquist is a high school social studies teacher in Minnesota. Her background is in cultural anthropology and immigration history.

*Minnesota 150* is the result of an enormous project created to coincide with the state's 150th birthday. The goal was simple: to create a collection of people, places, and things that promoted change within or outside of Minnesota, and display that collection in a book and an exhibit at the Minnesota History Center. The public was invited to submit nominations and make a case for why each choice merited consideration, and the list was narrowed by exhibit planners and historians. The resulting 150 choices range from the general (immigrants) to the specific (SPAM), from the famous (Charles Lindbergh) to the obscure (Frederick McKinley Jones, an African American migrant to Minnesota who invented refrigeration units for trucks). The collection includes events from prehistory (the ancient tropical sea that created the limestone from which the Twin Cities is built) to modern figures (Prince).

Readers may take issue with some of the choices, and that is part of the project's value. The arbitrary nature of the 150 final choices and the