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Poles in Wisconsin

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Poles in Wisconsin, by Susan Gibson Mikós. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2012. 134 pp. Map, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$9.95 paper.

Reviewer John D. Buenker, a native of Dubuque, is professor emeritus of history and ethnic studies at the University of Wisconsin–Parkside. The author or editor of 15 books and numerous book chapters, articles, and reviews, his research and writing have focused on the Progressive Era, especially in Wisconsin.

In his introduction to *Poles in Wisconsin*, John Gurda, the foremost authority on Milwaukee history and the great-grandson of Polish immigrants, opines that this slim volume is “the most comprehensive and even-handed treatment ever published of an ethnic group that has long been one of the state’s most important.” Anyone reading it will be hard-pressed to disagree. Wisconsin has the nation’s highest percentage of people (9.3) claiming Polish ancestry and ranks sixth in total numbers. Milwaukee ranks fourth among U.S. cities in the number of residents claiming Polish roots, while Portage County is home to the nation’s largest rural Polish community. A map of the distribution of Poles in the state in 1920 illustrates those statistics (4).

The text itself is dense; every sentence is packed with valuable information and insights that elaborate on the process by which European Poles became “Poles in Wisconsin.” The author painstakingly delineates the successive streams of emigration, settlement, and assimilation of Poles from Prussia, Russia, and Austria over several decades. She also cogently differentiates their rich intramural diversity from those universal characteristics that define them all as Polish Americans. Adding significantly to the story are two collages of photographs (48–57, 89–100). The first group focuses almost entirely on rural settlements and includes images of Catholic churches, roadside shrines, and family farmsteads. The second consists primarily of Milwaukee neighborhoods and ethnic institutions; it also features the wedding portrait and naturalization papers of Gurda’s great-grandparents.

Capping off this pictorial cornucopia is the portrait of the 1898 wedding of Franciska Wojda to Stanislaw Ślizewski. To maximize the book’s human interest, the author and her husband have appended a 28-page translation of the memoir written by Franciska Wojda’s father, Maciej, in 1928. Arriving in Milwaukee as a 15-year-old immigrant in 1868, Maciej Wodja lived there until his death in 1933. Although he had little formal education, Maciej was “a shrewd and articulate observer with a keen sense of humor,” and “his spontaneous writing style gives the reader a sense of listening to the reminiscences of a kindly grandfather” (102).

About the only problem with Mikós's highly informative and entertaining volume is that it has no footnotes or endnotes. The major source of documentation is a single-page "selected bibliography" of ten books and five articles in scholarly journals. This, unfortunately, makes it difficult for researchers to link up specific material in the text with its source. That aside, this is an excellent study of one of the most important ethnic groups in the upper Midwest.

The Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa, 1929–1933, by Lisa L. Ossian. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011. xiii, 237 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Catherine McNicol Stock is Barbara Zaccheo Kohn '72 Professor of History at Connecticut College. She is the author of *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (1996) and *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (1992).

Wednesday morning, November 9, 1932, brought news of a landslide victory for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose promise of immediate action to help the devastated economy convinced many Americans to vote for a Democrat for the first time in their lives. It also brought a record snowfall to rural Iowa. This forgotten detail, one of hundreds collected and preserved in Lisa Ossian's *The Depression Dilemmas of Rural Iowa, 1929–1933*, reminds us that even the most transformative moments in national or global history are inevitably experienced by individual men and women in one place and one time. Thus, no matter how important it is to see the "big picture," to focus on comparative and transnational accounts, and to understand the past more completely, the foundation of our knowledge must still lie in the small view, the local experience—the snowstorm as well as the landslide. Ossian delivers on her promise to explain how rural people in Iowa managed to "make do" in the early years of the 1930s. Even for readers who believe they already know how hard these times were in the countryside, she presents a sense of place and time rarely crafted with such care elsewhere.

Historians of the Great Depression tend to write about its broad, signature events—the stock market crash, the end of Prohibition, the election of 1932, and the First Hundred Days of the New Deal—from a national perspective, since they affected all Americans. But Ossian turns the tables on the familiar. Rather than simply recount the failures of the Hoover administration, for example, she reveals how the people of his home state, Iowa, who had enthusiastically celebrated his election in 1928, came to terms with his lackluster response to