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Minnesota on the Map: A Historical Atlas

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Minnesota on the Map: A Historical Atlas, by David A. Lanegran, with the assistance of Carol L. Urness. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2008. viii, 215 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

Reviewer Michael Conzen is professor of geography at the University of Chicago. He is the cartographic editor of the *Encyclopedia of Chicago* (2004) and co-author of *Mapping Manifest Destiny: Chicago and the American West* (2007).

The digital revolution in book publishing has brought with it an upsurge in the publication of full-color reproductions of appealing old maps, usually in attractive coffee-table format, that speak of the history of regions and cities from the depths of select cartographic archives. The ease and affordability of high-quality scanning of old images have aided and abetted the rise of lavish visual communication in contemporary culture in general and in this type of atlas in particular.

Historical atlases in the United States have been around since the early days of the Republic, and for most of that time have consisted of newly designed maps illustrating broad historical themes well suited to cartographic interpretation. The current wave of volumes based on reproductions of antique maps offers an alternative to, and perhaps threatens in some ways to eclipse, this tradition. It is much easier to tell history through maps produced by the labor of others than for the compiler to design new maps. *Minnesota on the Map* stands for the new trend in sharp contrast to, for example, *Wisconsin's Past and Present* (1999), published by the Wisconsin Cartographers' Guild, which is a sophisticated — and equally attractive — modern example of the traditional genre.

Intellectually, there is need for both kinds. Maps in the Wisconsin atlas show the spatial structure and repercussions of historical forces on places in ways that no one has thought to map before. Conceptually, therefore, they offer insights into historical processes that can be gained in no other way. The Minnesota collection, on the other hand, shows how society has viewed its geographical setting and responded to it over time through the kinds of maps made. In the reciprocity between environmental learning and human decision making, this perspective also offers much. It is the contribution *Minnesota on Maps* makes to such understanding that marks the book a distinct success.

David Lanegran is a respected cultural geographer at Macalester College in St. Paul who has written on various Minnesota themes past and present. This book presents nearly one hundred selections of old maps and a few views tracing aspects of the state's historical development, drawn principally from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society and the author's private collection. Maps are reproduced

in full color at various reduced scales to fit the page or a double page, accompanied in most cases by insets at larger scales to show intriguing details, as well as a thoughtful commentary that, taken together, average two pages per item.

The maps are grouped in ten topical chapters covering European perceptions of Minnesota, mapping topography, commercial atlas maps, county atlases, the Andreas state atlas of 1874, maps of small towns and cities, transport (mostly highway) maps, maps of the Twin Cities, outdoor recreation maps, and two spectacular modern thematic maps — Marschner's *Original Vegetation of Minnesota* (1974), based on the pioneer land surveyors' notes, and a state map of 1990s land use and cover. The map sequences in each chapter are roughly chronological, though not rigidly so. Chapters vary in scope, treating from two to ten map selections, and each chapter begins with a page or two of introduction. A bibliography of scholarly sources along with a list of maps featured and their repositories round out this elegant book.

For a compendium of this sort, the format is felicitous, being almost square and little larger than a standard hand-held book but big enough to display maps with excellent legibility. While the book's organizational formula is simple — present 98 maps of lively character with discrete mini-essays about each — it is sufficiently filled with interesting sidelights on the state's history to make for satisfying reading and study. The choice of maps encompasses manuscript as well as printed maps, government as well as commercial maps. In its sheer breadth of coverage, from explorers' maps to land surveyors' plats, school atlases to fire insurance atlases, road maps to scientific resource maps and more, the collection reveals the wealth of knowledge about this midwestern state locked up in its historical cartography. The widely contrasting appearance of the old maps will appeal to collector and general reader alike.

Iowa's only historical atlas dates from 1875, embalmed in the pioneer boosterish mindset of the day. Today the state deserves better. Until Iowa can boast a holistic historical atlas filled with creative maps interpreting the state's history on the order of Wisconsin's recent jewel, *Minnesota on the Map* demonstrates quite admirably what simple reproduction of ready-made maps can do for a sense of history. When it comes to Iowa's historical record of mapmaking, who would claim it is any less fascinating than that of Minnesota?