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Review of: Struggling with 'Iowa's Pride': Labor Relations, Unionism, and Politics in the Rural Midwest since 1877, by Wilson J. Warren

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The era during which Cook conducted his year-long adventure was particularly important in the history of the BWCAW, and first-hand accounts such as his bring personal observation and detail to that history. The era of big-pine logging had begun in the wilderness around 1890 but had pretty much ended in the Basswood-Fall Lake area when Cook arrived in 1919. Cook reported, for example, that Winton was practically a ghost town, with the logging company owning most of the boarded-up buildings there. Similarly, he reported the young second-growth forest in the Basswood Lake area after it had been logged, but by the time he reached Cypress (or Otter-track) Lake to the east, he had entered the virgin forest of tall pines that to this day has never been logged. Cook’s adventure ended shortly before Arthur Carhart’s 1922 report to the Forest Service that, among other things, recommended that the area receive some protection as a wilderness; U.S. Secretary of Agriculture William Jardine bestowed the area’s first wilderness designation in 1926, six years after Cook’s departure. It was not until 1936, during the Great Depression, however, that the boundaries of Superior National Forest (first established in 1909) were expanded to include the region covered by Cook’s trapping lines.

Some readers may be squeamish over some of Cook’s descriptions: his raiding of gull eggs to eat, for example, or his proud moment when shooting two timber wolves. His descriptions of trapping and how he and his partners killed various animals may likewise give some readers pause. But such descriptions reflect the reality of Cook’s time as well as the harsh realities of the trapping life. Modern readers will gain an appreciation of some of those realities and times, when Cook had to rely on his own wits and quickly learn skills to survive and when, unlike today, no U.S. Forest Service float planes were available to fly an injured visitor out for medical care. Cook’s tale provides a valuable glimpse back into the history of the nation’s most popular wilderness area and a trapping lifestyle that is now largely gone, at least in the BWCAW.

More careful editing would have provided a better and more accurate context for Trapping the Boundary Waters. Cook wrote of hemlocks several times, for example, yet no hemlocks grow in the BWCAW. In addition, the current name for Iron Mountain Lake, where Cook maintained his main trapping cabin, is Ensign Lake. (The lake is not identified for readers in the text, but one of the maps at the end of the book shows the locations of Cook’s three trapping cabins.) The maps also show roads like the Fernberg Road and Gunflint Trail, which did not yet exist during Cook’s time.

Cook wrote his account around 1953, some 33 years after leaving Winton. The area had changed considerably in the intervening years, much to Cook’s dismay on his return visit in 1953. But the area has again changed dramatically since the 1950s, thanks to a succession of wilderness conservation policies. It has returned much more closely to the wild condition Cook knew in 1920, with the opportunity to again provide wilderness adventures. I’d like to think Cook would approve.

Reviewed by Kevin Proescholdt, co-author of Troubled Waters: The Fight for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. A ten-year guide in the BWCAW, he has worked since 1985 as executive director and now as senior policy director for the Minneapolis-based Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, a nonprofit wilderness conservation organization.

Struggling With “Iowa’s Pride”:
Labor Relations, Unionism, and Politics in the Rural Midwest Since 1877
By Wilson J. Warren
(Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000. 185 p. Cloth, $34.95; paper $19.95.)

Slaughtering and disassembling animals and turning their body parts into food products is messy work. Struggling With “Iowa’s Pride” shows us that such work has been the foundation of a messy industry, one where corporations eat other corporations and also eat and disgorge communities. It doesn’t make for a pretty picture. Maybe there should be a consumer-warning label on this book: “Not for the faint of heart.” This industry (now including chicken and turkey as well as beef and pork) shaped and continues to shape communities across Minnesota and the Upper Midwest. The location of its plants has served as a magnet for rural-to-urban migrants or long-distance immigrants willing to stomach the work in order to earn a paycheck and benefits. Many of the resulting communities have come to be dominated by the corporations of this industry. At times, these communities have been turned upside down by labor-management conflict or by corporate decisions to sell out close down altogether.

Struggling With “Iowa’s Pride” offers readers a long-term view of one community—Ottumwa, Iowa—and its relationship largely with one corporation—John Morrell, and its string of collaborators and successors: AMK, Hormel, Excel, Chiquita Brands, and Smithfield Foods. Together, these corporations made millions upon millions of dollars in Ottumwa and similar communities, pulled out and liquidated their responsibilities, and left human carnage behind. Historian Wilson J. Warren has done all of us a service in excavating and revealing such a story, as it brings us into the inner workings of these processes and offers us a yardstick to employ in examining our own, similar communities.

Struggling With “Iowa’s Pride” places Ottumwa within a typology of “terminal marketing centers,” which empha-
sized beef and relied on skilled labor, much of it from southern and eastern Europe, and “direct buying centers,” which emphasized pork and relied on rural, native-born labor. Ottumwa, and most of the Minnesota and Iowa industry, fell in the latter category (in contrast to Chicago, Omaha, and Kansas City). Warren suggests this led to a pattern of industrial relations that revolved around paternalism (evangelically based, in Ottumwa’s case) and welfare capitalism and was reinforced by the ethnic and racial homogeneity of the workforce and the community. Efforts to organize the workers in these direct-buying centers generally failed before the 1930s, when new industrial unions emerged. Even then, however, these communities gave birth to a distinctive pattern of local or regional unionism (the Independent Union of All Workers, based in Austin, Minnesota, and the Midwest Union of All Packinghouse Workers, based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa), which left a strong imprint of local autonomy on the national union that finally emerged in the 1940s. The struggle to build and secure these unions often provoked intense conflict day-to-day on the shop floor, sometimes breaking out in massive strikes. Once they were established, however, labor relations tended to return to a staid, stable foundation, not unlike their status during the eras of paternalism and corporate welfare.

To be sure, these local unions articulated a strong sense of class that reverberated throughout the communities outside the plant gates, typically divided by railroad tracks (the packinghouse workers on one side, the management and white collar workers on the other), but the consequent class consciousness did not contest the industrial, social, and political order of the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, the union, a disruptive and militant force in the 1930s and 1940s, took a position within the labor-relations apparatus of the plant and the political structures of the larger community.

Of course, the only constant within a capitalist economic system is change, and the newly constructed social order of Ottumwa (and likewise Austin, Albert Lea, Cedar Rapids, Sioux City, and more) was barely solidified before its foundation began to erode. Inside the plant, as total job growth slowed and then reversed in the 1960s and 1970s, technological change undermined the traditional divisions between “men’s” and “women’s” jobs and led to a “battle of the sexes” that soon engulfed the local union and the wider community. In the corporate world, Morrell became a party to mergers, plant closings, buy-outs, spin-offs, diversifications, and conglomerations that threatened job security, pensions, wage levels and job standards. Diverse conflicts—along gender lines, along racial lines, along class lines—exploded. While groups of workers might win some of the battles—such as women gaining access to “men’s” jobs—and some of the battles might galvanize community and even national attention—such as the Hormel strike of 1985–86 in which the Ottumwa workers played a dramatic role—the “war” for safe, secure, well-paying jobs was ultimately lost.

When the dust had settled by the late 1980s, Warren finds, there was “a much more transient workforce . . . as dispirited and soulless as Morrell-Ottumwa’s workforce was militant and powerful during Local 1’s heyday.” In the late 1990s Morrell, now part of a multinational conglomerate, found a legal path out of its economic obligations to Ottumwa retirees and promptly ceased paying life insurance and health benefits with devastating consequences. “It is difficult not to feel anything but a sense of despair,” Warren writes.

But no student of history should ever lose hope or give in to this sense of despair. While I was reading this book (mid-summer 2000), 200 workers, most of them immigrants who did not even speak English, successfully unionized a South St. Paul packinghouse after conducting a one-day sit-down strike to protest line speeds. Inspired in part by the dramatic struggle of immigrant hotel workers in Minneapolis, they reconnected with the 1930s history told by Warren, even if they did not know it. This historian, for one, is sure that there are many more chapters yet to write.


The Ecological Indian: Myth and History
By Shepard Krech III
(New York: W. W. Norton, 1999. 318 p. Cloth, $27.95.)

IN ADDRESSING THE QUESTION of whether American Indian societies were in both ideology and practice protective of the earth’s biological systems, Shepard Krech steps into the perilous ground between myth and history, where the answer is an emphatic yes and no. Postmodern criticism has taught us to be wary of even such established distinctions as “myth” and “history.” How different are they? To Krech’s credit, he recognizes at the outset that history itself is “a metaphor of the past and metonym of the present.” Myth, for its part, may be light on demonstrable facts yet heavy with truth.

Almost from the first trans-Atlantic contact, Native Americans have served as an inspiration and example for European social critics. The “noble savage”—Rousseau’s natural man—appeared as a challenge to the social hierarchies and political tyranny of Europe. That the picture was a caricature of tribal people made it no less crucial to the development of democratic ideology. Today, as industrial civilization threatens the planet with its technological frenzy and commitment to perpetual growth, indigenous societies that lived in intimacy with nature and in rever-