Review of: The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925, by David Montgomery

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the nature and methodology of public land surveying in the United States. As a way of bringing his history up-to-date, Iseninger covered the present-day status of the boundary markers. He concluded that more than half of the original 720 monuments still stand, but many others have succumbed to road construction, vandalism, souvenir hunters, and breakage caused by livestock and equipment. In this connection, one is struck by the lack of provision for some type of boundary maintenance. Unlike the Canada-United States boundary, which is inspected and remonumented as necessary at regular intervals, the North Dakota-South Dakota boundary was surveyed, marked, and forgotten.

Iseninger’s work should increase public consciousness of the boundary monuments as interesting reminders of the area’s past. This book should enjoy a wide readership. It deals with a fresh topic, is well researched, clearly written, and lavishly illustrated. The coverage of Missouri River steamboating and the use of quartzite as building stone is unnecessarily long and detailed for purposes of this history, but overall Iseninger has produced an excellent monograph, which is appropriately related to regional and national themes.

Reviewed by William E. Lass, professor of history at Mankato State University and author of Minnesota’s Boundary with Canada: Its Evolution since 1783 (1980).

By David Montgomery.

THIRTY YEARS AGO, a group of farm and labor activists compiled a “People’s Centennial” collection of essays, marking the struggles and contributions of working people over Minnesota’s first century. Among the authors were such well-known names as Meridel LeSeuer and Irene Paul. While many of the essays were reminiscences and first-hand accounts, one of the more interesting historical studies was entitled “How Gene Debs Stopped the Great Northern,” by one Amos Flaheerty, who is otherwise unidentified.

“Flaheerty” was a pseudonym for a 30-year-old machinist at the giant Honeywell plant, David Montgomery. A graduate of Swarthmore in the late 1940s and a veteran of the American military, Montgomery had learned the machinist’s trade, joined the Communist party, entered a Brooklyn, New York, plant, and became a leader in the militant United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers Union. Ultimately fired and blacklisted on the East Coast, he moved to Minnesota and Honeywell, where “The sense that an injury to one [worker] was an injury to all ran through the whole department with such effectiveness that, in the end, the only way Minneapolis Honeywell could get rid of us was to close the entire division.”

When he lost his job at Honeywell and quit the Communist party, Montgomery decided to pursue the study of American history at the University of Minnesota. He took his experiences with Minnesota workers, labor activists, and radicals to graduate school with him. While the “power elite” model dominated intellectual thinking in the 1960s, Montgomery’s experience refused to allow him to buy into this perspective. His sense of the active role of working people—in shaping their own lives and in shaping society— informed his historical research, research that began to reshape the entire field of American labor history. One theme has united the seemingly diverse topics in his published works to date: “My study of both shop-floor struggles and the Reconstruction period has underscored for me the fact that the working-class has always formulated alternatives to bourgeois society in this country, particularly on the job.”

The Fall of the House of Labor is the mature work of a prominent scholar, now the Farnam Professor of American History at Yale University, and the country’s leading labor historian. It also bears the imprint of the author’s Minnesota experience. While Montgomery has broadened his scope to explore the experiences of unskilled immigrants, African Americans, and women and to probe the role of the state and the local community as well as the shop floor, working-class agency remains the core of his study. The results are most impressive.

This book is full of the rich detail that those familiar with Montgomery’s work have come to expect. Workplace after workplace comes to life, peopled with flesh-and-blood men and women with their own thoughts about how work ought to be organized, their own scale of values about responsible behavior, and a variety of organizations through which they attempted to impose their conceptions. Confronted by management bent on gaining the upper hand, these workers waged some of the most massive battles in the history of American labor. They also fought a less dramatic but nonetheless telling day-to-day struggle over the “frontier of control”—the space that they would control at work vis-à-vis the space that management could control.

The Fall of the House of Labor also offers some fresh perspectives on an overall vision of the direction of social change in America during the first three decades of this century. “Although my specialty is working-class history,” Montgomery once explained, “the subject I am trying to get at is the history of capitalism.” This volume brings his work much closer to this goal and opens up for the reader a window into the working-class impact on the history of American capitalism. It is neither a bemoaning of workers’ exploitation nor a celebration of labor’s “contribution” to American society. Rather, it offers a detailed and thorough look at the depths— and the limits—of workers’ influence on the direction of American society, from the shop floor to the state.

Last fall, many students and scholars of Minnesota history enjoyed a treat when they heard Professor Montgomery deliver the keynote address at the Northern Great Plains History Conference in Eveloth. It was his first visit to Minnesota in many years, and he was in rare form. His talk explored the impact of Iron Range workers on the course of the American labor movement. Those present will need no urging to read The Fall of the House of Labor. But if you weren’t there, this volume offers a golden opportunity to partake of the richness of Montgomery’s work and share in the harvest of the seeds planted three decades ago at Minneapolis Honeywell, in

FROM 1935 to 1943 a team of exceptionally talented photographers traveled across the United States documenting the experience of the Great Depression and World War II. The project was headed by Roy E. Stryker under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration, a New Deal agency concerned with the plight of the rural poor. In 1937 the RA became the Farm Security Administration; in 1942 Stryker and his staff were assigned to the Office of War Information. Following the war, the photographs were deposited in the Library of Congress. Known as the FSA-OWI Collection, the 88,000 captioned prints are housed in 235 file drawers and organized by region and topic.

Documenting America is the definitive study of the FSA-OWI Collection. Through the able guidance of the editors, the history and significance of “this most momentous photograph project ever conceived” is presented in words and pictures. Unlike earlier publications and exhibits that feature the best-known images of Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, and other legendary FSA photographers, this volume is organized by photographic assignment. The result is a work that places them in historical time and provides a rich understanding of how the collection evolved.

By way of illustration, two of the 15 essays feature the work of photographers with Minnesota connections. John Vachon, a native of St. Paul, joined the staff in 1936 as a file clerk and messenger boy. Encouraged by Stryker, he began experimenting with a 35-mm Leica in and around Washington, D.C. His first major assignment was in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1938; of his 208 photographs 29 are featured in this selection, depicting flophouses, an armored car, parade onlookers, and grain elevators (a favorite subject of Vachon). As the FSA project evolved, Stryker had told his staff “to photograph anything, anywhere in the United States . . . that seemed interesting and vital.” Vachon’s pictures of Omaha reflect this artistic freedom so essential to the success of Stryker’s project while also revealing Vachon’s emergence as one of America’s finest photographers. Whenever he returned home to Minnesota to visit his parents, Vachon came armed with cameras and film. His photographs taken in the Twin Cities and around the state are among the best in the FSA-OWI Collection.

Gordon Parks attended various high schools in the Twin Cities. The only black on the FSA staff, he joined the project in 1942. Featured in Documenting America is his series, “Ella Watson, U.S. Government Charwoman.” In Grant Wood style, Parks photographed her in front of an American flag with a broom in one hand and a mop in the other. This famous image is enhanced by his pictures of Mrs. Watson at home, at church, and at work. Vachon and Parks became close friends, and each went on to distinguished careers: Vachon as a senior staff photographer at Look and Parks as Life photographer, filmmaker, television producer, and writer.

Others represented in this collection include Russell Lee, Ben Shahn, Marion Post Wolcott, Jack Delano, Esther Bubley, Marjorie Collins, John Collier, Jr., Lange, Rothstein, and Evans. Unfortunately, the editors were unable to include two others who are recognized as major American photographers: Carl Mydans and Arthur Siegel. Introductory essays provide brief biographical descriptions as well as details about the assignment featured. Six of the 15 series are of the home front taken during World War II.

This is a handsome book with excellent reproductions prepared from the original negatives. An essay by Lawrence W. Levine on photography and the 1930s and 1940s and one by Alan Trachtenberg on “reading the file” offer important interpretive understandings. Especially useful is an appendix, which describes the size, scope, and organization of the FSA-OWI Collection. An index, bibliography, and list of the Library of Congress order numbers complete the volume.

Looking back on the project, Stryker wrote that “We introduced America to Americans.” From today’s perspective, the FSA-OWI photographs are cultural icons that present an America that used to be. In helping our generation appreciate the collection, Brannan and Fleischhauer have selected themes and images that display both the difficult times and the determined response of the American people. This book will be valued by scholars as a significant contribution to the history of photography and of 20th-century America; it will be enjoyed by anyone who loves a good photograph.

Reviewed by Robert L. Reid, professor of history and vice-president for academic affairs at the University of Southern Indiana, who is completing a book for the MHS Press on Minnesota as seen by the FSA photographers.