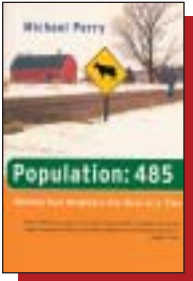


Pop History



Population 485: Meeting Your Neighbors One Siren at a Time

BY MICHAEL PERRY

Perennial Books, New York, NY, 2003. Pp. 256.

ISBN 0-06-095807-3, \$13.95, softcover.

When *Population 485: Meeting Your Neighbors One Siren at a Time*, was first published in 2002, its author Michael

Perry made the usual promotional appearances. One of these was on Wisconsin Public Television, a logical venue since his book is about life in his hometown of New Auburn, in north-west Chippewa County. Unlike other authors, whose standard talk show segments involve a one-on-one interview or a panel discussion, Perry tramped about “Nobburn” on a cold day with a camera operator in tow, offering viewers commentary on the stark winter landscape, and engaging in short discussions with various friends and neighbors. This brief peek into Perry’s life in northern Wisconsin becomes a full view in the pages of his book.

Population 485 combines memoir, local and community history, comedy, and a series of tragedies, all of which result in history at its most powerful, for it is shared by a gifted storyteller, willing to take the reader beyond artifacts and documents, to the real lives that those sources reflect. Although Perry comments on the often quirky nature of small town life, he never treats the people who live there—past or present—with anything but respect.

It is Perry’s understanding of, and real affection for, this community that allows his respect to shine so clearly through his words. He knows that New Auburn is no longer the vibrant place it was generations ago, but he still celebrates the society, as in his first description of it:

. . . We complain about the heat and brag about the cold. Summer is for stock cars and softball. Winter is for Friday night fish fries. And snowmobiles. After a good blizzard, you’ll hear their Doppler snarl all through the dark, and down at the bar, sleds will outnumber cars. . . . The farmers who came to town to grind feed and grumble in the café have faded away. The grand old buildings are gone. . . . But we are not dead here. We still have our Friday-night football games. Polka dances. Bowling. . . . Every day the village dogs howl at the train that rumbles through town, and I like to think they are echoing their ancestors, howling at that first train when it stopped here in 1883.

Perry’s romantic musings about the train’s history are the first of dozens of references to New Auburn’s documented past. Perry is not merely aware of the town’s history, however; he embraces it. After a decade spent away, his decision to return home brings a new view of and curiosity about the place. He discovers that the town’s name comes from the Oliver Goldsmith poem, “The Deserted Village,” and recounts how the community changed names three times before making this poetic choice. In discovering this history, Perry puts his money where his curiosity is. At estate and yard sales, he buys old ledgers from local businesses and a New Auburn Commemorative plate, which lead him to discover that David Cartwright, the town’s founder, wrote a lengthy-titled book about hunting and trapping, which he also purchases from a rare book dealer.

His fascination with his town is not limited to plates and papers. When he noticed that his backyard was sinking, he “grabbed a shovel, a sifter, and a notebook and went archaeological,” digging up and noting bits of glass, cement, and a Jolly Rancher candy wrapper. Although these findings only led to the knowledge that the former owners burned their garbage in the backyard, Perry branched out to sites around town, including one that exposed the log surface of an old corduroy road. Just viewing the road for a few moments led him to think: “I felt a goofy little reminiscent tug when I looked at the yellow paint thinking the last time I saw it exposed to the sun I was probably sixteen and riding my bike home from football practice. Silly, I suppose, but it spoke to the ties between the archaeology of a place and the archaeology of the heart.”

Perry’s affection for place is far from silly, however, for it is equaled by his affection for the people who live there, and, as an EMT with the local rescue squad (hence the siren in the book’s title), he regularly sees his neighbors at their most vulnerable, their most human. These moments are often understandably sad or frightening, yet many contribute the funniest moments in the book. Perry’s ability to balance the range of emotions that he witnesses or feels himself, all the while setting these various scenes against the backdrop of the town’s history, makes this book a success on every level. His sympathetic study reminds his readers that daily life and its neighborly nature are the foundation of all history, and such struggles, grief, and joys are universal, binding us together across time.

—MARGARET T. DWYER
Wisconsin Historical Society

WHAT THEY'RE READING

Ned C. Blackhawk

I can say without too much hyperbole that Richard White's *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) changed my life. I was immediately struck by how it did not limit “Indians” and “Europeans” to being antagonistic actors. Driven west and decimated, various Algonquian peoples rebuilt on the western shores of Lake Michigan a semblance of their former world, in close conjunction with the French, sharing language, family, trade, and diplomacy. This mutually constructed world precipitated the great Franco-Anglo conflicts of the mid-1700s and shaped the tensions between England and her colonial subjects. *The Middle Ground* writes Indians back into their rightful place at the center of this nation's history and it situates Wisconsin in the larger imperial contests remaking North America.



Ned C. Blackhawk is a professor of history at UW-Madison.

Robert Gough

Last year the Milwaukee Art Museum presented Colonial Williamsburg's touring exhibit, Mapping Colonial America. *Degrees of Latitude: Mapping Colonial America* (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2002), edited by Margaret Beck Pritchard and Henry G. Taliaferro, catalogs and explains the exhibit's seventy-three maps. With 159 full-color plates, it is a wonderful book to pick up and read selectively. Taken as a whole, it shows how Europeans gradually improved their geographical knowledge and used maps to dominate North America. For instance, the maps progressively define what is now Wisconsin, going from blank space on a 1592 map to more recognizable shorelines and borders in 1733. They also show how nations represented their territorial claims. In 1718 Wisconsin was claimed as “Partie du Canada ou Nouvelle France,” in 1755 it was divided between French and British territory, but by 1783 it lay within the new boundaries of the United States.



Robert Gough, a professor at UW-Eau Claire, is the author of *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900–1940* (University Press of Kansas, 1997).

Brett Barker

Victoria E. Bynum's *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001) will change the way you think about the Civil War. On one level, the book is about non-slaveholding whites' resistance to the Confederacy, and their creation of a rebellious “Free State of Jones” within the wartime South, led by Newt Knight. But Bynum's narrative touches on more: the history of poor and non-slaveholding whites in the antebellum South; the roots and limits of southern Unionism; and how women, slaves, and entire communities opposed the Confederate war effort.



Perhaps most innovative is Bynum's examination of how this incident is remembered. Newt Knight's children intermarried after the war, confounding definitions of race for the next century, just as the Free State of Jones challenged the myth of unanimous support for the “Lost Cause.”

Brett Barker is assistant professor of history at University of Wisconsin–Marathon County in Wausau, and the author of *Exploring Civil War Wisconsin: A Survival Guide for Researchers* (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2002).

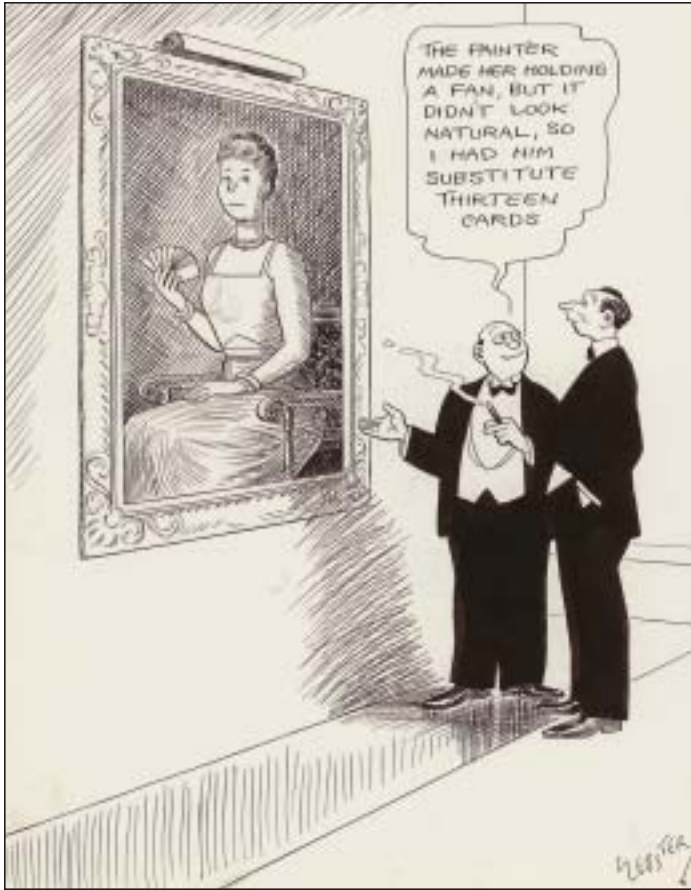
Russell Kirby

Often as I drive across the interstate highway bridge at La Crosse and along the west bank of the Mississippi toward Winona, I reflect on the natural beauty of the river: its seemingly motionless surface and the majestic beauty of the river valley. But just upstream, civilization intrudes on nature, where a lock and dam, together with numerous highway and railroad bridges, disrupt the river's natural flow. *The River We Have Wrought: A History of the Upper Mississippi*, by John O. Anfinson (University of Minnesota Press, 2003) documents these two sides of the Mississippi, explaining how little of the river we see today remains in its natural state, unaffected by human intervention. The book recounts the history of the river as a mode of transport between the Civil War and the culminating nine-foot channel project completed in 1940. By identifying the key personalities and their motivations, Anfinson makes this history accessible and relevant, as the struggle between conservation and economics continues into a new century.



Russell Kirby was trained in historical geography at UW-Madison, and is now a professor of public health at the University of Alabama–Birmingham.

Letters from Our Readers



PH 1301

H. T. Webster's love of bridge was a constant in his work.

Summer 2004, another marvelous issue of the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*; great format, great graphics, wonderful choice of topics, and superbly interesting. In addition to giving us Caspar Milquetoast, H.T. Webster gave all card players the phrase, "Who Dealt This Mess?" Webster and Philo Calhoun are the authors of a book by that title published by Doubleday in 1948. It's a collection of bridge cartoons, with a foreword by Charles Goren, and for those of us playing bridge it's still funny, appropriate, and right on the money. Ask any bridge player how many times he or she asks, sometimes rhetorically, "Who dealt this mess?"

—LONDON RISTEEN
Chicago

Ms. Angela Fritz wrote a well-researched article on the many accomplishments of Lizzie Black Kander in the Spring 2004 issue of *Wisconsin Magazine of History*. Lizzie Black's heritage was attributed to be of English and Bavarian descent. On the 1860 Wisconsin Mortality Schedule, however, Lizzie's grandfather, Herman Black, was listed as having been born in Poland. Her father, John, was listed on the 1860 and 1870 Wisconsin Census as having been born in Poland.

By 1880, John was listed as born in Russia. As you know, Poland disappeared for better than a century and became part of Russia, Prussia, and Austria. The Perles family was from Bavaria but all evidence indicates that the Black family was from Poland.

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Wollersheim Winery, Inc.

Lizzie Black Kander was a definite asset to Milwaukee and deserved such a fine article.

—ARLENE HALE BRACHMAN
Milwaukee

I had to write because of the article on the toy shop at the corner of Milwaukee Street and Michigan Street now called Michigan Ave—"toy loan center."

We were 4 of the 6 children in our family that used the "toy store," weekly—this was the only way we were able to play with "toys"; otherwise my sister would make dolls out of old stockings. We were at the opening day of the toy store—I do not remember the names of the ladies that worked there except that they were very nice and had dark hair. We lived in the 3rd Ward (now called "historic 3rd Ward")—so the toy store was about 4 blocks away. I was 12 or 13 before I got my own real dolls as a Christmas gift—and I still have it and I am now 75.

Your *Wisconsin Magazine of History* is the best book on the reading list for me. My downstairs neighbor buys it so I get to read it.

Thanks

—MARY M. TURDO
Milwaukee



The third annual Wisconsin Book Festival, an initiative of the Wisconsin Humanities Council, will take place this year on October 6–10. The free, public festival celebrates the written word, writers, reading, and books. A wide variety of events will again take place over the five-day gala at numerous venues in downtown Madison, from children's events, storytelling, and exhibits to readings, lectures, discussions, book signings, and other entertainment for all ages. Included in this year's Festival lineup are Wisconsin Historical Society Press authors Jerry Apps and Richard Carlton Haney. More details, times, and locations are available at the Wisconsin Book Festival Web site at www.wisconsinbookfestival.org.

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A ghostly apparition, most likely that of guitar maker Leo Uhlmeyer, sits among wood shavings, meticulously arranged tools of the trade, and the faces of several uniquely shaped instruments in this photograph by Henry F. Bergmann of Watertown taken around the turn of the last century. The shop owner was probably Uhlmeyer, the son of a Bavarian-born woodworker who immigrated to Watertown in 1863. Bergmann executed the trick photograph by beginning a long exposure with Uhlmeyer seated on the chair, then having him leave the scene before the exposure was completed. Bergmann's photographs are now a part of the Society's Visual Materials collection.