

6-1-2010

Book Reviews

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Recommended Citation

Barry, William D., W. Stanton Maloney, Stanley R. Howe, Randall H. Bennett, and Richard Condon. "Book Reviews." *Maine History* 45, 2 (2010): 189-197. <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol45/iss2/6>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Hardliners: A History of the Emery-Waterhouse Company. By Edgar Allen Beem and Charles L. Hildreth, Jr. (Portland: Emery-Waterhouse Company, 2007. Pp. 173. Cloth.)

Our understanding of the shaping of the State of Maine is dependant in large measure on the rise and decline or expansion of various business enterprises. *Hardliners: A History of the Emery-Waterhouse Company* is a case in point. There is a tendency among those in the media and those in academia to ignore or politely overlook such a volume. It is reasoned that a book written by, or for the firm it is about is self-serving and therefore not worthy of serious consideration. Arguably it should be covered for that very reason.

In publications like *50 Years a Truckman* by Paul E. Merrill, the reader is given an enthusiastic, detailed account of the founding and establishment of one of Maine's great transport companies. Of course it is self serving (what book isn't?), but it provides dates, scope of operations, and owners' point of view — all things necessary for future scholars to build upon. Equally useful are the pamphlet studies of local businesses published by the Newcomen Society over the last century. The Harvard Business School Press has also clearly seen the wisdom and utility of publishing important entrepreneurial books, including Leon Gorman's deep-dish *L.L. Bean: The Making of an American Icon* (reviewed below).

Emery-Waterhouse is by no means a household name like L.L. Bean, nor even so well known in southern Maine as Merrill Transportation, but it is a survivor. For natives, the name has an antique ring, although most would be surprised that at the time of this printing the nation's oldest hardware distributor had projected sales of \$118 million: no Mom and Pop operation this, although it began quite modestly in Portland back in 1842. Those who know city architecture are aware of the Emery Block (bearing the dates 1877 and 1930), on the corner of Portland's Middle and Pearl streets. Most, including this reviewer before reading *Hardliners*, would be hard-pressed to name the current locations of the hardware distributor. More importantly, it is a business people

know little about — how it functions and the roles it has played in the local, regional and national economy.

What better individuals to explain the company history than Charles H. Hildreth, Jr., who worked his way up through his family's firm and eventually came to run and expand it, and the able writer-journalist and long-time observer of Maine's cultural scene, Edgar Allen Beem. It was Hildreth's idea to create a written company history by organizing a corporate archive, hiring a first-rate researcher and building a contextual history.

The study opens with a portrait of Daniel Freeman Emery (1801-1891) who founded the company in partnership with Joshua W. Waterhouse. Readers are given the history of the founders and the bustling port, complete with illustrations, maps, documents, bill-heads, and family and company photographs. The book is beautifully designed by Geraldine Millham.

The company was one of many hardware firms in the city. By chance, the Middle Street store survived the Great Fire of 1866, although buildings on either side were reduced to ash. Still, the firm moved to new, larger quarters, and in 1875 historian Edward Elwell called Emery-Waterhouse "the largest in the Hardware line in this city or the State." The Emery family ran the business until the death of Daniel, Jr., in 1929 — the year of the stock market crash. In 1930 the Emery Block burned and was rebuilt. Then in 1933 the new president of the firm, Charles D. Alexander, shot himself and the company was found to be close to insolvency. At this point Charles L. Hildreth (1902-1976), son of a leading local family and graduate of Bowdoin College and Harvard Law School, was talked into buying the firm. For Hildreth it was a way to stay in Maine near his family and turn a fading company around. I will not spoil the book for potential readers, other than to say that this is a mini-tour of Portland and vicinity from the Great Depression to the present. It is well written and packed with information, and it shows how with thoughtful management a small business survived in a world of big national distributors by finding its own niche. Anyone who dismisses *Hardliners* as an exercise in self-indulgence simply hasn't read the book.

WILLIAM DAVID BARRY
Portland

L.L. Bean: The Making of an American Icon. By Leon Gorman. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 2006. Pp. 304. Cloth. \$26.95.)

The L.L. Bean Corporation enjoys a worldwide brand recognition based on outstanding customer service. The corporation also benefitted from numerous articles that reinforced the company's well-earned reputation for good value. Perhaps the author of a 1987 article in *USA Today* did indeed get it right in describing the company as "like family — a mildly eccentric but amiable uncle who lives up in Maine and sends us packages."

In 1960, Leon Leonwood Bean self-published *My Story: The Autobiography of a Down-East Merchant*. The book, a collection of photographs, letters, and text, presented a nostalgic look at the company Bean founded in 1912. The famous L.L. Bean catalog distributed the book. "Sell good merchandise at a reasonable profit, treat your customers as human beings, and they'll always come back for more," was L.L.'s golden rule. In 1912 Bean developed a "new and improved design for a hunting boot with leather upper and a rubber bottom." Bean perfected the boot and added other merchandise, but the company peaked in the mid-thirties and stagnated in the postwar period. In 1960 Leon Gorman, grandson of Leon L. Bean, took over the company, which today sustains annual sales of over \$1.2 billion.

In 2006, at the suggestion of the Harvard Business School, Gorman wrote *L.L. Bean: The Making of an American Icon*. The book provides a candid, behind-the-scenes view of the challenges the company faced and its response. As chairman of the board and former president, Gorman was indeed in a unique position to offer a revealing insight into the evolution of the company between 1960 and 2000. The book is divided into four parts covering the periods 1960 to 1967, 1968 to 1975, 1976 to 1990, and 1991 to 2000. Each mirrors the different roles Gorman played in the growth of the company, as novice, entrepreneur, professional manager, and strategist.

The book is composed of several stories that reveal the challenges facing the company over this forty-year period, beginning with the author joining the company in 1960. During his early years with the company Gorman was left to his own devices. He learned the business "from the ground up," without benefit of a formal training program. Drawing on modern management techniques, he evolved as a manager and a leader.

On another level the author describes how the corporation responded to fundamental changes in American lifestyles, in the role of

women, and in new technologies. Throughout the period, the company attempted to balance the almost mystical links with its iconic founder and the changes in market conditions and competition. A special feature that humanizes Gorman and other managers is the use of “offstage call-outs”: the voices of current and former employees who complement the insights and sentiments of the author.

In 1960 when Leon joined the firm, the company was facing a broad array of problems. Gorman offers an apt description of the situation: the product line was a “hodgepodge”; the catalog print quality and graphics had declined; and the copy was bland and “downright silly.” The company had failed to make necessary investments in internal systems, and the employees no longer possessed the outdoor knowledge that had been so important during the early history of the company. According to Gorman, “reading all of our competitor’s catalogs made me nervous, given how little the people at L.L. Bean knew about the outdoors or about the outdoors business.” However, the L.L. Bean brand and relationship with customers remained strong.

Gorman had a clear vision for L.L. Bean. Equally important was his awareness of what the company was and what it was not: the company sold sports equipment but not sportswear or casual clothing. Gorman launched numerous initiatives to improve operations and expand the catalog business, while at the same time maintaining the company’s status as a privately held family enterprise. Gorman clearly understood the inherent risks in pursuing a multi-channel strategy (catalog, retail, and e-commerce) and avoided this until it made sense from a strategic standpoint and the human and financial resources were in place.

Over the forty years of his leadership, Gorman employed a variety of management tools and techniques to improve and strengthen the company. His first efforts were to establish a budget system and implement a formal planning process that improved control and direction. Subsequently he introduced other programs emphasizing quality and strategy. The author provides substantial information about his expectations for these initiatives. However, it is abundantly clear that the heart of the matter was enhancing the performance of the company.

A key feature of the L.L. Bean story is the success the company achieved as a direct result of Gorman’s leadership. It is also quite clear that other catalog companies were suffering during this period. The L.L. Bean story will serve the general reader as well as the reader looking for a genuine business success story.

W. STANTON MALONEY
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Eminent Mainers: Succinct Biographies of Thousands of Amazing Mainers, Mostly Dead and a Few People from Away Who Have Done Something Useful Within the State of Maine. Compiled by Arthur Douglas Stover. (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House, 2006. Pp. 531. Paper. \$20.)

Maine: Downeast and Different: An Illustrated History. By Neil Rolde. (Sun Valley, California: American Historical Press, 2006. Pp. 288. Cloth. \$32.95.)

Anyone interested in Maine history should own *Eminent Mainers*, which provides brief biographies of more than 1,500 individuals with Maine connections who have achieved varying degrees of fame for their endeavors either in the state or beyond. Many names are familiar — James G. Blaine, Edmund S. Muskie and Winslow Homer — but others are more obscure. For example, Leonard Atwood, born in Farmington Falls in 1845, built the first oil pipeline in the world. Or consider Eliza Tupper Wilkes, born in Houlton in 1844, who became the nation's first female Unitarian minister. These and many more are brought to light by their inclusion in this easy to use reference work. There are also lists of persons with Maine connections who have served as ambassadors, justices of the Supreme Court, members of the U. S. Senate and House, presidents pro tempore of the U.S. Senate, speakers of the U.S. House of Representatives, governors of states, etc. Also included are recipients of the Medal of Honor and the Pulitzer Prize, as well as those who have been awarded other significant honors. In addition, one can find a listing of Maine birthplaces for those included in this work. Some cautions are in order, however. Many of the entries are inconsistent in regard to the information provided. And all of the entries should be checked against other sources to verify their accuracy. There are also omissions that could have easily been corrected by basic research. Nevertheless, this book provides a beginning for those looking to document Maine's leadership in so many endeavors throughout the nation and the world.

In *Maine: Downeast and Different*, Neil Rolde has ventured again to produce an overview of Maine history in a book dedicated to informing both Mainers and those from "away." He attempts to show how far Maine's roots go back in the nation's historical journey — settled prior to Plymouth and other "early" ventures. These antecedents, and the fact that this part of the New World was in contention for several centuries, leads Rolde to argue that Maine's downeast history is distinctive from those of its sister states. Whether he succeeds in this assertion can be ascertained from the evidence cited in Rolde's ten chapters, but the book,

which is profusely illustrated with many engaging photographs, provides the reader with the broad outlines and general contours of the state's past. Rolde also includes a brief timeline of Maine history, a useful index, and a limited bibliography.

STANLEY R. HOWE
Bethel Historical Society

The Rangeley and Its Region: The Famous Boat and Lakes of Western Maine. By Stephen A. Cole. (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House Publishers, 2007. Pp. 127. Deluxe Paperback. \$30.)

Nestled into the northwest corner of Maine close to the New Hampshire border, the Rangeley lakes cover more than sixty-four square miles. As early as the 1840s, out-of-state fishermen discovered the lakes' abundant brook and blueback trout and viewed these headwaters of the Androscoggin River more as inland seas than mere lakes. In response to a growing nineteenth-century sporting culture, a distinctive type of boat known for its durability and ease in rowing evolved in the region. Double-ended, lightweight, shapely, and swift, the Rangeley boat — averaging seventeen feet in length — rapidly became *the* boat favored by area guides and their “sports.” Stephen A. Cole's book about this namesake icon of the Rangeley region conveys how entwined the boat, people, lakes, the town of Rangeley, and the local economy became over a century.

The Rangeley and Its Region takes readers through the “golden age” of trout fishing on these famous lakes and then into a different, but no less significant, era following the introduction of landlocked salmon into these waters by the Oquossoc Angling Association, whose Camp Kennebago (1868), at the junction of the Kennebago River and Oquossoc Stream, still exists today. In fact, the author credits this organization of New York and New England fishermen with creating the prototype of what would become the Rangeley boat. By the 1870s, the bateau-like Umbagog boat and the Indian Rock boat — “lapstraked double-enders with a crude, heavy, beamy quality about them” — had been replaced by the Rangeley, with Luther Tibbetts receiving credit for fashioning the first of this type of craft out of cedar and ash.

A painstaking review of a wide variety of sources provided the au-

thor some fascinating details regarding the handiwork of a score of Rangeley boat builders, among the most prominent of whom were brothers Charles and Thomas Barrett of Weld, Maine. Likewise, the names and activities of many of the guides who made use of the Rangeley boat are included. To round out the story of the unique summer culture that developed in this relatively remote region before World War II, the author delves into the lives of hotel keepers, camp owners, rod builders, and fly tyers. The decline of the Rangeley came after the war when boats of aluminum and fiberglass began to appear. Nevertheless, the Rangeley did not disappear, and well-maintained examples of this hand-crafted boat can still be seen plying the waters in the Rangeley Lakes and beyond.

In a final chapter, the author focuses on the boat-building career of Herb Ellis, the last in the direct line of Rangeley boat builders. In 1938 Ellis purchased the Barretts' shop and continued to produce the wooden boats until 1981. Before his death in 1997, Ellis was interviewed extensively in order to preserve the methods that allowed him to produce fifteen or twenty Rangeleys per annum when "on a dead run." This chapter also contains line drawings and plans for one of Ellis's boats.

The text is complemented by an excellent assortment of photographs, with many images coming from the files of the Rangeley Historical Society and the Maine Historic Preservation Commission. These images document the popularity of the Rangeley boat as it was used for fishing and hunting activities throughout the region. The author also adds a selection of vintage newspaper and magazine advertisements that help capture the flavor of "sporting" on the Rangeley Lakes during the heyday of this famous boat.

The Rangeley and Its Region is as well-crafted as the sturdy, highly-functional boats that are its subject matter. Anyone with an interest in sportfishing, boatbuilding, guiding, and the mystique of a much-loved sportsmen's paradise in the highlands of western Maine should own this book.

RANDALL H. BENNETT
Bethel Historical Society

Voyages: A Maine Franco-American Reader. Edited by Nelson Madore and Barry Rodrigue. (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House Publishers, 2007. Pp. 606. Paper. \$30.)

Barry Rodrigue, with co-author Dean Louder, introduces *Voyages* with a masterful *tour d'horizon* called "Renaissance: Franco-Maine in a New Millenium." The editors remind us that French explorers and settlers, beginning with the founding of Ste. Croix Island in 1604, came to Maine before any other Europeans. Four centuries later, the French are Maine's largest ethnic group; moreover, "Maine is arguably — in relative terms — the 'most French' of the United States."

Despite all this, Maine's Franco community underwent decades of economic and social marginalization, discrimination in custom and law, and neglect by Maine's historians. Since the 1960s, however, a multifaceted "renaissance" has gathered strength. Rodrigue summarizes this admirably, but the more than five hundred pages that follow his essay document it. They include historical essays, biographies, autobiographies, novel fragments, poetry, political analyses, songs, and recipes (for *tourtierre* and *ployes*). The selections are arranged in a loosely chronological order, with essays on such topics as the seventeenth-century Acadian frontier, eighteenth-century Abenaki-French relationships, and the late nineteenth-century migration to Lewiston leading the way. At the other end are pieces on the Franco-Americans in contemporary Maine politics, modern poems and memoirs, and words and music to a French-language blues song.

Following the text is a major bonus: a forty-page bibliography of valuable French- and English-language sources, including theses, interviews, and internet sites, as well as important but not commonly known books and articles. Two other excellent features are short but informative profiles of each of the contributors and a substantial index. Many well-chosen and well-reproduced illustrations add to the book's value.

All of the seventy-odd selections are worth reading, but here are a few that this reader especially liked. One is an excerpt from *Canuck*, a novel by Camille Lessard-Bissonette written in 1936 for Lewiston's French-language newspaper, *Le Messenger*. The section chosen brings the Labranche family from Quebec to Lowell, Massachusetts, and follows them to work in the mills and home to their tiny, dirty apartment. The editors preceded it with an introduction by Linda Pervier, and followed it with an appreciation by Sylvie Charron and Rhea Côté Robbins, which tell us more about the author and the significance of *Canuck*.

C. Stewart Doty's "How many Frenchmen does it take to . . . ?" plays on the vogue of racist, mean-spirited jokes to highlight discrimination in employment and within the Roman Catholic Church. It traces the pervasive nativism of America in the 1920s home to Maine, demonstrated by the rapid growth of the Ku Klux Klan, and it notes the prejudice in academic circles. Doty himself, during his years of teaching and researching at the University of Maine, did much to overthrow these stereotypes in a series of valuable articles and books.

Most of the readings emphasize the tensions of living in a society and culture dominated by a powerful "other." The theme dominates Raymond Luc Levasseur's "Short Autobiography for my Daughter," written in 1976 when the thirty-year-old Sanford native was hiding from federal authorities. He grew up poor in a mill town, served in Vietnam where he was radicalized, went to prison on drug charges, and became a revolutionary there. Released, he joined an "underground unit" engaged in "armed attacks against the state." Finally arrested in 1984, he served twenty years. Ross and Judy Paradis ("The Silent Playground") remind readers of a forgotten and discreditable chapter of state history: the 1919 law, finally repealed fifty years later, that prohibited the use of French in public schools outside of high-school French classes. The law bred "resentment and mediocrity"; pupils who "told on" others who spoke French on the playground were rewarded for it. When Department of Education inspectors arrived at St. John Valley schools, the playgrounds were silent because the children didn't dare to speak French and would not give in by speaking English.

Michael Parent, born in Lewiston and now a "story-teller, singer, writer, and sometimes actor" in Portland, recounts his own odyssey from denying his roots to "giving performances and producing materials grounded in that culture." His grandparents' and father's work and examples changed him, he says: "their primary job was to survive in a place where they never truly belonged. Because they did that job so well, I've had the capacity and the opportunity to swim in the U.S. mainstream and in my Franco-American birthstream. And I honor my tribe with every stroke." A fitting end to a fine book!

RICHARD CONDON
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