



January 30, 2008

To the AASLH Award of Merit Committee,

DEPARTMENT OF
HISTORY

I write to recommend the Award of Merit for Annette Atkins in recognition of her outstanding achievement in setting a new standard for writing a state history.

We are fortunate that nearly every state has a good state history; several have excellent ones. Without such volumes on our shelves, nightstands, and libraries we cannot begin the many different kinds of projects that make state and local history so exciting and so important. The best of these books, like Annette's, make us think deeply and in new ways about a past we sometimes think familiar.

The first significance of Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out is that it pulls Minnesotans into their history in a novel and persuasive way. Annette has eschewed the standard goals of chronological coverage and traditional formats for case studies--carefully chosen stories, really--that bring the state's events, tensions, and joys close to the reader. Always on center stage are the people and their experiences as Minnesotans. With telling details, Annette reveals how people thought about their particular time and place and about the society and cultures around them. One St. Paul family's Christmas celebration in 1898, for example, becomes a vehicle for her to show in fascinating detail how fresh oranges appeared under their holiday tree. It's a story that at first glance appears inconsequential but by the second page packs immense learning and understanding. There are familiar subjects too, as, for example, the tribulations of the Dakota Wars, and familiar people, as with Hubert Humphrey, but Annette has turned the lens to make the familiar new and to reveal the particulars and commonalities of one Midwestern state.

Because the writing is so smooth and engaging, some readers may not realize the sophisticated conceptualization that forms the framework of Creating

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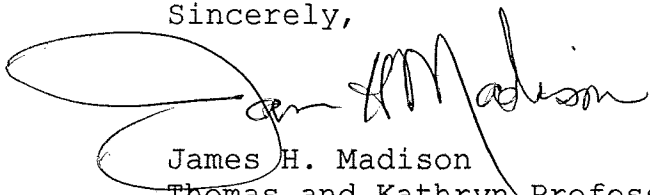
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Minnesota. And they may not realize the immense and creative use of primary sources. Paging through the photo essay, titled "The Look of the 1920s," for example, will suggest the outstanding achievements in both research and conceptualization. So will the imaginative way Annette uses the walleye fish to reveal the distinctiveness of this state's customs and traditions and their continuing evolution and diversity.

Creating Minnesota is a model for state history. Historians in the other 49 will want to read this book before writing, teaching, or presenting their own state's past. Of course, there are profound differences among the states, but Annette has pioneered methods and techniques relevant to the history of any state or region. Her innovations and contributions apply not only to written history but also to museums, documentaries, curricular materials, and other forms of presenting the past.

I remain proud of my own effort to write state history (The Indiana Way), published twenty years ago. But reading Creating Minnesota convinces me that my book is out of date. I have begun thinking of a new version, one in which I will gratefully acknowledge the many ways in which a book about Minnesota helped me think and write about Indiana.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James H. Madison". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

James H. Madison
Thomas and Kathryn Professor of History