

South Dakota is fortunate to have *County Capitols*. Iowa, with its longer history and larger number of county courthouses, has an even greater need for a similar publication.

Americans Recaptured: Progressive Era Memory of Frontier Captivity, by Molly K. Varley. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014. ix, 230 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Greg Olson is curator of exhibits and special projects at the Missouri State Archives. He is the author of "Tragedy, Tourism and the Log Cabin: How Abigail Gardner Sharp and Charlotte Kirchner Butler Preserved and Promoted the Past" (*Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, 2001).

As a literary genre, captivity narratives are deceptively simple. On the face of it, the facts that make up these stories of European Americans — usually women — who were taken captive by Native people, seem standardized and straightforward. Hostile Indians attack a frontier settlement, kill settlers, and take hostages. After living for some time in captivity and away from "civilization," the captives are released. Upon their release, many relay the story of their captivity to a curious audience.

Yet, as several historians and literary critics have pointed out over the years, these narratives are not only nuanced, but they have also proven to be surprisingly malleable as each new generation of Americans molds them to suit their needs and ideals. Early Puritans tended to see captivity narratives as religious parables of faith and redemption. In the nineteenth century, the stories evolved into sensational melodramas written to satisfy the prurient interests of readers hungry for romance and action.

Now, in *Americans Recaptured*, Molly K. Varley looks at the role captivity narratives played during the Progressive Era (1890–1916). That period is largely uncharted territory for students of the genre primarily because, by 1890, the so-called Indian wars were over and Native people no longer constituted a physical threat to the dominant society. Captivities had ceased, and America's frontier period had ended. As Varley points out, the closing of the American frontier and the rise of urban industrialization led to an identity crisis for a young nation that had always taken pride in being a place where character was shaped by hardship, perseverance, and struggle. If Americans were no longer a people who had to fight with nature (and an indigenous population) to domesticate a vast continent, who were they? City dwellers? Factory workers? Wage earners? How would immigrants who had not experienced the frontier become Americans? To many, the prospects seemed troubling.

In *Americans Recaptured*, Varley argues that, during the Progressive Era, captivity narratives played an important role in forming a new national identity as Americans, eager to maintain a connection with their pioneer past, repurposed the tales for a new age. To support her argument, Varley looks at captivity narratives that were republished or revised after 1890. She also examines monuments and memorials that Americans dedicated to captives during that same period. Although she mentions more cases, Varley looks most closely at the narratives of captives Mary Jenison, Francis Slocum, and Abigail Gardner Sharp. Iowans, of course, will be most familiar with the case of Sharp, one of two survivors of the incident commonly known as the Spirit Lake Massacre, which took place in March 1857.

According to Varley, these women served as both role models and metaphors for the process of transformation that every European immigrant had to undergo in order to become a true American. In fact, the author calls captives like Sharp “quintessential Americans” (89) because they had experienced “Indianness” firsthand during their captivities and had returned to white civilization. As scholars like Phillip DeLoria have pointed out, we have long idealized Indianness and have made that ideal an important part of our national identity. Yet, ironically, we have never been able to fully accept Indianness in Native Americans. Instead, we celebrated and commemorated it in these captives because they understood the importance of the ideal as it applied to white America.

This small book is dense with many more facets of the case Varley has laid out than I can fully examine here. Suffice it to say that she explores the importance of local histories, Theodore Roosevelt, Prairie Madonnas (which Varley refers to as Manly Mothers), memory, and historic preservation in connecting Progressive Era Americans to their pioneer roots. Sometimes her writing is somewhat unclear and not as well organized as I would have liked, but I appreciate what Varley has undertaken here. I was especially intrigued to see the way she reframed the case of Abigail Gardner Sharp. Historians have sometimes dismissed Sharp as an anomaly because her captivity took place late in the period of westward expansion and the first edition of her memoir (*The Spirit Lake Massacre*) did not appear until 1885. By linking Sharp with the concerns of the Progressive Era, Varley offers us a new and compelling vantage point from which to view her post-captivity life and crusade. It is one that future scholars considering Sharp’s legacy would do well to consider.