Wisconsin's Past and Present: A Historical Atlas
Consulting Editors: Ingolf Vogeler and John G. Holzhueter.
Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
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Reviewed by
Georges Cravins and Gregory Chu
University of Wisconsin - La Crosse

Perspective and Overview

Before evaluating this particular atlas, a brief assessment of previous efforts to produce a state atlas should be undertaken. Despite deep-rooted commitments by the Wisconsin state government and the University of Wisconsin to the field of cartography, no person or institution has heretofore made an effort to produce a genuine state atlas. Wisconsin is one of the few states that does not have a complete and comprehensive state thematic atlas. Major individual efforts in the past have included the Atlas of Wisconsin (Robinson and Culver, 1974), which emphasized only topographical and selected urban settings, and Collins' Atlas of Wisconsin (1968), which addressed some physical and cultural themes. Unfortunately, many of the maps in the Collins atlas were poorly designed as well as outdated.

The University of Wisconsin Press has been publishing individual theme-specific atlases and sheet maps in recent years, including The Cultural Map of Wisconsin, the 1997 volume Wisconsin Land and Life, the recent Atlas of Ethnic Diversity in Wisconsin, and this present atlas. Each of these atlases undoubtedly represent valuable resources for the state. However, important topics such as the environmental well being in the state of Wisconsin has not received in-depth and detailed attention in any atlases, nor have important topics such as demography, economics, natural resources, manufacturing, agriculture, public health, employment, and education. To the present reviewers, it would appear that the State of Wisconsin should consider funding more ambitious efforts, such as the production of a complete thematic atlas that truly reflects all aspects of the domain that is Wisconsin.

This particular historical atlas was funded and published in celebration of the Sesquicentennial Celebration of Wisconsin. The subject matter and the superb cartography alone will make this atlas standout as an excellent atlas in its own right. Combinations of photographs, tables, diagrams, and attractive maps collectively integrate this atlas into a very effective pedagogic media. Wisconsin's Past and Present: A Historical Atlas, was officially released on Statehood Day, May 29, 1998.

These reviewers wish to adopt two different approaches to the evaluation of this important atlas. The first approach will be based on the structure and the content of the atlas and the second approach will be to assess its cartography.

Overall Assessment

The Atlas combines art, geography and history in an effort to graphically represent historical change in Wisconsin from the mid-1800s to the late 1990s. It is a beautifully-illustrated work which focuses on regional settlement patterns, the major configurations that resulted in the development of Wisconsin as we know it today, critical features of the physical landscape, and more prevalent aspects of politics and people.

The atlas consists of three main sections which are titled “Peoples and Cultures,” “Land and Economy,” and “Society and Politics,” respectively. In terms of content and its value as a relatively new contribution, the most original and comprehensive is the “Peoples and Cultures” section. Of equally great value are the illustrations depicting the conformation of distinct populations to particular parts of the land, and the evolution over time of the region as a recognized political entity.

Wisconsin's Past and Present is supported by a forward with the title “Learning to See the Past That is
All Around Us,” written by William Cronon of UW-Madison. An Introduction whose authorship is attributed to the Wisconsin Cartographers Guild, the collective of contributors which produced the Atlas, outlines the work’s perspective and scope, and provides an essential explanation of some of its understandable limitations. In addition, the authors use the Introduction to show that — as a tool to understanding Wisconsin’s past — the Atlas in but one tool of many. To better understand the state, the Atlas should be viewed as part of an armory of informational resources, along with additional historical volumes recently published by the University of Wisconsin Press and other publishers. Serious students of Wisconsin should also use historical sites, replicas of earlier settler life, and state sponsored libraries and archives as resources.

Peoples and Cultures

The authors of the atlas adopt a broad, inductively-based view of peoples and cultural groups which passed through or settled permanently in Wisconsin. This gives the work an objectivity which is woefully lacking in the deductive, politically-inspired “diversity” approach. Major themes include the human presence in what is now Wisconsin before and after European contact. In both the pre and post-European periods, the region witnessed a succession of settlement by various nations competing for resources. In the aboriginal period, nations competed for specifically-defined geographic spaces and the natural resources these contained. Distinct identities occupying discernible territory through negotiated agreements was the norm. In the period since European contact, the region has been homogenized into an Anglo-American culture with continuing evidence of roots in aboriginal sources, the British Isles, and central and Western European.

The atlas presents significant detail on the aboriginal peoples who inhabited what is now called Wisconsin. In addition, in the contribution on American Indians, the authors make the necessary links to native peoples — such as the Oneida — which were forced out of New York and given land in Wisconsin.

The archeological record suggests that aboriginal peoples which evolved into what became known as American Indians first inhabited what is now Wisconsin about 12,000 years ago, following the recession of the glacial ice sheet. At the of the first French forays into the region, Lakota-speaking people -- including the Sioux and the Ho-Chunk, were the dominant elements. Among Wisconsin’s native peoples who inhabited before European conquest, Algonquin-speaking Omaeqnominniwuk (“Menominee”) lived for millennia alongside the Siouxian Dakota and Ho-Chunk. Many other American Indian nationalities which have come to be associated with Wisconsin -- including the Ottawa (Odawa), the Fox (Meskwaki) and Kickapoo -- moved to Wisconsin during the period of European settlement of the what is now the U.S. and Canada as a result of shifts resulting from European encroachment, particularly in the New York, Ontario and Quebec. For example, in the wars unleashed by the French fur trade, the Haudenosawnee (Iroquois) confederacy forced numerous native nationalities from their eastern homelands. Many moved westerly in search of new lands.

The absorption of Wisconsin into the United States in the 1800s formalized the status of native peoples and vastly limited their range within the region. Through a succession of treaties, all of the Native American groups were assigned specific reserves or — like the Ho Chunk — were given small parcels of land which limited their rights to natural resources and their freedom of movement.

The Cartography of Wisconsin’s Past and Present

The overall graphic quality of the maps is very high. For most of the maps, the one striking characteristic is their clarity. The cartographers of this atlas have skillfully used low percentage area tints throughout the atlas this design technique contributes not only to the sharpness of the lines and the clarity of the maps, it also makes the maps much more pleasing to look at and easy to read. Because the subject matter is essentially the history of the State, there are more maps based on qualitative descriptions than quantitative portrayals. Design techniques differ between qualitative maps and quantitative maps and the cartographers have properly portrayed information for both types of maps correctly. The authors must be commended for their methods in portraying such historical records in spatial formats that required a lot of care and thoughtfulness.

The maps are not without flaws in their design. The computer age has provided cartographers with the power to maneuver graphics in more fancy ways than ever. Much more cartographic research needs to be performed to determine whether these graphics are appropriate for use on maps. A very easy maneuver is the use of "fountain fills", meaning that a color can change in intensity either linearly, radially, or according to the shape of an area. While fountain fills
can be graphically pleasing to look at, they must be used extremely carefully in harmony with the map data. Fountain fills are found on maps on page 33 (Key Cultural Figures), page 47 (Great Fires of October 8, 1871, and 1871 Peshtigo Fire), and page 61 (Deer Per Square Mile, 1961). Of these four maps, the use of fountain fill is appropriate only for the 1871 Peshtigo Fire map as it truly suggested the origin of the fires and their spreads. Fountain fills for the maps on pages 33 and 47 are meaningless, but provide a negative effect in the difference in background contrast in relation to other maps symbols. The use of fountain fill for the Deer Per Square Mile map is really against cartographic principles: while the data are quantitative in nature, the intensity of color varies within polygons which are meant to be homogeneous according to the data classification scheme in the legend.

The second most frequent design disagreement (some cartographers may call it a flaw) is the use of blocks of typography over the surface of the maps, such as those on pages 41, 46, and 60. This follows the exact same design principles as the Cultural Map of Wisconsin. Lettering on maps generally ought to be short and limited only for place names while the spatial arrangement of map symbols serve the function of showing geographic patterns. The use of large amounts of blocks of texts on maps defeats the purpose of making the map, which is to show the distribution of things. In these examples, blocks of lettering are crowding the map, the map reader is refrained from being able to see the intended geographic patterns.

The overall cartographic quality should be highly praised. There are some very innovative ways of using point symbols, as evidenced by maps on pages 33, 41, 43, and 52. Mimetic point symbols are direct results of what computer graphics can provide to cartography and the cartographers have applied them well. The quality of the map is indeed indicative of the long-standing traditional cartographic excellence that has been associated with the University of Wisconsin cartography program.

Overall, the value of this work as cartography and as historical documentary will withstand the test of time. It will undoubtedly constitute a valuable resource at both and individual and institutional levels for many years to come and is a solid contribution that can only enhance rather greatly the collection of resources on the state of Wisconsin.

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Dr. G. Cravins is a Professor in the Department of Geography and Earth Science, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and the Editor of the Wisconsin Geographer. Dr. Gregory Chu is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography/Earth Science, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. His interests include both traditional and computer-aided cartography and GIS applications. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Hawaii in 1986.