

A Short History of Wisconsin

Erika Janik

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In 1910, voters in Milwaukee, the largest city in the State of Wisconsin, elected Emil Seidel the first Socialist mayor in the United States. Equally significant, that year they sent Victor Berger to Congress as the first Socialist congressman.

Another big year in Milwaukee was 1845, which saw the creation of the Milwaukee Curling Club, now the oldest curling club in continual existence in the United States. And in 1919, Earl “Curly” Lambeau and George Calhoun organized the Green Bay Packers, which went on to win more league championships than any other professional football team.

This is but a sampling of the many facts and stories that are entertainingly told in *A Short History of Wisconsin* by Erika Janik. The author does a commendable job of bringing the history of Wisconsin to life and filling it with meaning. A freelance writer whose first book was *Odd Wisconsin: Amusing, Perplexing, and Unlikely Stories from Wisconsin’s Past*, Janik skillfully interweaves the events that occurred in the Badger State with the bigger story of historical events in the United States. For instance, she relates how the work of economists at the University of Wisconsin was developed by President Franklin Roosevelt’s administration into what became a national system of unemployment compensation and retirement benefits.

Janik’s account of the social and political development of Wisconsin is one of the strongest parts of her book. Her brief treatment of the Progressive era in Wisconsin and the influence of Robert LaFollette on both state and national politics is clear and detailed.

A Short History of Wisconsin is thorough and completely self-contained. It tells its story from beginning to end in a comprehensive yet breezy manner. Equally important, however, the book is an invitation to the reader to delve deeper into Wisconsin history. In that regard, the best chapter is the last, titled “Essay on Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading.” Here Janik tells the reader where her research took her and where the reader can go to discover more about the topics and people contained in the book. If you want to know more about Fighting Bob LaFollette, Janik points the way.

Janik even manages to explain how Wisconsin became known as the “Badger State.” Just let it be said that the name comes not directly from the animal, but from the 1820s and 1830s when a part of what was to become the State of Wisconsin was a significant lead mining area.

A Short History of Wisconsin will appeal not only to history buffs, but to those who take an interest in how history can be made accessible to general readers.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (July 30, 2010)

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