

The Gag Family: German Bohemian Artists in America

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One of children's author Wanda Gág's favorite sayings was: "There are times when it is necessary to do the impossible." The artist, who lived from 1893 to 1946, is a central figure in this family biography. She followed her own advice as readers will discover in this thorough examination of life as a member of the creative Gág (pronounced gog) family of New Ulm, Minnesota.

The father, Anton, immigrated with his own family from Bohemia (now a part of the Czech Republic) to St. Paul in 1873 when he was fifteen. The author, chair of the Liberal Arts Department at St. Paul's College of Visual Arts, writes that Anton never forgot his roots and passed Bohemian traditions—like love of family, nature, and music—on to his children. A struggling painter and photographer, Anton eventually moved to New Ulm, a utopian community founded twenty-five years earlier by a group of German immigrants. L'Enfant traces his life here and his marriage to Lissi Biebl, whose family also came from Bohemia.

The Biebls' farm, which the Gágs affectionately called "Grandma's Place," was to greatly influence later artistic efforts. The Gág children numbered seven: Wanda, Stella, Nelda, Asta, Dehli, Howard, and Flavia, born one year before their father's untimely death in 1908 at age fifty.

Some of Anton's best-known work includes paintings of the August 1862 attack on New Ulm during the Dakota Conflict and the grand fresco behind the altar at the city's Cathedral of the Holy Trinity. L'Enfant notes that it was completely in his character to paint several angels with the faces of his children.

On his deathbed, he urged Wanda to continue his work. Solely responsible for her siblings after the death of their mother a few years later, the young woman nevertheless carved out a life for herself as an artist. Most of the family followed her to New York City and its environs. She and her common-law husband eventually bought a farm in New Jersey, dubbing it "All Creation."

Nearly all of Wanda's children's books, which she wrote and illustrated herself, were commercially successful and nominated for the Newbery Award. She died of lung cancer at age fifty-two. Youngest sister Flavia picked up the artistic gavel and she, too, produced books and drawings for the juvenile market.

This extensively researched family history is richly illustrated with photographs that enhance its wonderful text. (September / October 2002)

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