

Women's History/Women's Work in St. Louis County

By Susan Schwanekamp, Executive Assistant, Traveling Exhibits Coordinator and *Rootprints* (Society Newsletter) Editor

Women's history at St. Louis County Historical Society is a subject – a very large subject – that is woven into almost every collection the Society owns and is at least in the background of every historical presentation and every exhibit. Women, after all, constitute about half of the world's population and half of the population of St. Louis County. Women were half of the immigrants from Europe who made their way to northeastern Minnesota in the 1800's and early 1900's. Without their labor in the homes, raising their families, maintaining their homes, working outside their homes to the extent the social structure of the day permitted for survival, in some cases, and in other cases to help with their families' survival, the entire fabric of life could not have been maintained and certainly the many ethnic communities in Duluth and on the Iron Range could not have grown and flourished.

Women also comprised half of the native population, mostly Ojibwe, who were living in this area, as elsewhere in the country, when these European immigrants arrived. There, too, they were active contributors to the social fabric and to the survival of their people. The Society's new Ojibwe Gallery, now basically complete in construction, will have exhibits – Eastman Johnson art work and Ojibwe artifacts – installed and will then open Spring/Summer 2014. Eastman Johnson, a nationally prominent painter of his time, is known in the collection of his work owned by the Society – 37 oils and charcoals - for his realistic portrayals of the Ojibwe people who lived in Grand Portage and in the "Head of the Lakes" region, that is, what is now Duluth and Superior. The Minneapolis Institute of Art has other works, as do other prestigious museums throughout the United States. There are many women in these works! Also, many if not most, of the Ojibwe artifacts were created by Ojibwe women, such as the beadwork.

Last summer, the Society was fortunate to have an intern from St. Olaf College, Sierra Napoli, from Proctor, Minnesota, work on first a very successful event and then on creating an exhibit which will ultimately join the Society's Traveling Exhibits Program. The event was "Polka! The Movie", which featured a Cleveland-based writer and historian who commented on his documentary on Slovenian polka. Sierra then turned her efforts to producing an exhibit about the lives of Italian women immigrants on the Range. As a descendent of Italian immigrants who came to Ellis Island in the early 1900s and were then drawn here by the mining boom, she brought an innate strong interest and extensive acquired knowledge to the project. She is a double major in History and Sociology/Anthropology, with a concentration in Women's and Gender Studies. Sierra states that with her combination of studies, she came to the Society in search of a more balanced history.

She spent a lot of time researching the subject, as well, through the assistance of the Hibbing Historical Society's museum and through the Iron Range Research Center. What resulted from the use of these documents and artifacts was essentially what Sierra started out to do, which was an attempt at an accurate description of the life of a Hibbing immigrant woman around the turn of the century, focusing on her additions to the family dynamic and contributions to the cultural and religious wealth, not to mention economic wealth, especially indirectly. Francesca Napoli (Talarico), Sierra Napoli's paternal great grandmother, who was born in the Calabria region of Italy in 1887 and entered the United States at New York City in 1910, became the center of the exhibit. The Society plans to open this exhibit, entitled *To America, with Love*, in February 2014. After this, it will become a traveling exhibit, probably moving next to the Hibbing courthouse. Please watch our website, www.thehistorypeople.org for further details about the opening.

We think that this exhibit was a successful beginning to "sharing the stories that have never been heard" and need to be heard, that is, the stories of the women of St. Louis County. Much work remains to be done and we invite your ideas and volunteer efforts, perhaps through an internship, to accomplish this.

The Society is currently in the beginning stages of work on a large mezzanine level (of the St. Louis County Heritage & Arts Center – the Depot) exhibit which will focus on the children of immigrants and on the family life of these immigrants. Parts of this exhibit will be "interactive", such as a smaller-scaled model of a Finnish dove-tailed cornered log cabin. Kim Schandel is the content developer for this exhibit and Gordon Manary is the fabricator. Kim is very enthusiastic about the project, which is a natural extension of the work she did on the Immigrant Waiting Room's renovation in early 2013. Kim became a "woman of all trades" on that exhibit, doing most everything from research and text writing, photo gathering and other creative components of exhibit production to scrubbing layers of grime from the entryway to the shower room, to reveal the natural flooring. Again – "women's work" in action in 2013/2014!