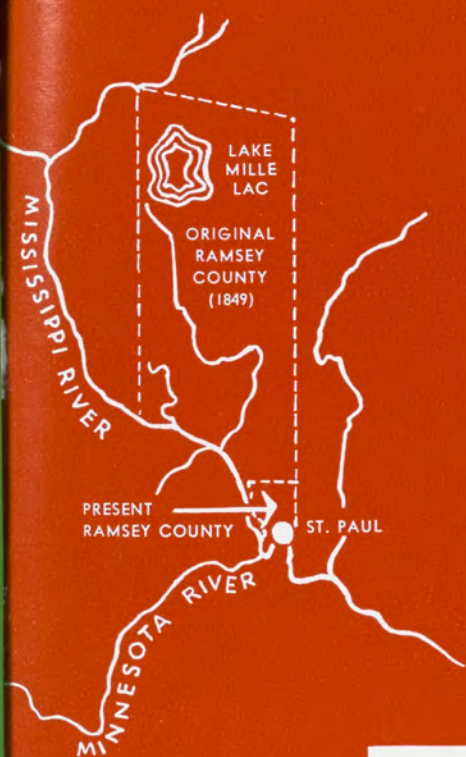


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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ON THE COVER: This picture of Fort Snelling, taken about 1870, is an example of the work of William H. Illingworth, pioneer St. Paul photographer whose career is described in the story beginning on Page 9. This is an appropriate cover picture because it also illustrates the story of the early explorers of the Ramsey County area, beginning on Page 3. It was from the Fort that expeditions of exploration set forth into the "howling wilderness" of the Minnesota area between the 1820's and the 1850's.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: All pictures in this issue, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Picture Department of the Minnesota Historical Society. The editor is indebted to Eugene Becker, picture curator, and his assistant, Dorothy Gimme-stad, for their help.

Restless, Troubled Opportunist

Portrait of a Pioneer Photographer

BY HENRY HALL

WILLIAM H. ILLINGWORTH was a pioneer St. Paul photographer who has remained a shadowy figure in Minnesota history. From the bare facts which are available concerning his life and career, he emerges as a talented but restless man with a penchant for adventure, and something of an opportunist who evidently struggled with serious personal problems.

He does not seem to have worked at

William H. Illingworth



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Henry Hall is a professional photographer and industrial editor. For the past 12 years, he has been with Mutual Service Insurance Companies of St. Paul. A native of St. Paul and a graduate of the University of Minnesota, he has had a long-time interest in photographic history. He has served three terms as a member of the Board of Directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society and four years as a member of the Editorial Board of Ramsey County History.

photography throughout his entire career, but as a photographer he accompanied two major expeditions into the West—and was prosecuted for embezzlement of government property. In 1893, after three marriages, he killed himself by putting a bullet through his brain.

William H. Illingworth was born in England in 1844 and brought to the United States as a child. The family settled in Philadelphia, but moved to St. Paul in 1850. His father, William G. Illingworth, was a jeweler and clockmaker and young William first learned this trade.

T. M. Newson writes in *Pen Pictures of St. Paul* (St. Paul, 1886) that Illingworth was engaged in his father's jewelry and clockmaking business but that he went to Chicago to learn photography.

IN 1866, Illingworth accompanied the Fisk emigrant expedition from St. Paul to Montana Territory. He returned with about thirty stereoscopic pictures. Apparently at this time he had formed an association with another photographer. The prints were made by "Illingworth and Bill" and published in Chicago by John Carbutt.

Newson reports that in 1867, Illingworth established himself in business in St. Paul by opening a gallery there. He was 23 years old. In the following years, he may have worked for other photographers. Certainly, whether working for himself or for others, he does not seem to have been content to be a "studio" photographer, confined to making stiff portraits of Ramsey County's leading citizens. His sparkling, nostalgic pictures now in the photographic department of the Minnesota Historical Society indicate that he often packed up his heavy equipment and hauled it out into the nooks and corners of Ramsey County, as well as into other areas of Minnesota.

William Illingworth thus was one of the hundreds of American photographers who

sloshed into business with wet plates during the middle decades of the Nineteenth Century. Wet-plate photography was a new process which required much shorter exposures than did the old daguerreotypes (five to ten seconds, compared with five to ten minutes) and had the enormous advantage of yielding a negative from which any number of final prints could be produced. Every daguerreotype required its own sitting and there was no process for reproduction. The wet-plate photographer could produce portraits for dozens of relatives at less cost than the daguerreotype needed for his single image.

THE MAJORITY of Illingworth's contemporaries concerned themselves exclusively with studio portraiture, and the few who took their ponderous gear into the field generally did so on a commission for which payment was assured. The temptation to take a picture without an immediate market could rarely prevail over the half-hour of messy processing that each wet-plate exposure required.

Any outdoor work, in fact, required a portable darkroom which, when added to the huge cameras and heavy glass plates, made up a total burden that ranged from 100 to 400 pounds. The field photographer also had to learn modified techniques in much the same way that a modern housewife would learn to cook over a camp fire.

History was being made, however, during these middle and later years of the last century. The Civil War and the western expansion created a demand for visual documentation that was met by a group of expeditionary photographers including such giants in the art as Matthew Brady, Alexander Gardner, Timothy O'Sullivan, William Henry Jackson and a few others.

ILLINGWORTH'S service on the Fisk expedition and, later, on Custer's Black Hills expedition of 1874 qualifies him for the list of photographic pioneers—even though his work is relatively unknown, except to historians.

For the photographer who accompanied one of these momentous explorations into the vast reaches of the West, there were minor variations in field procedure, depending upon whether he used a wagon,

a mule or his own back for transportation; but the basic steps always were the same. The camera was set on its tripod and focused by means of the ground glass back.

The photographer then capped the lens and went into his wagon or tent to prepare his plate for exposure. This involved carefully flowing collodion over a meticulously clean glass plate. As the collodion started to set, but before it became hard, the plate was immersed in a silver nitrate solution and allowed to remain there for about three minutes, depending upon the strength and acidity of the solution. He determined the exact timing by the feel of a corner of the treated side. In the solution too long, or withdrawn from it too soon and the plate was ruined.

ONCE OUT of the solution, the plate was fastened in the holder, covered with the dark slide and taken out to the camera.

Donald Jackson gives a vivid picture of Illingworth at work in his book, *Custer's Gold* (Yale University Press, 1966). Illingworth has prepared his plate and is about to take a picture. Jackson writes:

"Up to the camera. Check the view. Insert the plate. Pull the slide carefully. Remove the lens cap for an exposure of, say, f.32 for 10 or 15 seconds. Then back to the airless tent for the developing. He poured a solution of ferrous sulfate over the plate to bring out the image, washed it in water to halt the process and plunged it into a fixing bath of potassium cyanide. When the plate was washed and dried, William Illingworth had one more negative to protect from dust and breakage until he could get it back to his studio for printing."

This was delicate and dangerous work. The ferrous sulfate worked rapidly and, once poured over the plate, could not be used again. One of the hazards lay in the use of potassium cyanide. If this were not completely rinsed off, the photographer found himself working in an atmosphere of hydrogen cyanide, the gas now used for executions in eleven states.

THE "WET-PLATE" process was so named because the plates had to remain wet from the time they were removed from the silver nitrate until the develop-

ment was complete, which means they had an effective life of about six minutes, depending upon the weather.

The final step in the process was a coat of protective varnish which was best applied at a temperature of about 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

It is small wonder that the amateur photographer did not exist until after 1889 when George Eastman invented the roll film and simple box camera.

* * *

Illingworth had been hired as photographer for the Custer expedition—the controversial expedition which was to find gold in the Black Hills—by Colonel William Ludlow, engineering officer of the command. Jackson writes that the colonel agreed to provide Illingworth with a camera, a spring wagon for his equipment and supplies, rations, horse and forage and money for living expenses. He was listed as a teamster, for pay purposes, and promised an assistant if needed.

In return, Illingworth was to turn over to Ludlow six sets of his prints. He did not do so. He gave the colonel one set, which was not complete, and pleaded lack of money to make more. At the same time, he was selling complete sets of his pictures of the expedition through Huntington & Winne, a St. Paul firm located at 60 West Third Street. He seems to have been working for them when Ludlow signed him up for the Custer expedition.

THIS DEFECTION on Illingworth's part brought down upon him a suit for embezzlement of government property which was prosecuted through the St. Paul courts. He escaped conviction because of a legal technicality. Ludlow later asked the War Department to take action but the Judge Advocate General decided against it.

Through the 1870's and into the early 1890's, Illingworth applied his craft to record scenes of a growing city and state and the people who lived there. But he seems to have had unbearable personal problems. He was married three times and had two sons. His first two wives died. By 1893 he had divorced his third wife.

On March 17 of that year, Illingworth

was found dead. The *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* for March 18 reported his death in the florid style of that era:

"W. H. Illingworth, a well known photographer, was found early yesterday morning lying on a bed in a room in the rear of his photographic gallery, 517 North Street, stark and cold in death, with a gaping bullet wound in his forehead and a rifle, with which it is supposed the terrible deed was committed, grasped in his left hand. . .

"He leaves two sons, one in the employ of Finch, Van Slyck & Co., the other a physician in White Bear [Lake]."

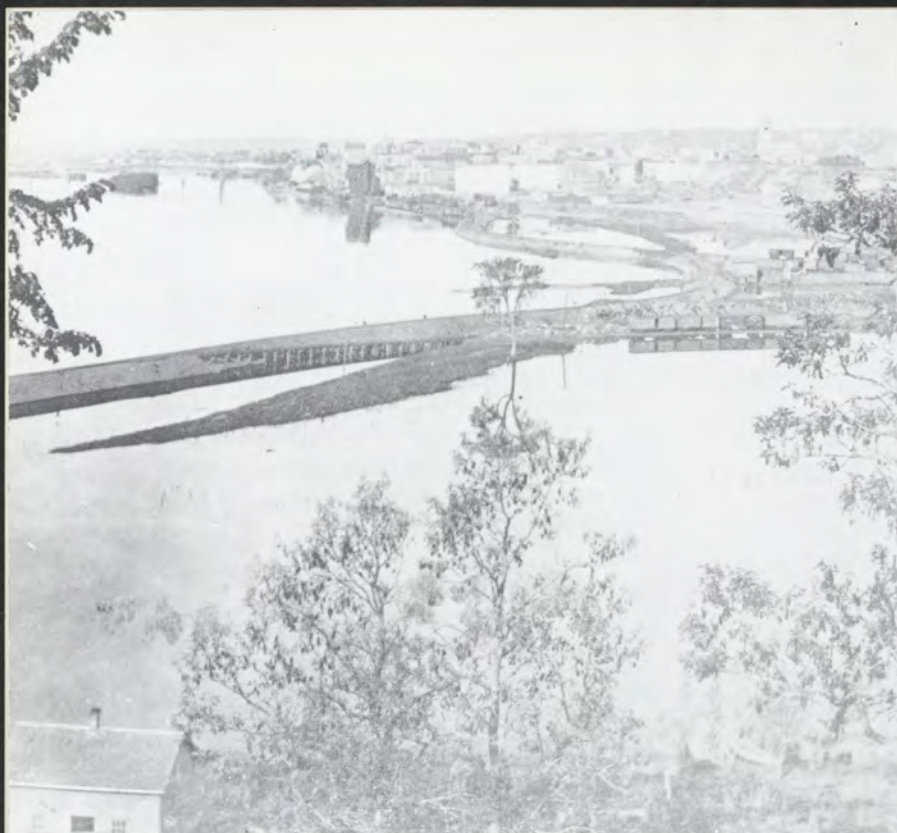
One son, according to the newspaper accounts, said his father had been despondent over ill health. Whatever the reason, William H. Illingworth had ended his life when he was only 49 years old.

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OVERLEAF: Many of William H. Illingworth's pictures of the Fisk emigrant expedition to Montana Territory and of Custer's expedition to the Black Hills have been reprinted recently. One famous Illingworth picture from the Custer expedition shows the wagon train winding through Castle Creek Valley in the Black Hills.

It was felt, however, that Ramsey County History could add more to the record of this pioneer photographer by reprinting pictures which were representative of his work in Ramsey County and other areas of Minnesota. These pictures, which vividly recall life as it was 80 to 90 years ago, are shown on the next two pages.



Railroads were the great transportation mode of the state. The picture above is undated but shows the Northern Pacific track near Brainerd, Minnesota, beyond. Below, a pleasant summer day with people sitting in the shade beside White Bear Lake.



St. Paul during the last 30 years of the Nineteenth Century offered endless variety for photographers of the era. Above is a view of the growing city taken by Illingworth from Dayton's Bluff. Below is the waterfront, reflected in the river on a still day. The steamers "City of St. Paul" and "Minnesota" are tied up at Robert's Landing. At left is a portrait called simply "Sioux Man."





...potation link for the growing
...ted but it shows the end of the
...nerd, and the wide, flat prairie
...er day is whiled away by families
... Bear Lake. The date is 1885.



The picture of Red Wing's main street, above in 1870, shows Illingworth's skill. With an exposure time of five to ten seconds, it was difficult to get clear pictures of people and animals. Illingworth managed it with only one blur, apparently a team of horses coming down the street. Below is the railroad station at White Bear Lake in the 1870's.





THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue W., St. Paul, Minn.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958 the Society erected a barn, behind the house, which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.