



Ramsey County Historical Society  
"History close to home"  
Landmark Center, 75 W. 5th St.  
St. Paul, MN 55102

# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Volume 14  
Number 2



# Ramsey County History

Published by the  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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*ON THE COVER: The corner of Fifth and Wabasha streets photographed in 1873. On the left is the United States Customs House and the Post Office where Patrick O'Brien worked before moving to the Old Federal Courts Building in 1902.*

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY is published semi-annually and copyrighted 1979 by the Ramsey County Historical Society, Landmark Center, 75 West Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minnesota 55102. Membership in the Society carries with it a subscription to *Ramsey County History*. Single issues sell for \$3. Correspondence concerning contributions should be addressed to the editor. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Manuscripts and other editorial material are welcomed but no payment can be made for contributions. All articles and other editorial material submitted will be carefully read and published, if accepted as space permits.

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The O'Brien family photographs on pages 7, 16, 17 were loaned to the Society by George Rea. Photographs on pages 3 and 15 are from the Ramsey County Historical Society's collection. Photographs on pages 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 20 & 21 are from the Minnesota Historical Society. The Society wishes to thank Mrs. Hugh F. Guin of the St. Croix County Historical Society, Hudson, Wisconsin, and Tom Ericson, archivist at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls, for the photograph of Hudson in the 1880s and for locating and sending the newspaper advertisement of Fannie Higgins' dressmaking shop.*





View of downtown St. Paul in 1888, photographed from the West Side by A. C. Warner.

## The Liberated Woman Patrick O'Brien Married

*By Michael Maher*

**T**he letters of Fannie Higgins are less interesting than those of Patrick O'Brien, less witty, less philosophical, less reflective of St. Paul's exciting society in the years immediately following the Civil War. But in many respects, they are more informative about the personalities of these two long-courting "friends." It is Patrick's letters that explain the attraction the two had for each other. This is true, notwithstanding the fact that relatively few of her surviving letters were addressed to the young postal money order clerk in St. Paul.

The letters portray a hard-working and busy young woman established in a dressmaking shop in Hudson, Wisconsin, after the Civil War. Her chief concern is with her family, especially her younger brother, James, still a teenager trying to finish his schooling, and her shop, which requires her to work long hours herself and find seamstresses to work at the

shop or accept piece work at home. By virtue of her isolation in Hudson and her total preoccupation with her dressmaking business, Fannie saw very little of either the society or the politics of her day. She wrote to "Mr. O'Brien" in August, 1868, that she gave Mr. [Ignatius] Donnelly "credit for a good memory, but as I am not a judge of talent I will not expose my ignorance by passing my opinion."

It is difficult to say whether she ever ventured to see or hear the great politicians of the day. In general, her views never rise above the conventional; pious objections to drink and drinkers, the importance of hard work, and the importance of self-reliance. The coy, fun-loving, genially teasing young woman who emerges from O'Brien's letters is a rather shrewder, more self-willed woman in her own letters.

FANNIE HAD two brothers, John, probably near her own age and a millhand or occa-



sional lumberjack in the late 1860s, and James, a boy who boarded with Fannie's friends, Mr. and Mrs. John Misson, in St. Paul.

John Higgins' letters are written in a fine hand, but are generally rather dull. The most interesting is written from Snake River in early January, 1868, and reports briefly on camp life in the dead of winter:

"I arrived here in Camp on the 22nd of Dec. had a pretty cold trip it was so cold one day that it froze my eyewinkers together. It is vary nice here in camp. There is no wind here the woods cuts the wind off there is 25 of us here in our camp we have a camp built 30 by 60 ft we have lots of fun here of evenings when we all get together Singing and Joking and playing cards and checkers. There is lots of game here of all kinds we often have Venison here. There is any amount of Deer running around here."

IN ANOTHER LETTER written from Brunswick, Minnesota, on March 22, 1868, John tries to calm Fannie's agitation about James' need for money. Mr. and Mrs. Misson, at whose house Fannie first met Patrick, a fireman in Misson's brigade, had been boarding James and now wanted some money to cover their costs. John proposed to come to St. Paul in the latter part of April and settle up then. "To send money from here would be considerable of a Risk."

That September James wrote that Misson had offered to teach him the tinner's trade, but evidently this was not done, for in March,

1869, James again wrote Fannie, this time from a small farm where he took care of the horse and cows. It was only a seasonal job, since the woman who owned the farm had no need for a worker in the summer. She would try to get him a place where he could attend school, for otherwise he feared he would "be turned back in his studies."

The following May James wrote from a new address "about a mile from the city on the fort road," and though he could not attend school there in the summer, he still hoped "I can go to school here in the fall if I stay. I get \$15 per month now." We know from later remarks in O'Brien's letters that James did finish school and that he was good at his studies. But Fannie's solicitude is evident from Patrick's letters which never fail to mention that he has seen James and he looks well, or later reports teasingly on the boy's girlfriends.

JAMES DID RATHER well with \$15 a month for light farm chores. By comparison, his sister was offering seamstresses \$3 a week plus board. Not all seamstresses found that wage acceptable. Emma Young, a friend of Fannie's, wrote in August, 1869: "I cannot afford to work for three dollars and to hire my washing out of that." She was friendly enough, however, to inquire whether Fannie had received the corn and cucumbers she had sent.

Emma may have been related to, may even have been the same Etti Young who had written a plaintive note from Boardman, Wisconsin, the previous May:

Hudson, Wisconsin, in the 1880s when Fannie Higgins had her shop downtown.





## MISS FANNIE HIGGINS, Fashionable Dress Maker

Rooms on Third St., next door to Residence  
of Mr. Wm. Otis.

Patterns of all new and elegant styles constantly  
received. Her patrons may rely upon having well-  
fitting garments and tasty and durable work. 2-291r

An advertisement for Fannie's shop which  
appeared in the Hudson Democrat on Sep-  
tember 30, 1870. From the collection of the  
University of Wisconsin at River Falls.

"You asked me if it was time that Mort had his hand amputated. Yes Fannie it is so, it is a great misfortune now that we little thought of, but I think it God's will, but it is awful hard to be reconciled to such misfortune. I thought my heart would break all to smash but Fanny I have come to the conclusion that I was doing wrong to grieve so."

Misfortunes were not uncommon for the Youngs, for the same letter reports that her sister had visited relatives whose baby had fallen from a second story window and "came very near falling in the well we have not heard from them since."

SUCH STORIES would be funny if they were not such a tragic reminder that people of that era had to regard such events almost as commonplace. We know from O'Brien's letters about "Mr. Brown" that alcoholism could be a chronic problem, that young friends frequently died of consumption or typhoid, and that colds and fevers were as common an affliction then as now, though far more serious in their complications.

Still, even these grim realities of life had their compensations for the quick-witted. For example, O'Brien wrote an interesting letter to Fannie on April 30, 1870, telling her of his imminent move to the Post Office from the press room of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. He notes proudly that after having worked there six years, the newspaper was "suited with the way I have fulfilled every trust," adding slyly, "even if I was *drunk* two days in Hudson." If drunkenness was common enough to be accepted as an excuse for missing work, or to be used as one by the temperant Patrick O'Brien, it was a major problem.

This April letter is one of the most valuable in the collection. Surprising, informative, and revealing, it represents one of those frank assessments men are inclined to make at certain critical passages in their lives. Patrick boasts to Fannie that in his new job at the Post Office, "My say about the way the office is run will be law and you bet they will do their duty to the public (which has not been done heretofore.) Keep shady Puss, for Pat is no fool though he acts it occasionally just for fun."

Patrick and Fannie had taken each other as confidantes, supporting each other's weaknesses with reassurances, reinforcing and confirming one another's values and principles. And despite her pose of independence and of feminine self-reliance, Fannie was probably not unconvinced by Patrick's more chauvinistic view of women expressed in a long letter in the summer of 1868. He teased Fannie about the frailty of women after she had boasted that she and four friends had killed a snake on a picnic. He reminded her that Mr. Noyes had done the killing.

"WHY BLESS ME, the most harmless snake in the world would frighten a hundred girls. You women folks will remember the serpent as long as the world remains, and it is through both of you that the *men* were compelled to leave Paradise. The serpent caused Eve to eat the forbidden fruit and she fooled poor Adam as woman does the men of the present day. She tears a little and there is no saying no."

Fannie knew women's role in her age, and accepted it as ultimate reality even while she worked hard to establish and maintain her own shop. She was self-reliant and independent, and as good a business manager as any man, but her business, after all, catered to women who had either become dependent on

Patrick O'Brien was the assistant St. Paul postmaster in 1902 when the Post Office expanded into new quarters.







Minnehaha Falls, a popular spot for a summer picnic.

husbands who took them to the fine balls of St. Paul, or who aspired to that status. Fannie herself was seldom able to go into society. The holiday season with its brilliant dances was her busiest time and required her to sit up until two or three in the morning with sewing. When she did go to St. Paul, it was for a quiet afternoon at Lake Como or Minnehaha Falls, or to attend a small gathering at Mrs. Mison's. She may have made a show of independence and even wilfulness at times, but between themselves she probably deferred to O'Brien's leadership.

FOR HIS PART, Patrick seems to have found much that was appealing in Fannie. There was her constant concern for her family, especially James, which could not help but remind him of his mother's struggle to raise

her family after his father's death. On the other hand, her great self-reliance, her ability to run her own business, no doubt reinforced his own ambition to win a position of responsibility and authority. Patrick's letters from these early years are much more wavering, more suggestive of self-doubts than Fannie's, and it is probable that she was instrumental in giving him the self-esteem and self-confidence that he began to show in his maturity.

If there was a weakness in this partnership, it may have been that the two, Fannie especially, became so persuaded by their mutual claims of independence, and so practiced for a host of reasons in disavowing any interest in marriage, adept dissemblers even to close friends, that they tried Cupid for nine years before reconciling themselves to marriage.





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the Ramsey County Historical Society  
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St. Paul, Minn. 55102

### THE GIBBS HOUSE

*at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County Historical Society as a restored farm house of the mid-nineteenth century period.*

**T**he Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. Its chief function is to collect and preserve the history of the city and the county and share that history with the people who live here. The Society is the county's historian. It preserves those things from the past that are the community's treasures — its written records through the Society's library; its historic sites through establishment of the Irvine Park Historic District and its successful efforts to help prevent destruction of the Old Federal Courts Building, now Landmark Center. It shares these records through the publishing of its magazine, brochures, pamphlets, and prints; through conducting historic sites tours of the city, teaching classes, producing exhibits on the history of the city, and maintaining its museum on rural county history. The Gibbs Farm Museum, the oldest remaining farm home in Ramsey County, was acquired by the Society in 1949 and opened to the public in 1954 as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler. In 1966 the Society moved onto the property a one-room rural country schoolhouse dating from the 1870s. Now restored to the period of the late 1890s, the school is used for classes, meetings, and as the center for a summer schoolhouse program for children.

Society headquarters are located in Landmark Center, an historic Richardsonian Romanesque structure in downtown St. Paul, where it maintains the center's only permanent exhibit, a history of the building during the seventy-five years it was the federal government's headquarters in St. Paul.

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