



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.*





Patrick O'Brien's house at 225 West George Street, ca. 1900.

## *A Grandson Describes: The O'Briens' House on George Street*

*By George A. Rea*

*Editor's Note: The marriage of Patrick O'Brien and Fannie Higgins and the home they created is examined from another point of view, that of grandson George A. Rea. In the reminiscence published here, Rea, who still lives in his grandfather's house, describes that house and what he remembers of his grandparents and the life they shared.*

The house has twelve rooms and wooden siding now painted a light yellow, and it stands at 255 West George Street, a street on St. Paul's West Side named for George Bell, an early real estate promoter. My grandfather built it for \$5,000 between the spring of 1888 and the summer of 1890 — an eighteen-month construction period required because work came to a halt during the winter.

From 1880 until his retirement in 1924, Grandfather O'Brien was assistant postmaster for St. Paul and, at the turn of the century,

Post Office employees had a saying that the only two persons they feared were God and Mr. O'Brien. I was surprised to learn that he was such a stern taskmaster. To us he was a kind gentleman of the old school, a smiling, good-natured man who never so much as raised his voice in anger when he was at home. At work, apparently, it was another matter and the power he seemed to hold over the jobs of postal workers may have derived from the experience he had accumulated since he began work with the Post Office in 1870. Another reason was that, while postmasters, who were political appointees, came and went as administrations changed, my grandfather's job was permanent and immune to the vagaries of politics.

*About the Author: This is the third reminiscence written for Ramsey County History, by George A. Rea, a long-time member of the Ramsey County Historical Society.*



He evidently had high ideals of public service. He told me about the time he missed a \$5 gold piece in his accounts. He searched frantically through his papers, because the slightest breath of scandal or dishonesty meant instant dismissal. At last he got down under his desk on his hands and knees to look on the floor and, much to his relief, the gold coin rolled out of the cuff of his trousers.

Before they moved to George Street, Grandfather and Grandmother lived at 194 McBoal Street in the Irvine Park district of St. Paul. They had six children — five girls and a boy. Grandfather's mother, Ann Mullen O'Brien, also lived with them. Grandfather was dissatisfied there. His children seemed to be constantly sick with childhood diseases, a fact he blamed on the neighborhood children and an unhealthful water supply. But he really decided to move the day a neighbor's bantam chickens got into his garden and ate his newly sprouted vegetables. He chased after the chickens, flailing at them with a buggy whip and knocking off some of their tail feathers, so angry, in fact, that Grandmother never again let him plant a garden.

In 1885 Grandfather had bought four lots from Samuel Deering on land that was out in the country. There were acres of wheat fields

south of George Street, with only an occasional farmhouse and not many trees. The Indians had cut them for firewood and the settlers had cleared the land for crops. Before building his house, he bought four more lots. He needed them because he had two horses which fed on the grass in the summer. The horses and carriages and a cutter sleigh were kept in the barn behind the house.

When they moved from Irvine Park to George Street, their household goods, it was reported, were the first to cross over the High Bridge. Probably the opening of the bridge was another factor in their decision to move across the river. The Wabasha Street bridge was a toll bridge, with a charge of 25 cents per person, at a time when the average working man earned about a dollar a day. This economic fact of life may have slowed settlement on the West Side. No tolls were charged, however, on the High Bridge.

The house when they moved in was painted pumpkin yellow and had a red-stained shingle roof. My grandmother's cousin, who was a building contractor, and who drew up the plans for the house, planned it well. The house faced south so that the principal living spaces had the most sun. The kitchen was placed in the northwest corner where the warmth of the

**Some O'Brien family members on their front porch in 1912. From left: Jessie O'Brien, Marjorie Rea, Fannie H. O'Brien, James Rea, Jr., Frances O'Brien Rea and Bessie (front).**





coal-burning stove was most needed. Only one small window was set into the north wall to protect the house from the north winds. The large front porch warded off the hot sun in the morning, noon, and afternoons, and on the east side of the house, a big side porch was a pleasant site during the afternoons when the sun had moved to the other side of the house.

The house had five fireplaces, four downstairs and one upstairs in the main bedroom, a large coal stove in the kitchen, and two central heating systems, a gas boiler which heats steam radiators and an oil system which heats separate hot air ducts. Some of the larger rooms have both gas and oil heat.

The stairway to the cellar is worn with the marks of footsteps caused by years of hauling up hods of coal. Mounds of cannel coal and cords of wood were always stored in the cellar before winter set in.

There are many reminders of the 1890's in the house, such as leaded glass windows, hardwood woodwork, parquet flooring, fish scale shingles for decoration on the outside walls, and Gothic designs and turned spindles on the porches. The cellar also holds a stone cistern for collecting rainwater through a series of gutters and pipes installed on the roof. No longer used, the cistern once held the soft water so prized by my family for washing clothes and hair.

The front and back parlors and the library downstairs have eleven-foot ceilings, while those in the remaining rooms are eight feet in height. The parlors are separated by sliding wooden doors. For years the front parlor with its stiff bottle-green horsehair furniture was used only for entertaining company, for funerals, and at Christmas when a large evergreen tree, trimmed with a great variety of sparkling ornaments and surrounded by piles of presents in gaily wrapped paper awaited the family, friends, and servants on Christmas Day.

When she entertained, Grandmother always sat in the front parlor on a special chair.

"You'll never entertain your guest or learn anything by hovering over a hot stove," she used to say.

She did not like housework, so she had a maid-of-all-work, the "hired girl" who lived at the house. She also did not like to cook, so she hired a woman to do the cooking for important dinners. Four temporary maids helped serve at dinners and parties, and a neighborhood boy took care of the horses and did odd jobs, such as carrying coal for the fireplaces. Grandmother ran the house because Grand-

father worked long hours, seven days a week. On Sundays he went down to the office after going to church.

Grandmother did like to garden, however. I remember her coming into the house for breakfast after tending her garden in the early morning with the hem of her long, black serge skirt wet with dew. It was Grandmother O'Brien, also, who planted the rows of elm and maple trees around the house. She used to take the horse and buggy out into the woods to dig up little whips of trees that today are too large for a man to encircle with his arms.

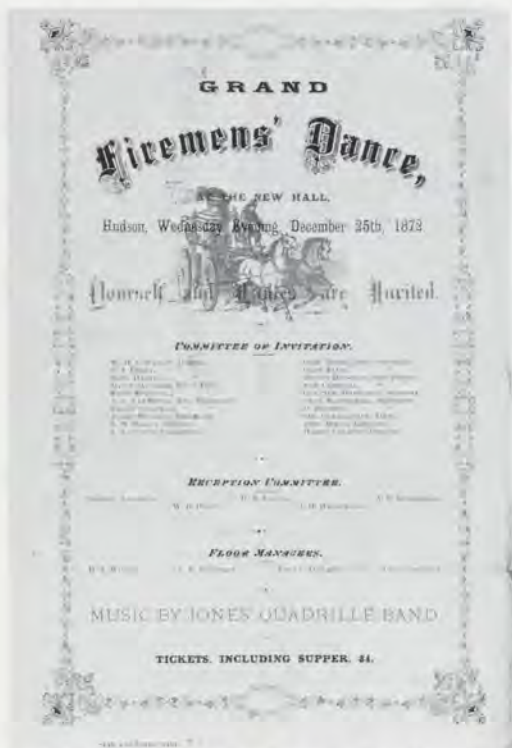
When my grandparents first moved into the house, there was a wooden sidewalk running along the front and a gas lamp on the boulevard. Every night a man came along with a little wooden ladder which he used to climb up and light the lamp.

One of the treasures of the house is a silver-plated calling trumpet presented to my grandfather when he retired as foreman of Hope Engine Co. No. 1, of the St. Paul Volunteer Fire Department. The city once had several Volunteer Fire Departments, including the Pioneer Hook and Ladder Co. No. 1, the Minnehaha Engine Co., and the Trout Brook Hose Co., and Rescue Engine Co. No. 5. My grandfather knew most of these volunteer firemen and the rosters of these companies contain the names of many men who were prominent in early St. Paul's history: R.C. Knox, Isaac Banker, H.B. Pearson, George F. Blake, Richard Galloway, Robert Mason, J.W. Cathcart, Washington Stees, Benjamin Irvine, R.L. Thompson, T.M. Newson, C.V.P. Lull, J.I. Beaumont, Adam Fetch, Jacob Heck, J.L. Forepaugh, Edward Corning, C.P. Peabody, W. Potgieser, George W. Prescott, J.R. Jenkins, Joseph M. Marshall, George Sommers, George Benz, John B. Sanborn, I.V.D. Heard, H.P. Grant, A.A. Schlick, N.W. Kitson, W.A. Van Slyke, Theodore Borup, B. Presley, Richard Gordon and James J. Hill. They all served without pay.

Grandfather's mother lived with the family from about 1900 to 1912. She was a very old woman with thin white hair parted in the middle. She usually wore a long black silk dress and felt carpet slippers. She sat in a low rocking chair and rarely left her room because she was quite feeble. They brought her meals on a tray. She was always glad to see us children and gave us peppermint candy, but we were not allowed to visit her often because she grew tired easily.

She was an old Irish lady who was said to be 102 when she died in 1912, but the records and





Patrick O'Brien invited Fannie Higgins to the Firemen's Christmas Dance at Hudson, Wisconsin.

the church in Ireland had burned and it was not known how old she was. She was a widow when she came to Saint Paul in 1852 with her four children, two other boys besides my grandfather, and a daughter. Her sister, a Mrs. Galvin, lived here and Mr. Galvin was on the police force. Great-Grandmother O'Brien bought a house on Harrison Street, near the present Smith Avenue and West Seventh Street location of the Salvation Army. She made her living by sewing. Among other things, she made shirts for the officers and soldiers at Fort Snelling. The soldiers could call for their garments en route to the Fort by way of West Seventh Street, then called Fort Road. Her daughter, Catherine, wanted to become a nun, but she was needed at home to help her mother with sewing and housework in order to support the family.

I can guess that my grandmother, Fannie Higgins, helped financially when the house was built and furnished. Before her marriage, she had employed as many as fourteen women to help sew the dresses she designed and made in her dressmaking shop in Hudson. There were few department stores in the 1870's and much of the clothing was made by dressmakers or tailors. She sold her shop when she married.

Of course, there were no telephones, radios, television, or automobiles, to name a few items, when this house was built. I think people visited their friends and entertained more often. They read more books and played musical instruments, attended the theater, joined more organizations, such as the Browning and Tennyson poetry groups, went to social or fraternal lodges, and were interested in church programs, such as Bible study, sending parcels to overseas missionaries, and sewing for the heathen and local unfortunates. There were seasonal activities such as baseball and football games, hockey, and skating. During State Fair Week, Chauncey Alcott always sang at the Metropolitan Opera House. Caruso, John McCormick, and Sir Harry Lauder were great favorites. There was the Winter Carnival, and visiting on New Year's Day.

As there was no telephone service, it was not unusual to send messages or small packages by Western Union messenger to another address within the same city. The boys rode bicycles and some downtown business offices had regular pickup and delivery routes.

Automobiles did not come into general use until after World War I. The first horseless carriages were considered rich men's toys as they were too expensive for the average person. The horse-drawn buggies were the usual means of transportation and cutter-sleds and sleighs were used in the winter. Some of the carriages of the rich were quite elaborate, with carriage lamps on the outside, tufted cushions on the seats, and pull-out jump seats for extra passengers. Large bear rugs or buffalo robes were wrapped around passengers in cold weather and heated bricks, alcohol stoves, or charcoal burners warmed their feet.

People did not travel long distances as frequently as they do today by car or plane. In those days, they traveled by train. If they were going to stay for some weeks, they packed their clothes and other possessions in a trunk. A drayman would haul the trunk to the railway station, and at the destination another drayman was hired to carry the trunk to the place where the traveler was staying.

My Grandfather's house apparently has been a healthy place to live. Grandfather and Grandmother, the original owners, both saw their late eightieth birthdays; my father lived until he was 92, and my mother, their daughter, was almost 98 when she died. The environment of a comfortable house and a pleasant home must have been of help to an already sturdy heredity.





Ramsey County History  
published semi-annually by  
the Ramsey County Historical Society  
Landmark Center  
75 West Fifth Street  
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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