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Landmark Center, 75 W. 5th St.
St. Paul, MN 55102

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Three Madams in
Post-Civil War
St. Paul ...
Page 3



Volume 15
Number 1

St. Paul in 1869, looking very much like a raw frontier town. This is Jackson, looking toward Seventh Street.

Ramsey County History

Published by the
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

Contents

Long Kate, Dutch Henriette and Mother Robinson
Three Madams in Post-Civil War St. Paul . . . Page 3

By Joel E. Best

Volume 15

Number 1

Aronovici's Campaign
To Clean Up St. Paul Page 11

By Gary Phelps

Closing of Mattocks School
End of an Era in Education Page 18

By Rachel A. Bonney

Acknowledgements: The cover photograph and the panorama of St. Paul in 1888, page 5, are from the Ramsey County Historical Society's collection. The news item concerning Kate Hutton is reproduced from the St. Paul Pioneer Press' August 20, 1880, edition, on microfilm at the Minnesota Historical Society. Photographs with the article on St. Paul housing, page 11, are from Aronovici's 1917 housing study on file in the Minnesota Historical Society's Reference Library. The photograph of Aronovici himself is from the Science Museum of Minnesota. Photographs with the Mattocks school article, beginning on page 18, are from the Bonney family collection, loaned to the Ramsey County Historical Society for use with this article.

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Correction: Jim Sazevich, St. Paul's "house detective," points out that we led readers of the City Birthday Party edition of this magazine (published in the fall of 1979) to believe that the Jackson Street Methodist Church, built in 1856, is still standing. It is not. This last landmark in the Lowertown neighborhood (other than the Dahl house) was razed several years ago. Also, the house at 26 Irvine Park, identified as the William R. Marshall house, is known historically as the Henry Knox house. The house at 30 Irvine Park is the Parker-Marshall house, leased by Marshall from 1877 to 1880.



Garbage-filled yard in St. Paul, from Aronovici's 1917 housing study.

Aronovici's Campaign to Clean Up St. Paul

By Gary Phelps

In April of 1936 a scathing article in *Fortune Magazine* noted of St. Paul that, "Its slums are among the worst in the land." A number of reasons were recognized as the cause of this condition. George Herrold, St. Paul's city planning engineer, believed the condition grew out of the tremendous population explosion between 1870 and 1890 when the city added 100,000 people. Herrold maintained that as the population grew, the number of skilled artisans in the building trade did not grow proportionately, hence many of the city's homes were constructed in a most inadequate and haphazard way. To compound the situation, structures were being erected in a city which had relatively non-existent zoning laws and non-enforced building codes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Gary Phelps, a 1975 graduate of the University of Minnesota where he majored in physical anthropology, joined the Ramsey County Historical Society's staff as a researcher and writer in 1978. This article is based on his research for a history of the Ramsey County the society plans to publish in 1982.

St. Paul's condition was not unique among American cities. Other cities had suffered as well because they lacked adequate planning. However, during the first two decades of the 20th century, American city planning became a new vocation with its own group of experts, many of whom had begun their careers as landscape architects. They tackled a multitude of urban problems, such as alleviating congestion, improving traffic flow, and influencing decision-makers to accept ordinance zoning.

BUT BECAUSE city planning was a new science, it had to cope with these and other evils and the most flagrant among them was the condition of housing in the nation's cities. Marked by the grossest of unsanitary and overcrowded conditions and lacking proper municipal health care and building codes, slums that were among most squalid in the world had come into existence. American city planners, however, proceeded with great caution in offering recommendations for the alleviation of the housing problem. The housing and real estate industry was within the

realm of private enterprise, and any proposed governmental regulation of business and industry was viewed with alarm as un-American.

Nevertheless, government intervention in housing was becoming a recognized necessity as the first decade of the 20th century unfolded. In the world-famous 1909 *Plan For Chicago*, authors Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett stated: "It is no attack on private property to argue that society has the inherent right to protect itself against abuses; and when the city itself leads the way by the creation of broad streets well paved and clean, restrictions against overcrowding, defective drainage, and the heaping of waste in yards and side streets are but a logical sequence."¹ There were few who disagreed with this.

THERE WAS, however, a Romanian-born social scientist named Carol Aronovici who thought other action was called for as well. Born in 1881, Aronovici was exiled from Romania with six others because of their efforts to gain agrarian rights for peasants.² He emigrated to the United States in 1900, received a B.S.A. from Cornell in 1905 and a Ph.D from Brown in 1911. In 1914 he published a controversial paper in the *American Academy of Political and Social Science Annals* entitled "Housing and the Housing Problem". In it he called attention to the nationwide housing evils and suggested that government-subsidized housing, similar to that in European cities, be considered as a possible approach to the United States housing problem. To many, such intervention represented government competition in private industry.

Aronovici, however, was a tactful and respected intellectual of national reputation and in December, 1916, the United Charities (a group of St. Paul charitable organizations) and the St. Paul Institute (the precursor of the Science Museum of Minnesota) brought him to St. Paul for a week-long lecture series sponsored by the institute. In the spring of 1917, Aronovici left his position as director of the bureau of social research of the Seybert Institution of Philadelphia to become director of social services for the Amherst H. Wilder Charity in St. Paul. He immediately addressed himself to the housing conditions in St. Paul which were among the worst in the United States.

AT THE REQUEST of the St. Paul Association of Commerce (later the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce), the Wilder Charity undertook an inquiry, which Aronovici



Carol Aronovici

directed, into the city's housing. Before it began, Aronovici made it clear that the study was to be far more than an observational survey; it was to be a foundation for action. *The St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported:

"Dr. Carol Aronovici, housing expert, told the committee on housing and town planning and the housing commission of the St. Paul Association, at a meeting at noon in the club rooms, that he desires assurance from the association and affiliated agencies that the findings of the proposed housing survey will result in broad and far reaching action.

"If I am to advise the board of directors of the Wilder Charities to undertake such a survey, which if carefully carried out will involve an expenditure of several thousand dollars, it is important to receive such assurances

"It is my conviction that a housing survey which is merely intended to give the community a bad reputation and does not result in immediate, practical, constructive and far-reaching action, is detrimental rather than beneficial to the community."³

The last paragraph was a wise inclusion. The survey, begun on April 12, 1917, and ready for distribution the following December, was particularly shocking in some respects, and particularly in the many photographs that vividly illustrated the city's unsanitary and overcrowded housing conditions.

The report was based on a survey of more than 5,000 homes, occupied by 20,000 people. Besides examining local conditions, the report contained a tentative draft of a housing ordinance, an analysis of the housing laws of thirty-one other cities and states in the country, and a plan for a housing development known as Beaver Lake Heights.⁴ The report also concluded that there was inadequate legislation for control of housing conditions in St. Paul, that the health department was unable to enforce existing laws due to lack of money and an inadequate inspection force, and that the city zoning system was grossly inadequate.⁵

Also discussed was the need for a city plan. (The first city plan was still five years away and would come out after the city's population had exceeded 234,000 people.) Aronovici wrote:

*"The entire city needs a constructive plan, but the elimination of the slums and the redistricting of the city to meet the housing and industrial needs of the wage earners and poorer elements of the population should take precedent over the construction of costly public buildings, the development of improving thoroughfares, the building of boulevards designed for the automobile tourist, the opening up of park areas in districts undeveloped and inaccessible sections of the city. These things, while desirable, should not take precedence over the immediate needs for the improvement of the living conditions of people."*⁶

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* interpreted the study in a somewhat favorable light and issued some of its own conclusions:

"At a time when the public mind is highly agitated over the very live subjects of war abroad, unrest at home and disaster at the nation's threshold, it is not likely to become unduly agitated over a revelation of unhappy local conditions which have existed for some time. Housing conditions in St. Paul, says Dr. Carol Aronovici, investigator for the Wilder Charity, under whose supervision an elaborate scientific survey has been made, are little better than in the old congested centers of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago."

"The conclusion is not to be doubted nor is it surprising. St. Paul has developed in the haphazard, unsupervised way that has been characteristic of practically all American cities. Among

*the sacred constitutional rights of American citizens has been the inalienable right to be thriftless and shiftless, to drink up one's paycheck every Saturday, to breed with utter democratic abandonment of the number of children desirable in the family and of the question of how they are to be supported, to stick about the unpleasant environs of the most unpleasant part of the city and to bring up children in a way they should not go."*⁷

(Aronovici had noted in one of his conclusions that, "Structural defects of new buildings and the low standard of construction prevalent in the early days of the development of St. Paul are more largely responsible for bad housing than the habits and standards of life of the people.")⁸

To some extent, Aronovici's report was a success. The prerequisite of its undertaking, that being to foster some form of action at its conclusion, came in the spring of 1918 when the housing ordinance recommended in the report was submitted to the city council. After two weeks of conferences and hearings, Ordinance Number 4028 was passed "regulating the Construction, Enlargement, Alteration, Repair, Inspection, Maintenance and Safeguarding of buildings, and the Safeguarding of the Health of Occupants by the Regulation of Sanitary Provisions and the Protection of Real Property Used for Dwelling Purposes in the City of St. Paul."⁹

THAT SPRING of 1917 was marked by the frenzied escalation of fears of disloyalty. The Germania Life Insurance Company's building was renamed the Guardian Building and the statue of Germania was removed from the building's center front. Aliens were most suspect. Aronovici had his own ideas on disloyalty, on aliens, and on their environment. In a periodical which he helped found known as *Social Welfare* ("published monthly in the interest of welfare work in the city of St. Paul, Minnesota") he published an article on the "Fallacies of the Americanization Movement." He wrote:

"With the emergency of this war we have become conscious of serious dangers to our national life due to our failure to absorb in the body politic those elements of foreign peoples that have to seek in this country the opportunities that their own have failed to supply."

"But what have we done for the masses of the foreigners during their



Outhouses lining the banks of Phalen Creek, from the 1917 housing study.

first years, the most impressionable period of their residence in this country?

"We have housed them in houses that are worse, even though we are improving them, than their ancestral huts; we have exposed them to all that is most dangerous in our industries; we have permitted them to be exploited and abused in industry and we have permitted political corruption to develop in their midst all that is vicious, that is health destroying, that is soul deadening. Should we expect under these conditions the development of unflinching loyalty and unfailing confidence in the high purpose of the American government and the American people? If America is to be loved, America must be known and understood. The slums do not represent America, they merely represent our social and political liabilities . . .

"We must not believe as long as we tolerate slums to remain in our midst, as long as industrial conditions into which the foreigners are permitted to enter are not affording either safety or protection of their health, as long as the 'padrone' system is permitted to exist and the politician takes advantage of our poor naturalization laws to maintain his grasp upon the community, that we shall Americanize the foreigner."¹⁰

The alleviation of these conditions was and continued to be of prime concern. The 1917 housing study was followed by another study, *Health Conditions and Health Services in St. Paul*, authored by Esther M. Flint with Aronovici's cooperation, and published under the auspices of the Wilder Charity. The report was critical of the Health Bureau of St. Paul. Among its conclusions:

"1. The Health Bureau of the City of St. Paul has been under investigation two different times in the last five or six years and many of the defects found have not been removed nor have the recommendations made been carried out.

"2. The death rate from preventable diseases shows an undue failure to use preventive methods for the control of such diseases. This is especially true of tuberculosis, measles, scarlet fever, diphtheria, etc.

"3. The enforcement of the Housing Ordinance passed by the city council in March, 1918, is lax. This is due to a shortage of inspectors and a poor record system.

"4. The removal of waste entails an expenditure of many thousands of dollars to the city and no provisions have

been made to salvage the marketable products contained in the waste.

"5. The general sanitary conditions in the schools are in many instances deplorable.

"6. It is remarkable that practically all the dispensary work done in the City of St. Paul is done under private auspices rather than under the direction and at the expense of the city.

"7. The food inspection and particularly the milk and dairy inspection require a complete readjustment and a clearer division of responsibility between the State and City before adequate service will be secured."^{11*}

The day after the report was released, Dr. B. F. Simon, the city's health officer, issued a harsh rebuttal and attack on Aronovici:

"If conditions in St. Paul are as bad as painted by Dr. Aronovici, I can't see why the Federal health report for last year shows it to be the healthiest city in the United States.

"Surely if the Health Department has been as lax in its work as Dr. Aronovici would lead people to believe, it is hardly possible that St. Paul would lead all other cities in the United States in the matter of health.

*"I wish to state that I have not seen Dr. Aronovici's report or recommendations but I wish to go on record from the first that I have not given a great deal of time or attention to said Dr. Aronovici since taking public office because I absolutely refuse to give much of the public's time to recommendations made by any man who is not a full-fledged American citizen.***

Dr. Simon continued:

"As an American citizen I believe that I have a greater interest in the welfare, health and happiness of my fellow citizens than any alien, who since his arrival in the United States has been so busy criticizing our American cities and her institutions that he hasn't had time to complete his citizenship in the very country which has stood for his P.T. Barnum well known line of bunk.

"As to the report itself, two or three days after coming into office, Carol Aronovici, Ph.D. — not M.D. — brought to my office a large bundle of papers containing proposed health ordinances which he wanted to introduce at once.

"This I refused to do, because Barnum's statement to the contrary not

withstanding, I did not care to humbug the American people of St. Paul. In other words, until I could carefully compare the present ordinances with the ones proposed by Dr. Aronovici, study all sides of the questions at hand, I would not go before the Council with a 'cat in the bag'."

"We have, it is true, drafted a milk and cream ordinance which I am convinced, when adopted, will receive the general verdict as one of the best, if not the best, milk ordinances in the country."¹²

The following day's newspaper brought Aronovici's reply. He maintained that rather than stampeding the health bureau concerning the passage of a milk ordinance, it had taken six months for the problem to be dealt with, and he also stated:

"Why was it necessary to have a committee of private citizens take charge of the influenza epidemic and spend thousands of dollars out of private funds if the health bureau was doing all that was necessary to be done to meet the emergency?

"The housing ordinance, which became effective April 28, 1918, is not being enforced by the health bureau, while it is being enforced by the inspector of public buildings under Commissioner Clancy. It may be lack of funds, poor organization of the department, etc., but the fact remains that we have evidence that the law is not enforced."¹³

When the Amherst H. Wilder Charity published its brief history, *Resume 1906-1952*, of the 1919 health survey, it noted, "The Study aroused considerable interest and controversy but did not have an effect in leading to improvements in the Health and Milk Ordinances in St. Paul."¹⁴

Dr. Aronovici left the Wilder Charity shortly after the controversy erupted, but apparently not because of it. In 1918 he had submitted a

* (Milk-borne epidemics had been of considerable concern for some time in St. Paul. In November, 1915, the St. Paul Medical Journal noted, "In this city within two years we have witnessed four milk-borne epidemics of great severity. Two of these have been of diphtheria and two of typhoid. Better control of dairies by municipal authorities is imperative." (St. Paul Medical Journal, 1915, pp. 751 and 752)

** Aronovici had not maintained a permanent residence in the United States and thus had not qualified for naturalization.

comprehensive program to the charity's board of directors involving the planning of many departmental aspects under his direction. In this program, St. Paul's housing situation became a topical focus.

"There is at the present time no material shortage in houses in the poorer sections of the City of St. Paul. There is, however, a field for service along the lines of providing sanitary homes for families with small incomes, many of whom might be designated as bordering on dependency. A group of small houses accommodating 25 to 50 families should be constructed, when the cost of construction is again reduced to normal, and the houses placed under the supervision of a competent social worker who would act as a friendly rent collector as well as a social welfare agent. These houses should be built under the direction and with the assistance of the Wilder Charity but the business part should be carried on through a corporation similar to that of the Octavia Hill Association of Philadelphia or London (England). In this manner the financial resources would be increased and the interest in the enterprise would be extended to a large number of people. In connection with the housing enterprise it would seem advantageous to the community to have the Wilder Charity set aside a sum of fifty to seventy-five thousand dollars to form part of a larger fund for the construction of small houses to be sold to prospective owners on what is called 'a rental plus' basis which would make it possible for the housing corporation to either enlarge the original housing scheme or develop new ones as necessity may demand and without the investment of new capital."¹⁵

Months went by without the Wilder board of directors taking positive action on this topic or others in his program. On December 9, 1918, Aronovici submitted a letter to Victor M. Watkins, board president, in which he stated, "Should the Board of Directors, however, reject the entire program I would feel that my usefulness to the Wilder Charity has come to an end and that I should look elsewhere for a field of service."¹⁶ And so he did.

His resignation became public just before the controversy with Dr. Simon in the spring of 1919. Aronovici wrote a letter of explanation to the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* "Mail Bag":

"My resignation as director of the Wilder Charity was tendered as a result of an agreement between the Wilder Charity and myself that unless the somewhat elaborate program which I prepared was to be carried through at an early date, my services could be dispensed with by the Wilder Charity.

"The organization of the new activities of the Wilder Charities which has been established during my regimes such as the Health Center, the Library, the publication of a monthly bulletin, the establishment of a Central Council of Welfare Agencies, have been so shaped as to become permanent and are conducted now practically independent of my office.

"The board of directors of the Wilder Charity is not responsible for my action in any way whatever, while the relations between the board and myself during the last two years have been and remain most cordial."¹⁷

Aronovici did not, however, leave St. Paul. He stayed, and added to his list of accomplishments. In 1918, the St. Paul City Council passed a new city planning ordinance. (City planning in St. Paul had languished since 1911 when nationally-known city planners John Nolen and Arthur Comey produced a city plan for St. Paul which was never adopted.) Aronovici, who had come out strongly in favor of a city plan in his 1917 *Housing Survey*, became secretary of the City Planning Commission. In September, 1919, while serving as chairman of the Minnesota State Committee on Americanization, he published a booklet, *Americanization*, in which he reflected on his "conscientious effort to understand the social and political life of his adoption and to fashion his mode of life in harmony with those traditional standards of American life that distinguish it from the peoples of Europe."¹⁸

Between March, 1918, and December, 1919, a survey on women in industry in Minnesota was conducted by the Committee of Women in Industry, Minnesota Commission on Public Safety, and the Bureau of Women and Children, Department of Labor and Industries. Aronovici wrote the survey report and submitted it in June, 1920. In analyzing the survey data, he made the following points:

"While we cannot draw any positive conclusions as to the rate of increase in wages that had taken place during the war, it is clear that a disproportionate

number of women were receiving a wage below the minimum of subsistence and that these low wages were frequently needed to assist in the support of the family of the wage earner.

"The native women are employed at comparatively higher wages than the foreign women and the foreign married women enter gainful occupations more frequently when they have children than do the native women, showing perhaps, that economic necessity is the cause of employment in a large number of cases."¹⁹

During his stay in St. Paul, Aronovici also taught at the University of Minnesota. In 1920, he published a book, *Housing and the Housing Problem*,²⁰ based on his lectures, research, and surveys of the previous decade, and in the book's preface he paid tribute to the graduate students who had helped him produce a guide to the procedure for conducting a housing survey.

By then Aronovici had found his new "field of service" as the director of housing for the California State Commission on Immigration and Housing. His departure in 1920 was St. Paul's loss. Though city planning continued at a steady pace in the following two decades, city housing was still given only a minimum of attention and that concerned chiefly remedial efforts.

CITY PLANNING engineer, George Herrold, made futile attempts in the mid-1930s to alleviate the overcrowding and shortage of housing by proclaiming the necessity of taking advantage of new federal programs which allocated funds for government-subsidized housing. But in order to obtain these funds it was necessary for the state legislature to pass an enabling act. This legislation was continuously blocked by real estate interests and apartment owners who saw such government aid as competing with their industry.

By 1940, after nearly forty other states had passed such an enabling act, there was a new ray of hope for St. Paul. John McDonough became the city's mayor, and throughout his four terms in office, he worked to introduce such an act in the state legislature until, in 1949, the legislation finally was passed. By the end of World War II, St. Paul's housing situation showed little improvement. To compound matters a housing shortage had developed which had become so acute that many returning veterans and their families were forced to take up temporary residence in quonset huts erected on the city's playgrounds.

Footnotes

1. Edward H. Bennet & Daniel H. Burnham, *Plan For Chicago*, (Prepared under the direction of the Commercial Club), Chicago, 1909, page 108.
2. *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, Volume 45, James T. White Co., New York, 1962, page 460.
3. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 3-5-1917.
4. Amherst H. Wilder Charity, *Annual Report 1917-1918*, St. Paul, page 26.
5. Carol Aronovici, *Housing Conditions in St. Paul*, (report undertaken by the Wilder Charity at the request of the St. Paul Association of Commerce), St. Paul, 1917, page 74.
6. *Ibid*, page 11.
7. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 12-11-1917.
8. Carol Aronovici, *Housing Conditions in St. Paul*, St. Paul, 1917, page 74.
9. *Official Proceedings of the Common Council, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1918*, page 229.
10. Carol Aronovici, "Fallacies of the Americanization Movement", *Social Welfare*, Volume 1, Number 2, St. Paul, 1917, pages 1 & 2.
11. Esther M. Flint (with the cooperation of Carol Aronovici), *Health Conditions and Health Service in St. Paul*, Amherst H. Wilder Charity, St. Paul, 1919, page 102.
12. *Amherst H. Wilder Foundation Papers*, Box 1, Scrapbook 1917-1921, Minnesota Historical Society's Division of Archives and Manuscripts, St. Paul, (or see *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 2-2-19)
13. *Ibid*, (or see *St. Paul Dispatch*, 2-3-1919)
14. Amherst H. Wilder Charity, *Resume: 1906-1952*, St. Paul, 1952, page 16.
15. *Amherst H. Wilder Foundation Papers*, Box 5, "Program to the Board of Directors", 1918, Minnesota Historical Society Division of Archives and Manuscripts, St. Paul.
16. *Ibid*.
17. St. Paul Public Library, "Morgue" Biographical Clippings File, source and date unknown.
18. Carol Aronovici, *Americanization*, Keller Publishing Co., St. Paul, 1919, preface.
19. Carol Aronovici, *Women in Industry in Minnesota*, (report submitted by the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industries Bureau of Women and Children), St. Paul, 1920, page 35.
20. Carol Aronovici, *Housing and the Housing Problem*, McClurg & Co., Chicago, 1920.



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.

The 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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