RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Ramsey County Historical Society

Farming in the Shadow of the Cities: The Not-So-Rural History of Rose Township Farmers, 1850-1900

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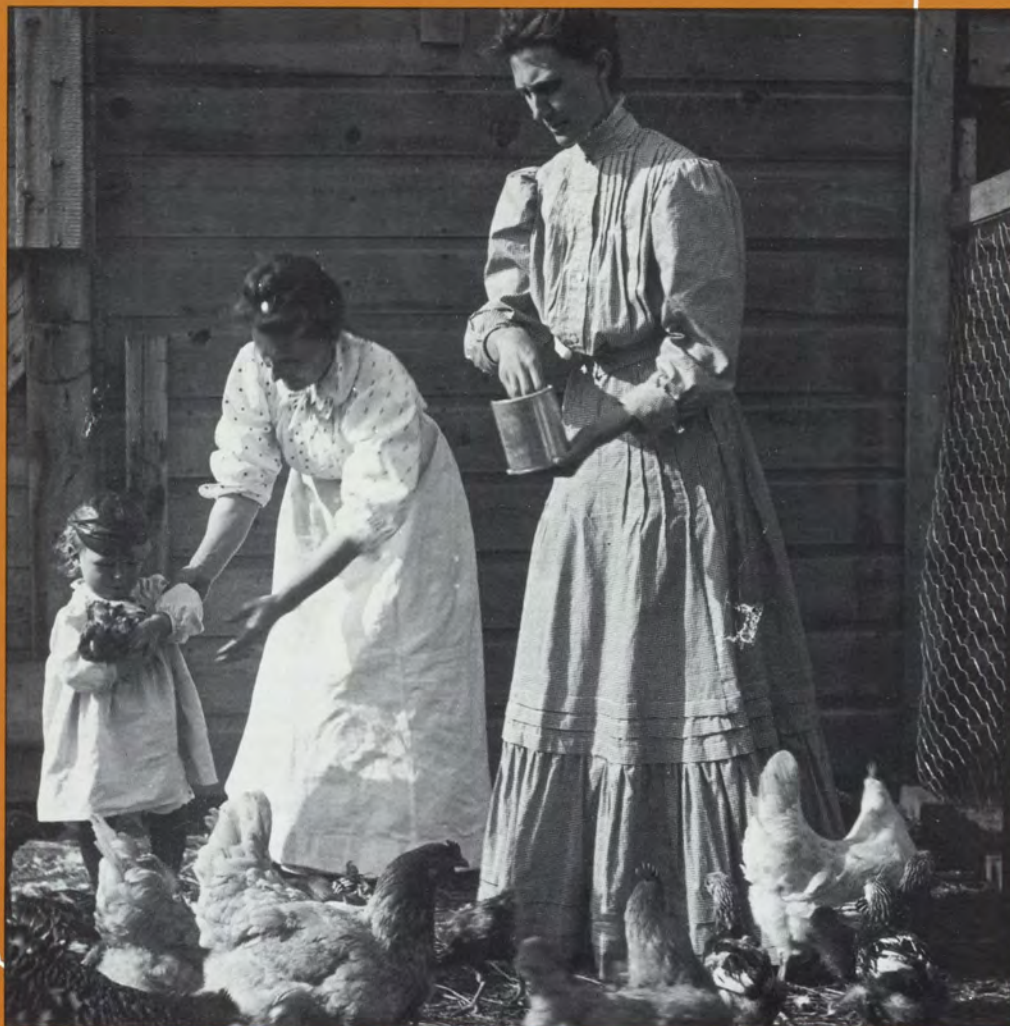

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Contents

Farming in the Shadow of the Cities:
The Not-So-Rural History of
Rose Township Farmers, 1850-1900
By Kendra Dillard
Page 3

Growing Up on Dayton's Bluff
A Turn-of-the-Century Boyhood
By Karl Trout
Page 20

Will the REAL Dorothy Hunt
Please Stand Up?
Page 22

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The photographs of Heman and Jane Gibbs on page 4 and of the farmhouse parlor and summer kitchen on pages 6 and 7 are by Erick Vryens. The Gibbs family photograph on page 15 is from the Ramsey County Historical Society collection. All other photographs used with the article beginning on page 3 are from the photographic collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. The photograph on the cover was taken by Dr. Emil King, Fulda, Minn.; the photo on page 13 by Kenneth Wright; the photo on page 15 by Joseph Brechet, Glencoe, Minn.; the photo on page 16 by H.D. Ayer, St. Anthony Park, Minn. The Trout house on page 21 was photographed by Gary Phelps for the Historic Sites Survey of Ramsey County conducted by the Ramsey County Historical Society and the St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission in 1981-83. The photograph of Doreen Lindborg on page 22 is from the files of Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Minnesota, and the photograph of Dorothy Hunt, also on page 22, is owned by Mrs. Hunt.

Growing Up on Dayton's Bluff

A Turn-of-the-Century Boyhood

Editor's Note: These memories of growing up on Dayton's Bluff around the turn-of-the-century are shared by a lifelong resident of St. Paul. They indicate, once again, that the homes and the pastimes of city dwellers were not greatly different from those of families living on the city's fringe. After noting that the first claim to land on Dayton's Bluff was made in 1839 by William Evans, a discharged soldier from Fort Snelling, and that 10 years later Lyman Dayton purchased 5,000 acres for residential development, the author describes his own early life in an area that, by the end of the Civil War, had become a fashionable upper class neighborhood.

By Karl H. Trout

A short distance to the north of Indian Mounds Park is a residential street, Burns Avenue, named after an early settler. On this street is a house that, with its flat roof and corner cupulo, is perhaps architecturally different from any other home built in the city. It was in this odd appearing house at 1163 Burns Avenue that George Trout and Georgiana (Jenny) Deichen commenced their wedded life in 1885, and it was here that five of the Trout children were born: Harriet, 1886; Edward, 1888; Helen, 1890; Karl, 1892; and Hazel, in 1895.

In 1892 the average home was without gas, electricity, indoor plumbing, running water, central heating, telephones, refrigeration, air conditioning, bath tubs, and dozens of other necessities of life. Airplanes, automobiles, and buses were figments of the imagination, as were radio, movies, television.

Benjamin Harrison was president of the United States, the Civil War had ended just twenty-seven years earlier, and railroad construction was in high gear. Electric streetcars were beginning to displace horse-drawn cars, and local transportation and communication was almost entirely by wagons and buggies, except in winter when sleighs and cutters glided over the snow.

Paved and graded roads and highways were almost non-existent. The pavement that did exist was usually of "cedar blocks". Roads and streets often followed lines of least resistance over hill and dale and in farm communities followed section boundaries. In winter there were no plows to clear away the snow.

IN THE BACK YARD of our house, and extending the entire width of the lot was a big red painted shed and outhouse. A steep driveway led from Burns Avenue to the barn. Inside, the kitchen was the largest room, which was true of most average homes. The kitchen stove kept it warm in winter, and meals were served there.

The cast iron stove burned wood, which meant that every house had a woodshed that was usually attached to the rear as a lean-to. A cord of wood would be purchased from a fuel and feed dealer. A bum or tramp, who were common visitors begging for food, would be given meals in exchange for cutting the wood and splitting the chunks into small pieces. My brother Ed and I would then carry the pieces into the woodshed and stack them in neat piles. In autumn enough wood was accumulated to last all winter. A wood box was placed next to the stove, and it was our job to keep it full for continued feeding of the fire during the day. Fires were started by using kindling, or very small pieces of wood which would be sprinkled with kerosene oil before igniting with a match.

All baking, cooking and heating was done with the kitchen stove. Ashes would accumulate, a shaker would sift them to a container below the fire pot and they would be carried out to the ash pile behind the barn. The upstairs bedrooms had no heat, but some houses had floor gratings that let heat into the rooms, If one slept upstairs, one wore flannel nightclothes in winter, and piled on blankets and comforters. In the morning Dad would start the kitchen stove before dawn so the room would be warm. When we had to get up we would grab our clothes and come to the warm kitchen to dress. The front room had a second stove, a "base burner" which was a "cool burner", and usually used anthracite coal which was a long-lasting fuel.

A COAL BIN formed part of the wood shed. Coal would be purchased by the ton and delivered to the coal bin. From there it would be carried to the base burner on a coal scuttle and poured in at the top of the base burner.

Lighting was by kerosene lamps which had wicks which would soak up the kerosene and provide a light when lit by a match. In better homes, large lamps sometimes were attached to the ceiling above the dining room table.

Trout house at 1163 Burns Avenue, Dayton's Bluff.

At our house water was drawn by handpump in the kitchen. Since there were no connecting sewers, dirty water was simply thrown out into the yard or driveway. Bathrooms with tubs and showers were not found in the average home. Baths were taken on Saturday night in tubs placed in the kitchen.

There were no supermarkets, and grocery stores often were miles away. You either carried your groceries home or, if a store had delivery service, orders would be delivered by horse and wagon.

As far as we were concerned, Dad would bring what food was needed from his store. I do remember clearly, however, that every morning the milkman would come to the door with a five gallon can of milk and an empty quart can. Mother would tell him how much milk she wanted, and it would be measured out from the five gallon can.

SINCE ELECTRIC REFRIGERATORS were unknown, people had iceboxes. Ice companies would cut tons of ice from the many lakes in the winter and store it in ice houses where chunks of ice would be piled to great heights. Sawdust would be spread between layers to keep them from freezing together. In summer, small chunks of ice would be delivered by an ice wagon to homes where it would be placed in the top of the ice box to keep the food from spoiling.

Marbles was the most common game for young boys. A large ring was drawn on hard ground. Marbles were placed in the center on dirt divits that raised them from the ground. The number of marbles and the sizes of the ring depended on the number of boys and their shooting skill. Holding a large "shooter" between thumb and forefinger, the boys would take turns trying to shoot the marbles out of the ring. The game usually was played "for keeps" – you kept the marbles you shot out of the ring, so there were losers and winners.

Marbles were of various sizes, colors, and value, such as "commies", "crockeries", "crystals", and "agates". "Agates" were the most valuable and the most sought after. In one sense, the game was similar to pool. If you did not hit a marble out of the ring, you may have left an easy shot for the next boy.

Bicycles were common, but the dusty dirt roads were difficult to ride on, as were the wooden plank sidewalks. However, the city had built a bicycle path beside the sidewalk along Burns Avenue. Bicycle paths were common in many parts of the city. Streets were not lit by electric lights, for this was the gaslight era. How well I remember the lamp lighter who came at dusk with his long lighter to light the gas in those flimsy Welshbach lights.

AT THE FOOT OF Indian Mounds Park and alongside the railroad tracks were the sand cliffs, the miniature "White Cliffs of Dover". A steep, rocky road, called the Old Fish Hatchery Road because it led to the State Fish Hatchery, ran from our driveway to the tracks. The neighborhood children would fill various shapes and sizes of bottles with colored sand from these cliffs — layers of sand of different colors — blue, yellow, red, green. Bottles with various color designs were displayed at sand stores and sold for marbles.

Directly across from our house was a heavily wooded area, and farther to the east were low grassy hills and valleys. Each spring it was customary to go picking flowers — crocuses, May flowers, violets, marigolds, and jack-in-the-pulpits, which were hardest to find. A band of gypsies camped each summer in this wooded area. In all the years they came, they never caused any trouble, but they were certainly unusual neighbors.

Everyone had sleds. Hills and valleys were everywhere, and sliding down steep hills was a common winter pastime. We had a big red bobsled, besides some smaller sleds, and we also had a big black dog named Rover. It was a common sight to see harnessed dogs pulling sleds with youngsters riding. We had a harness for Rover and our big home-made sled held as many as three kids for a ride.

WHEN SLIDING conditions were favorable, with hard, semi-iced packed snow, we could start at the top of our steep driveway, cross Burns Avenue to the Old Fish Hatchery road and slide all the way to the end of the railroad tracks, a long thrilling ride, but a long pull coming back.

East of the sand cliffs, the state had three or four fish breeding ponds as well as two museum buildings. On week-ends Indian Mounds Park and the fish hatchery were popular spots. The streetcars would be filled with people. Those fortunate enough to have horses and buggies followed the two roads to the fish ponds and the museums.

Streetcars didn't run to the Indian Mounds in win-

ter. My only recollection of streetcars prior to 1900 was that of small "dinky" open cars with trailers which operated on week-ends. There certainly were no plows to clear the snow from street and car tracks.

I have no recollection of attending any school while living at 1163 Burns Avenue. The nearest school, Van Buren on Maple Street and Conway, was a long distance away, and there were no buses, streetcars, or automobiles. After we moved to 948 Hastings Avenue I went to the Van Buren School until the Mounds Park School was built. I have an 1892 report card from the Van Buren school.

Trivial incidents also come to my mind when I think of this remote period. One is marching up Burns Avenue with a group of kids carrying small American flags. Why? I don't know. Perhaps some victory in the Spanish American War, or the signing of the Peace Treaty, or the Fourth of July.

Will the *Real* Dorothy Hunt Please Stand Up?

Dorothy Hunt

Doreen Lindborg

We often say, in the publishing business, that if anything is to go wrong, it will not be trivial. Our most recent issue of *Ramsey County History,* with its history of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, was no sooner off the press and in the hands of its readers — including some 8,000 past and present employees of BCBSM — than we learned that the photograph on page 10 identified as Dorothy Hunt was not Dorothy Hunt at all, but that of Doreen Lindborg.

How did such a thing happen? At some point in the mists of time the photograph of Doreen Lindborg unaccountably found its way into a file bearing Dorothy Hunt's name and there it remained for future researchers and writers to take at face value, as it were.

That this case of mistaken identity should happen to someone who played such a key role in the history of BCBSM is most regretable. Dorothy Hunt, who rose to the position of vice president of actuarial research with BCBSM, started her 29-year career with Minnesota Blue Cross as a statistical clerk in 1944. As the health coverage business grew more complex and competitive, she advanced from clerk to statistician to vice president of actuarial research in 1958. She was the first woman vice president within the national system of Blue Cross plans. After her retirement from Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota in 1973, the national Blue Cross Association hired her for a six-year stint as assistant actuary to audit actuarial operations of Blue Cross plans across the country.

Heman Gibbs

Picking raspberries in Bloomington.

Summer kitchen as it looks today.

Farmers market, probably in Minneapolis, ca. 1900.

The Gibbs Farm Museum, owned by the Ramsey County Historical Society, at Cleveland and Larpenteur in Falcon Heights.

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