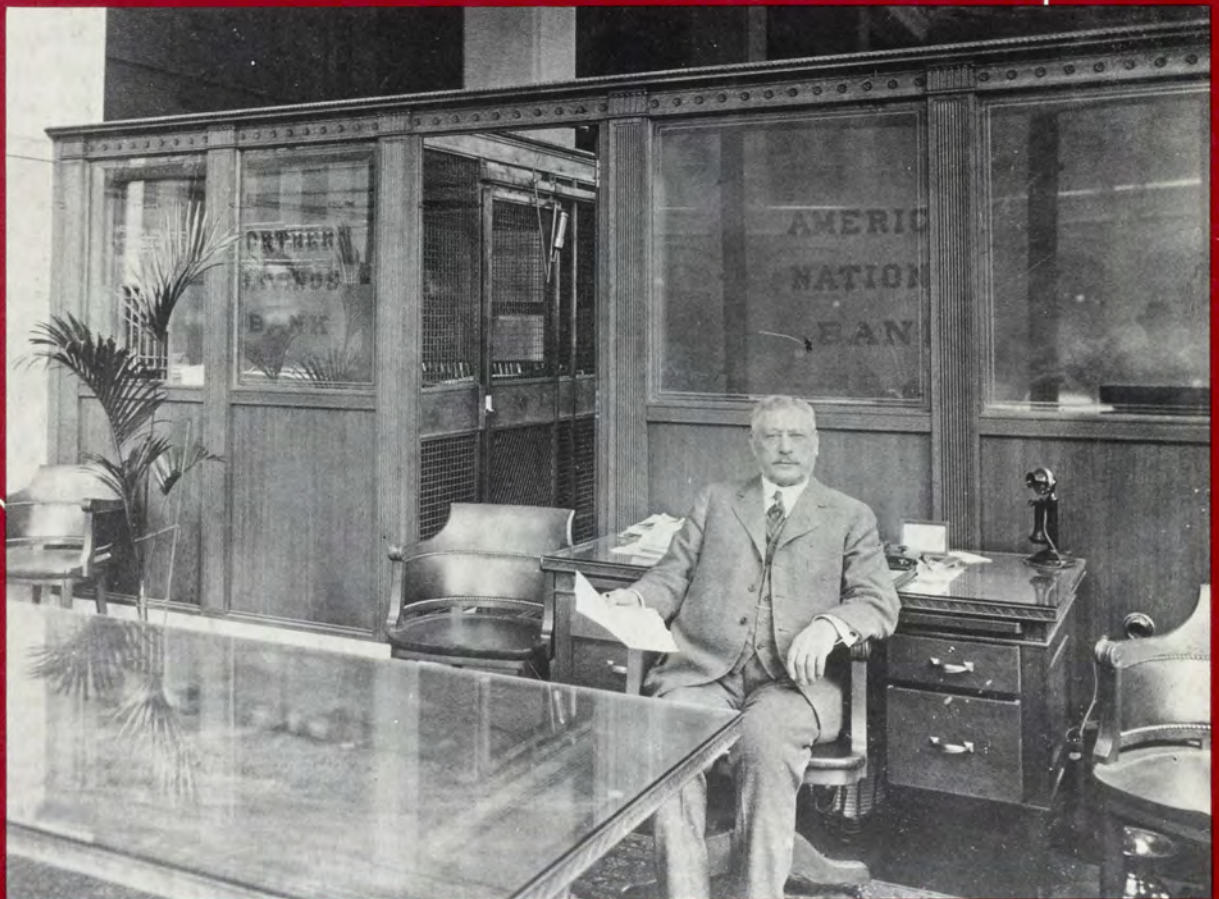


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Ramsey County Historical Society

The American National Bank and the Bremer Brothers

Volume 23
Number 1



Ramsey County History

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ON THE COVER: Benjamin Baer's office in the American National Bank was typical of banking in that period just after the turn-of-the-century. The Jacob Schmidt Brewing Company (small photograph) was linked with the bank through much of the bank's history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: All photographs used in this issue of Ramsey County History are from the Audio-visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.

George H. Trout And the Corner Grocery Store

Editor's Note: These memories of his father's grocery store and of a time when crackers came in barrels rather than boxes, are shared with *Ramsey County History* readers by a lifelong resident of St. Paul. The author's earlier reminiscences of growing up on Dayton's Bluff as the new century was dawning appeared in Volume 20, Number 3, of *Ramsey County History*, published in 1985.

By Karl H. Trout

My father was born in 1860 on a farm in Castle Rock Township, not far from Farmington, Minnesota. There were eight boys and two girls born to Henry and Louisa Trout. Five of the boys remained on the farm, but apparently farming did not appeal to my father, so at about the age of 18 or 20 he came to St. Paul. He married in 1885 when he was 25 years old.

St. Paul in the late 1870s and early 1880s was in its infancy and more like a frontier town. A book which I inherited gave his address as 367 Jackson St. This was presumably a rooming house of some sort, and its location today would be the parking space behind the Federal Building at Jackson and Kellogg Boulevard.

My Dad found a job with the Andrew Schock Grocery Company at 7th and Broadway, presumably as an apprentice, errand boy, stock boy and general handy man. Whatever the duties, it was the start of a career which lasted some forty years. Sometime in the 1890s Dad left the Schock Grocery and started his own business as the George H. Trout Grocery Company on Bates Avenue and Plum Street on Dayton's Bluff. I say the 1890s because on January 6, 1948, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* showed a picture of the directors of the Retail Grocers Association as they posed for a picture in 1901. There were eleven directors, and one of them was George H. Trout. With the picture was a story of the origin and growth of the St. Paul Retail Grocers Association.

My Dad was a popular and successful business man. He was an extrovert, very friendly, and knew all the prominent retail grocers, wholesalers, merchants and farmers. This popularity paid off, as indicated by his election to the association's board of directors. Dad took charge of the buying, banking, and financial aspects of



O.W. Schornstein grocery store at 707 Hudson Avenue, a competitor of George Trout's. From Picturesque Dayton's Bluff by Smith & Horst, 1905.

the business, as well as all routine matters of running the store. It was his store, and he had the experience.

GROCERY STORES at the turn-of-the-century were entirely different from the modern supermarket. In the "good old days" most items came in bulk. Some packaged items would be placed on shelves reaching to the ceiling. Ladders running on an iron rail would be pushed to the proper shelf, and the clerk would climb the ladder to get the item you wanted. Sugar, flour, rice, beans, tea, were sold in bulk. The amount desired was weighed, placed in paper sacks and tied with a string. Coffee beans were kept in bins according to price (25-40 cents per pound). After being weighed, they were put into an immense coffee-grinder, which stood on the floor and could grind any amount from one to ten pounds. All grinding was done by turning a big wheel by hand while the customer waited. To grind ten pounds of coffee was a man-sized job.

Because most families baked their own bread, the cheapest way to buy flour was in 100-pound sacks. Farmers also would buy sugar in 100-pound sacks. In September and October families would spend weeks canning fruits, vegetables, pickles, melons, apples (into apple butter), jellies, and jams. Everything was cheap by the crate, barrel, bushel, or basket. Big families would have a storage room in the basement where shelves reaching to the ceiling were filled with "goodies" for the winter. Farmers dug a storage pit into the ground at the side of the house. It also served as a cyclone cellar.

On farms and among large families canning bees were common, with families helping with preparing,

cooking, and placing the fruit in Mason jars. I remember clearly the Elberta peaches from Palisade, Colorado, as the best peaches for canning or eating, grown anywhere. They usually came on the market in late August or early September. Customers would wait for these peaches before canning. Even for eating, they were and still are incomparable.

POTATOES WERE SOLD by the bushel, one-half bushel or peck. They were never weighed, only measured, and this was not an accurate measure. Some measuring resulted in "heaping full," and some just "even." In autumn farmers would bring in wagon loads of bulk potatoes, and would pour them down "chutes" into bins in Dad's basement. Different bins contained different potatoes with different prices. Purchases had to last until the new crop came in the next year.

Apples were purchased from the farmers by the barrel or bushel and were sold that way. Everyone ate apples. They were cheap. Children liked them, and apple butter was a common spread. Apples brought in from the farms were not the bright-colored hard apples shipped to supermarkets today. Local apples were easy to bite into, which is not true today. Several varieties were available: Ben Davis, Delicious, Baldwin, Winesap, and Greenings, all tasty.

Butter was brought in five, three and two-pound crocks. Every farmer had a different-tasting butter, and a woman customer always wanted to taste the butter before purchasing. A small taster would be plunged into a crock and sometimes she would taste three or four crocks before making a purchase. Some creameries like Tilden on old Third Street, where the Y.W.C.A. now stands, would sell butter and cheese in large round chunks, and a clerk would cut the amount desired by a customer, weigh it, wrap it up and give it to the customer. Eggs were brought in by farmers in large egg cases holding ten dozen eggs, separated by thin cardboard dividers, supposedly to keep the eggs from breaking. These eggs were emptied in a large container and sold by the dozen. They would be put in double paper sacks, often causing breakage.

Fresh vegetables were a big item for the farmers. Leaf lettuce, cabbage, beets, carrots, turnips, rutabagas, beans, squash, tomatoes, cucumbers, asparagus, rhubarb were all sold in bulk. Sold in small quart boxes were strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, and gooseberries. Peaches, pears, canteloupe, and watermelon were purchased from commission merchants on Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard). Nothing was sold by the pound. Peaches and pears were sold in small baskets, oranges, lemons, and bananas by the dozen. Tokay, Thompson seedless, and Malaga grapes came in large square baskets (four to a crate) and were sold that way. Sweet corn came in bulk and would take so

much display room that the ears usually were piled high on the sidewalk.

Although most families baked their own bread, there was a bread case (glass enclosed) where loaves of bread, doughnuts and sweet rolls were delivered by a bakery. Everything was unwrapped and brought into the store in a large basket. For those who baked their own bread, small cakes of yeast could be purchased for 2 cents each.

A TOBACCO CASE was a must. Pipes were common, and the "Henry George 5¢ cigar" was the people's choice. The best cigar made could be purchased for 5 or 10 cents. Pipe tobacco came in small 5-cent sacks tied with a string. "Dukes Mixture" was the most popular brand, but 10 and 15-cent sacks were available for the "expensive" smokers. "Dukes Mixture" was also used by the roll-your-own cigaret smoker. Chewing tobacco came in long slabs and was cut to the size a customer wanted. "Coimax" was the popular brand, and "Piper Heidsieck" the elite brand. Snuff was also sold, but in small quantities. In those days a woman was an outcast if she smoked. For juveniles to smoke was simply not even thought of, and cancer was never mentioned. Certainly, no one ever connected cancer with smoking.

We must not forget the candy case. It would drive the men "nuts" when kids came in to buy a penny's worth of candy. A youngster would spend five minutes trying to decide whether to buy two for one cent, three for one cent, or one cent each. If a kid had a nickel to spend, he was from a rich family. Candy was kept mostly to give to farmers to take home to their children.

This narrative would not be complete without a word about the mechanics of running a grocery store at the turn-of-the-century. My Dad and his brother, Charlie, and a delivery man, were the three men involved. In addition, there were two horses, "Daisy," a chestnut work horse, and "Lady," a high-stepping white mare. Charlie lived above the store with his family. The barn, attached to the store, had three stalls and a hay loft. The wagon shed was in the rear of the barn. In one corner of the store, Dad had a roll-top desk where he did the paper work. In the other corner was a large kerosene oil tank. Many stores sold kerosene in gallon cans (or five gallon cans) because so much was in demand for lighting lamps and starting fires.

SO MANY CUSTOMERS were without telephones that the first order of business was for Charlie to start at 7 a.m. with "Lady" and the buggy to call on customers with no phones and take their orders. These orders, together with those which came over the phone, would be filled and placed in folding delivery boxes.

At 10 a.m. the delivery man, Charles Bronsak, would hitch "Daisy" to the wagon and deliver the



Fritz Woost's Groceries and Provisions on E. 7th Street, around 1895 – another typical neighborhood grocery.

orders. At the same time, Dad would take “Lady” and the buggy and drive to Commission Row on Third Street in downtown St. Paul, where three blocks of merchants filled the sidewalks with crates of fruit of every description, almost all of it from California. Dad would load the back of the buggy (a one-seater) with fresh fruit for the day’s sale. He would also stop at the Globe Hotel on Sixth Street near Broadway. The Globe was a profitable customer since it was close to the Andrew Schock Grocery. At 2 p.m. Charlie would take “Daisy” and the wagon and deliver the Globe Hotel orders, and other orders to customers he had in the downtown area. Many times I would go with the men on their trips. Sometimes they would let me drive, which was a great thrill for a boy.

In those days there was no bridge connecting downtown Third Street with Dayton’s Bluff. There was only a wooden bridge that crossed the railroad tracks, and a steep hill that had to be conquered before one reached Hoffman Avenue (half-way up) or Maria Avenue at the top. Third Street was the city’s first business

street in the early days of St. Paul. Bankers, lawyers, insurance companies, and department stores were located on both sides of Third Street which was narrow because it was so close to the river and the railroad terminus.

Dad’s store was on a popular corner where three streets came together: Bates Avenue, Plum Street, and Hastings Avenue. These three streets joined in a wide plaza. The Rondo-Maria streetcar turned the corner of Maria and Plum, then went a block to Hastings Avenue where it ran along the south side of the plaza to Earl and Hastings and then to the Indian Mounds. In the center of this plaza was a large circular cast iron drinking fountain for thirsty horses. Six or more horses and wagons could gather around this fountain. Hastings Avenue was the main street leading to Woodbury and the tremendous farming area to the north, east, and south. A short distance from Earl and Hastings, the

avenue became the Hastings Road connecting with Upper and Lower Afton Roads, Battle Creek, Newport, St. Paul Park, and Hastings, Minn.

TODAY MUCH OF this rich farming area is the home of 3M, the city of Woodbury, and Battle Creek, with the new high schools, churches, and schools. Once, all of this extensive farm land was a gold mine for corn, potatoes, apples, melons, and fresh vegetables of every description. Furthermore, this was a German community and a Methodist church built in 1866 was the center of much of the community activity of its parishioners. The descendants of those German farmers who did not care for farming would move to Dayton's Bluff and join the Dayton's Bluff German Methodist Church at Fourth and Maple Streets, where the Trout family were members and where the writer of this narrative was confirmed in 1905 in German.

One thing I remember very clearly was the fact that the biggest day of the year was "Grocers' Picnic Day" at one of the nearby lakes. Dad would hitch up "Lady" to the buggy and take a few of us kids to the picnic. It was a big day for Mother and Dad whose popularity was evident at these picnics. He knew everyone, and was part of every event: fishing, horse shoe pitching, kids races, etc. Tables were filled with food, and I presume there was plenty of beer for those who like it. It was a gala family outing for everyone.

About 1902, Dad apparently was prospering, as he bought two lots at Forest and Hastings Avenue, only three blocks from the store. On one lot he built a large modern house for the family which was about to increase from five to seven children. Raymond and Anita were born at this new house.

On the corner lots, a group of young blades built a tennis court which became a popular "hangout" for the boys and their girl friends. It was here that sister Helen met Walter Temme, and here brother Ed brought Eva Rapp. So a brother-in-law and sister-in-law were brought into the family as a result of the tennis court.

ALL OF THE BOYS were from families who were members of Dayton's Bluff Methodist Church. Our new home therefore was scene of constant action, with the boys playing tennis, and their girl friends cheering them on from benches along the sides.

About this time also, Dad doubled the size of his store, remodeled the original, put the entrance at the corner, so as to have a long glass front as a display window. The name also was changed to Trout Brothers. It was the farmers from this extensive area who were primarily responsible for making Trout Brothers a profitable business and enabled them to double the size of their store. The location on the main entrance to St. Paul, by the tri-corner plaza with its cast iron drinking fountain, made it the finest location on Dayton's Bluff

between East Seventh Street and the Mississippi.

However, Trout Brothers did have local competition. One block to the north was Schornstein Grocery on Hudson (now Wilson) Avenue and Bates. This building is still standing and is listed on the National Register of Historic Sites because of its significant architecture. Opposite Trout Brothers on a triangular piece of land between Bates, Plum, and Hastings was the E.J. Sauer Grocery. Sauer's Grocery some years later was sold to Blackmun's Grocery. Ten years ago I wrote to Justice Harry Blackmun of the United States Supreme Court to inquire if there was any connection between him and the Blackmun Grocery. He replied as follows: "You are correct in your surmise about the store at Bates and Hastings on Dayton's Bluff, St. Paul. I well recall your father, and your uncle in their store. My father had the one across the street, and often I was sent on errands between the two."

When we moved to 948 Hastings Avenue, the Mounds Park School was built only one block away on Cypress and Pacific. In September, 1902, I transferred from the Van Buren School to the Mounds Park School. Since our store was only three blocks away, when school was out at 3:30 p.m. I was expected to help at the store. Two jobs I hated. Grinding coffee was hard for a 10-year-old because turning the big wheel was so difficult. Sprouting potatoes in the spring was not too bad, but separating the good potatoes from the spoiled ones was a messy, dirty, smelly job that I despised. Good potatoes were washed and sold, spoiled potatoes were thrown out.

ONE WINTER PLEASURE must not be forgotten. When school was dismissed at 3:30 p.m., farmers would be returning home with the big, empty sleighs and hay racks. Hastings Avenue was their exit street, and the kids knew it, and would have fun hitching rides on those sleighs. They would grab the sides and step onto the big runners for an exciting ride for two or three blocks to Earl and Hastings, then walk back for another ride. Sometimes an empty flat hay rack would come along, and there would be a scramble to get on. This was considered the biggest treat of all — a bonus ride. Farmers would get a kick out of seeing the fun the kids were having, and often would speed up their horses to make the kids really run.

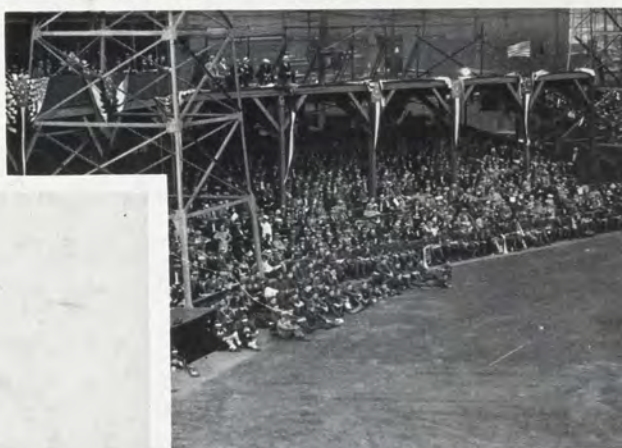
It is hard to believe that today Hastings Avenue is Federal Highway I-94, whereas at the turn-of-the-century it was a winter playground for youngsters after school and on Saturdays.

Guild of Catholic Women's garden party. See pages 13-16.



Otto Bremer. See pages 3-12.

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Lexington Ball Park. See pages 21-22.



Fritz Woost's grocery. See pages 17-20.

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



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