

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Ramsey County Historical Society

Minnesota's First Arts School—
St. Agatha's Conservatory
And the Pursuit of Excellence

Volume 24
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ON THE COVER: *The log chapel built by Father Galtier on Bench (now Second) Street in downtown St. Paul became the chapel of the Sisters of St. Joseph after their arrival in the frontier village in 1851. By 1884 they had established St. Agatha's Convent and Conservatory at Cedar and Exchange Streets. The large photograph shows the conservatory, which was Minnesota's first arts school, sometime before its closing in 1962. The conservatory's Music Building stood on the right. The conservatory and convent (on the left) still stands. Known as Central Manor for 25 years, it is now the Exchange Building.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: *The large photograph on the front cover, the photographs on pages 5, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 17, and the top three pictures on the back cover are from the CSJ Archives, Sisters of St. Joseph Administration Center, 1884 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul. The photograph of the Palmer House on page 6 is from the Archives of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. All other photographs, including the sketch on the front cover and the picture of the boat race on the back cover, are from the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Boats, Boaters and Boat Clubs Slips Cost 10 Cents a Foot

EDITOR'S NOTE: For more than 100 years the melting of ice on the Mississippi has been followed by men (and now women) and their boats. The following brief history of the St. Paul Yacht Club was adapted for Ramsey County History by Thomas J. Kelley from a history prepared by James Taylor Dunn for the yacht club's 75th anniversary in 1987. Reminiscences of the Minnesota Boat Club were preserved by Thomas C. O'Brien, St. Paul attorney and an associate justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, in a delightful book he wrote for his family, There Were Four of Us or, Was It Five. It was privately published in 1936 but a copy has been donated by the family to the Ramsey County Historical Society's library.

The St. Paul Yacht Club has been part of the St. Paul community and the downtown river front for 77 years.

Pleasure boating on the Mississippi River at St. Paul began more than a century ago. The Dingle Boat Works was established here in 1880 and hundreds of Dingle boats powered by Capitol marine engines manufactured in St. Paul were being used on the river by 1912, creating a demand for a convenient place for these boats to be docked in the summer and stowed in the winter. To meet this need the St. Paul Motor Boat Club was formally organized on February 26, 1912, to serve boaters in the St. Paul area. Sixty-eight families, including that of Mayor Herbert P. Keller, signed up as charter members.

The city health commissioner granted the new club permission to use a part of Harriet Island located directly opposite the city's central downtown district. At the time the island was the site of the city's public baths and therefore under the supervision of the health department. The lease was complimentary and during the club's early years the city donated \$500 to the club each year.

During the club's first year floating docks were built. Boat slips cost 10 cents a foot. Gasoline was 10 cents a gallon and each five-gallon can had to be lowered by rope from the Wabasha Street bridge to the docks below. The first dockmaster was a Mrs. McNamara, who lived on a houseboat moored to the south side of Raspberry Island, now known as Navy Island. Arrangements were made with the Minnesota Boat Club, an organization of sculling enthusiasts, to use its facilities on Raspberry Island. The motorboat owners became associates of the older organization and were issued membership and entrance cards for the clubhouse which still stands at the upper end of the island. The club also engaged in social activities, including excursions, dances and picnics.

The following year the club purchased an old river barge left from the lumbering days and moved it to the lower end of Harriet Island, about where the marina is located today. By July 12, 1914, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* was able to report:

"...the club has been evolved from an idea to a strong, live organization. It is financially sound. It affords hosts of people a respite from the oppression of the city by allowing them to seek shady nooks among the natural scenery of our rivers."

From 1916 through the 1930s the club sponsored power boat races on the river. The first year races were held Chris Smith, who lived for a time in St. Paul and later started the Chris Craft boat company in Michigan, built a boat for the Minneapolis Boat Club named appropriately "Miss Minneapolis." Smith set a world water speed record when he piloted the boat on a run between the Wabasha Street bridge and the High Bridge at 62 miles per hour.

In 1934 the club changed its name from the St. Paul Motor Boat Club to the St. Paul Yacht Club. The name change did not change the character of the club or its activities. It continued to sponsor races and water shows in cooperation with the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce and other organizations until World War II, when fuel shortages and the absence of many members serving in the armed forces limited the club's activities. Many club members and their craft took an active part in the U.S. Coast Guard Power Squadron. A cordial relationship between the Yacht Club and the Coast Guard and its auxiliary continues today.

The conclusion of World War II in 1945 meant a return to normal for the club but activities were curtailed again a year later. Dredging and other harbor improvements at Harriet Island harbor required the club to move its docks and floating clubhouse to the river bank at Holman Airport. The club remained at that location until the fall of 1951.



The Harriet Island baths and pavilion around 1910. C.P. Gibson photograph.

The work at Harriet Island, which was begun in 1948, included the widening of the river for the protection of the Robert Street bridge and to enable tow boats to move upstream against the current in high water. The swampy channel at the south end of the island, which separated it from the mainland, was filled in and the entire lower end of the island was raised from five feet to 20 feet. About 80 feet was removed from the entire length of the north shore of the island to widen the river.

In 1952, less than a year after the club returned its docks to Harriet Island, it faced a record flood. The river crested at over 22 feet. In April, 1965, the river set a new record when the water crested at 26.1 feet at St. Paul. The Yacht Club lost its clubhouse to that flood.

The Corps of Engineers had dredged a small boat harbor at the upstream end of Harriet Island in 1962 but it remained unused until after the flood of 1965 when the Yacht Club was given permission to use it temporarily. The club has occupied the upper harbor ever since and now 94 slips are in use there.

Over the last century the river corridor through St. Paul has provided a place for recreation for the residents of the area. After 1900 Harriet Island, which was easily accessible, was a place where thousands of people bathed, picnicked, listened to concerts, visited the zoo or went boating each week.

During the late 1930s the Federal Works Progress Administration built the pavilion which still is in use on the island. The WPA also built roads and picnic facilities and made other improvements at Hidden Falls Park, Indian Mounds Park and other locations along the river.

Following World War II the city government and its development agencies were encouraging commercial use of the river and industrial

development along its corridor. In some places marginal housing was removed and the land offered for industrial use. The emphasis had turned away from the recreational use of the river corridor but by 1970 interest in its use for recreation was reviving. Plans were being pushed for turning lower Lilydale into a park, for the restoration and expansion of Hidden Falls and for the addition of Crosby Lake to the Hidden Falls Park area. The development of Fort Snelling State Park and the establishment of a huge federal reserve on the Minnesota River adjacent to Fort Snelling were in the works. The U.S. Department of Interior with its National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service began taking a greater interest in the river so that by this time the Corps of Engineers was still a powerful force on the river but it was no longer the only federal agency on the scene.

The Minnesota Boat Club

Before St. Paul grew to metropolitan proportions, the young people were largely dependent upon themselves for amusement, and among the organizations for this purpose the Minnesota Boat Club was prominent. The club had been organized at an early date by a group of young men of whom Charles Corning—an uncle, I think, of Leavitt and Clifford Corning of this city—was a leader. Among the organizers or very early members of the club were L.W. Rundlett, Hunt Butler, W. H. Hyndman, C. D. O'Brien, Kenneth Clark and many others, some of whom achieved national fame as oarsmen.

It was the custom to give an inter-club regatta every Fourth of July, the course being a mile upstream and return, from the boathouse on Raspberry Island. A formal ball was given once a year and, like the regatta, was well attended. One beautiful summer night we gave what we called a "fete champetre" on the island. The moonlight glinting through the trees illuminated many locations where romantic couples could sit out dances.

Each year those who had capsized on the river were required to finance a picnic, always held on the river bottoms about five miles above the boathouse. In rowing to the picnic grounds, we necessarily passed Banholzer's brewery, where it was convenient to obtain some kegs of beer to be consumed during a day spent in foot races, wrestling matches, baseball and other sports.

A legend of the club is that of a boat race

between Chris O'Brien and Kenneth Clark, who became president of the Merchants National Bank. Neither was an oarsman, so the race had to be rowed in heavy boats. So much time was spent in covering the course, most of the spectators left before the race was finished. Another legend is of the time when a group of husky young Englishmen who had settled at Fairmont came to St. Paul with their four-oared shells to race with the club here. Charles F. Marvin, a perfect young Hercules, was stroke of the Minnesota crew and volunteered to entertain the visitors the evening before the race. Next day, Charlie appeared at the boathouse in the pink of condition, but the visitors had been so over-entertained they were scarcely able to finish the course. Marvin's crew triumphantly won the race.

Among the later members were W. H. Lightner, James K. Taylor, Cass Gilbert, M. J. Boyle, Lucius Ordway, John J. O'Leary, John and Percy Parker, George Becker, and myself. Very few of us developed into great oarsmen, but a notable four-oared crew was composed of Hunt Butler, bow; George Becker, stroke; and the Parker boys in the waist.

The members would do their rowing on the river in the afternoon, after five o'clock, and after a shower or a plunge in the river, would climb the long stairs to the bridge and proceed at once to Grote's "Tivoli", a very respectable saloon and pavilion on the river bank, facing Bridge Square, and there quench their thirst with beer. I never knew of any excessive indulgence on those occasions.

Hanlon, a champion professional sculler, was present at a regatta held in Minneapolis, in which our club participated. A discussion arose as to the care required in order to avoid capsizing the frail single shell made of paper or of the lightest cedar and reduced to the smallest possible size. John O'Brien, a rich lumberman from Stillwater, offered to bet \$100 against Hanlon's shell that he could remove the outriggers from the boat and then paddle it around a lake. Not realizing O'Brien's experience, while a youth, in riding logs on the St. Croix River, Hanlon eagerly accepted the wager. The outriggers were removed, and O'Brien, furnished with an oar, took his seat in the shell and not only paddled it safely in a sitting position but also, when well launched actually stood up in the shell and continued to propel it, returning to the landing place in

safety.

In my youth nearly all athletic exercises were in the hands of amateurs. We had no million-dollar skating rink. Instead of professional hockey, we would construct and clean our own rinks, where shinny instead of hockey was played. We would go into the woods and dig up a shrub, the root of which curved sufficiently for our purpose; then, with this as a shinny block, we would take sides and try to propel it across a line drawn over the ice. Our first skates were those in which the blades were imbedded in wood from the heel of which a screw protruded. This was firmly screwed into the heel of the shoe, and the forward portion of the skate was fastened to the foot with straps. Later came the club skate, made entirely of metal fastened to the shoe by levers. Club skates were known as half-rockers, the front of the skate curving upward, the rear portion of the blade terminating just beyond the heel. To stop, we turned up one foot, letting the sharp end cut into the ice. Then came the full-rockers, on which the blade curved at each end; and to stop, one turned the blade sidewise. With these curved skates, our chief amusement aside from shinny, was fancy skating, in which we cut various figures on the ice.

Coasting was another winter sport, in which we used everything from a single sled to the large bob-sleds seating ten to twelve persons. These sleds generally were of home manufacture and afforded us the keenest pleasure.

Another recreation was provided when a party of young people would secure one of the big bob sleighs used by the express company. The sleigh would be half filled with straw and a liberal supply of buffalo robes, and would be drawn by four horses. "Straw rides", as they were called, would afford delightful entertainment, which generally ended with a dance at the house of one of the party.

The Minnesota Boat Club is still active...I was greatly attached to it. Although never a superior rower, I greatly enjoyed rowing and participated in the winning of some minor races. As an active member and before my marriage, I thought it impossible I would ever give up rowing; but as a married man, I realized that I must give stricter attention to meal hours and other domestic obligations than was required by an indulgent mother. So I resigned from the club.

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Judge Palmer's house at Exchange and Cedar. See Page 6.



"The Ireland Connection": Sisters St. John, left; Celestine and Seraphine. See page 3.



A play staged by St. Agatha's Expression Department. See Page 13. (Can anyone identify these youngsters?)

Passengers on the steamboat, "Red Wing," docked on the St. Paul riverfront, watch the Minnesota Boat Club bantam four race about 1910. See page 20.

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



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