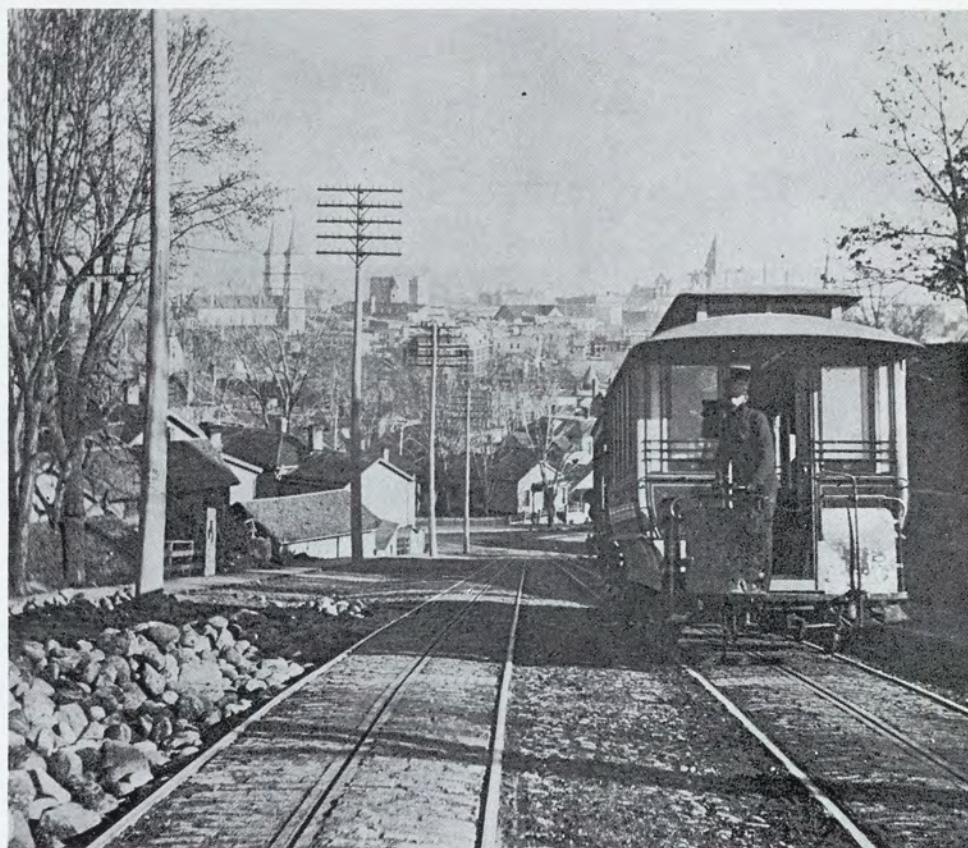
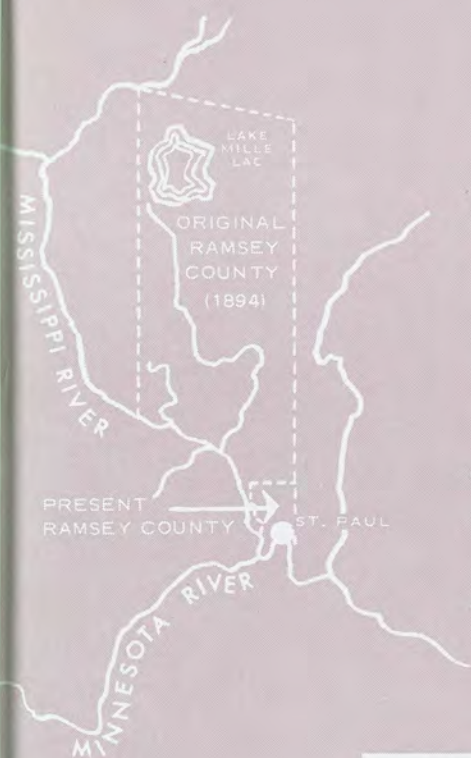


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Fall

1964

Volume 1

Number 2

Ramsey County History

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Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

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On the Cover: This 1895 photograph shows one of St. Paul's cable cars described in George M. Brack's article beginning on page 3. The car is ascending Selby Hill. This and other pictures illustrating Mr. Brack's reminiscences of a tranquil era are from the Minnesota Historical Society's collection.

"We Was Ordered Out on the Double-quick . . . They Skeedadled"

Sergeant Ramer's Indian War

BY VIRGINIA BRAINARD KUNZ

IN AUGUST OF 1862, Major General John Pope was encamped with his army along the Rappahannock River in northern Virginia, Chief Little Crow and his Santee Sioux warriors, hungry and desperate, were muttering in their lodges along the Minnesota River, and a young man of 24, James Thackery Ramer, was harvesting grain on his father's farm at Lewiston, west of Winona.

Before 30 days had passed, fate in the guise of an overworked Congress trying to deal with Civil War problems and tardy at voting the Indians their annual payment of money for lands ceded to the federal government, would draw together the lives of these three men in the brief but bloody conflict known as the Sioux Uprising of 1862.

The events of the Sioux War have been told and retold, but they never seem to lose their freshness when seen again through the eyes of the men who were there. James T. Ramer was one of these men, an apparently level-headed, sensible young man who recorded his experiences with all the wide-eyed candor of youth.

Today's generation, dedicated as it is to typewriter and telephone, can be everlastingly grateful to men like Ramer who took the trouble to carry pen, inkwell and notebook into battle, and to record vividly each

day's events. Besides being a dedicated diarist, Ramer was a faithful letterwriter and his descendants, with a fine feeling for history, had the good sense to preserve both his diary and his letters. Today they are in the possession of his grandson, Ramer D. Leighton of St. Paul, who has made them available to *Ramsey County History*. James T. Ramer obviously had them at hand himself when he wrote the account of his regiment for *Minnesota in the Civil War and Indian War* published in 1890. This young farm boy actually served in both wars. He was a member of Company B of the Seventh Minnesota Infantry Regiment.

RAMER had come to Winona County with his parents, Philip W. and Ruth Thackery Ramer, from Ripley County, Indiana, when he was 16. In 1855, his father homesteaded a tract of land in Utica Township, near the site of New Boston. Later, when the railroad came through the area, heading west from Winona, the post office was moved a short distance and renamed Lewiston.

James Ramer farmed with his parents on this land, which now is the John H. Nahr-gang farm and well-known to local agriculturists because of its fertile soil.

On August 12, 1862, Ramer and five other men from Utica Township had enrolled their names for military service, agreeing to report at Winona when called to duty. The call came two days later. The men were harvesting but Ramer literally abandoned the reaper in the middle of the field.

He recorded in his diary for August 14,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Virginia Brainard Kunz was for 11 years a newspaper reporter and feature writer. She is the author of "Muskets to Missiles—A Military History of Minnesota," published in 1958 by the Minnesota Statehood Centennial Commission. She has been executive secretary of the Ramsey County Historical Society since 1962.

1862, that "I was raking grain off a four-horse McCormack reaper in my fathers wheat field. I stepped off telling my brother Charles to take the rake for I was going to enlist. Others joined, making eight that left the harvest field to volunteer. We started for Winona about eleven o'clock, getting there at three and at once enlisted with Dr. S. B. Sheardown, who had a recruiting commission. My name was sixty third on the list."

On August 15, he reported, "By nine A.M. over one hundred had enrolled and at eleven o'clock Sheardown with ninety seven men started by boat for Fort Snelling; the others were turned over to Company D."

The next day "We got to St. Paul at six and marched to the state capitol, where the company was organized. We took boat again and reached the fort at 11 A.M. We then had our first meal of army rations—hard bread, salt pork, black coffee, tin plates, etc. Most of the company had lived well, a few luxuriously. It made some of the more delicate ones look homesick. But later experiences made this fare comparatively luxurious."

Ramer's diary entry for August 17 revealed a bit of local pride as well as a sight-seeing excursion:

"WE WENT DOWN to the Surgeons office and was examined and sworn into Company B, 7th Regiment, Minnesota Volunteers. The Surgeon gave us the compliment of being the best Co. that he had examined, and there was but one man rejected out of one hundred. At one o'clock P.M. I and several others went up to see Minnehaha Falls. Minnehaha is a nice village. The falls is a handsome stream. The falls is a nice scene. It is the grandest sight that I ever saw. The water falls about sixty feet. After viewing the falls, village etc. we returned to camp. This afternoon three companies arrived."

The next day, August 18, Ramer learned what recruits have known since approximately the days of Julius Caesar: Never volunteer.

"There were ten companies arrived from different places," he wrote in his diary. "At nine o'clock I volunteered to stand guard. I stood my regular two hours and then thought I was through but come to find out



James T. Ramer in his Civil War uniform. From a portrait in the possession of his grandson, Ramer D. Leighton of St. Paul.

I had to be on guard 24 hours. I then made up my mind never to volunteer to stand guard any more."

THAT DAY might have been tedious for Ramer but for the peaceful farmers of the Minnesota valley, it was tragic. Near day-break, Chief Little Crow with a large group of warriors rode into the Lower Agency, near the present-day site of Morton. The agency was a village of storehouses, missions and schools set up to administer the affairs of the Sioux who were living on reservations along the river. The Lower Agency, or Redwood Agency, was one of three. The Upper Agency or Yellow Medicine Agency, also was on the Minnesota near present-day Granite Falls. The Big Stone Agency was on Big Stone Lake.

On the morning of August 18, the Sioux War began. The attack by Little Crow and his men began at the storehouses where most of the traders were killed and the stores looted and burned. Ramer heard about it the next day, according to his diary entry:

"Three o'clock P.M. today news came down to Gov. Ramsey that the Indians were murdering the whites and that Captain Marsh^o went out with fifty men to stop them. Two of his men returned and said that 35 of the Co's were killed by the Indians. The Capt. was one of them. The Gov. then sent the 6th Regt. up to Ft. Ridgely to stop this murdering. At 6

o'clock eighty of the Co. B started home on a furlough of nine days as promised to save their crops."

RAMER WAS ONE of the furloughed men but his trip home did not last long. The entire frontier was aflame. The Indians' attacks had spread to the Upper Agency, the Big Stone Agency, to New Ulm, to Fort Ridgely itself, and within two days he was ordered to return to his regiment. On August 25, he arrived back at Fort Snelling. The next morning, he noted in his diary, "We received orders to hold ourselves in readiness to march at a moments notice. In the afternoon we received our uniforms and guns and equipment."

On August 27, the men received their orders, took the boat to Shakopee, and marched to Belle Plaine, Henderson, and Mosquito Grove where they camped on September 1.

While the Seventh Minnesota Infantry Regiment was marching west, General John Pope was retreating north toward Washington, having lost the Second Battle of Bull Run.

On September 2, Ramer's regiment finally reached Fort Ridgely.

"THIS MORNING we were on the march very early," he noted in his diary. "We arrived at Ft. Ridgely at 4 o'clock P.M. a distance of twenty-two miles. We were very tired and foot sore. As soon as we arrived, we pitched our tents and began to prepare for supper. At five o'clock we

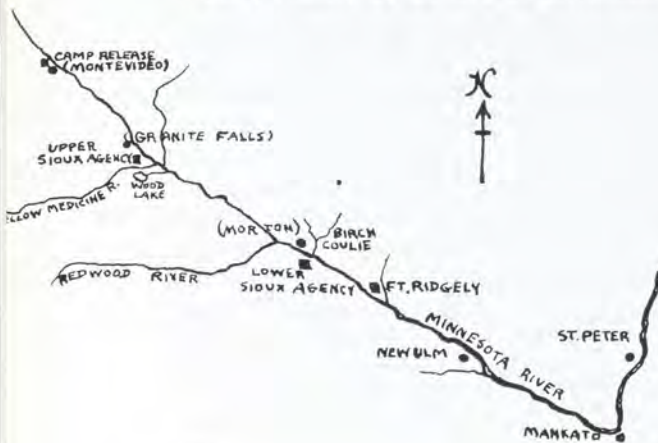
received orders to be ready to march at six o'clock to go to Birch Coolie a distance of 16 miles to relieve Capt. Grant† whom the Indians had attacked and surrounded. At six o'clock we were called into line and had two crackers issued to each one of us. This constituted our supper. It was rather a light supper after marching all day and then have to march 16 miles more the same night. At ten minutes after six we were on the march, we arrived within two miles of Birch Coolie and halted. We lay on our arms until daylight."

Ramer's diary entry for the next day, September 3, described the relief of Grant's force and gave a candid account of his own reaction to the realities of war.

"At daylight we were on our way towards Birch Coolie without any breakfast. After going about a half mile the Indians began to fire upon us. We kept them back with the Mountain Howitzer and the Skirmishers. We arrived at Capt. Grants Camp at ten o'clock. When we arrived at the camp the men began to cheer us for their relief. Some cried for joy, others begged for water and came for something to eat. They were nearly exhausted, having fought thirty six hours without water or anything to eat.

"As soon as the excitement was over I began to look around. It was an awful sight for there were thirteen men killed, thirty-nine wounded. There were 80 horses lying dead in camp. As soon as we got the wounded comfortable and circumstances would permit we began to prepare our breakfast which we got ready and ate at 4 P.M. Capt. Grant gave us flour and salt pork. We fried the pork [and] made cake of flour and water, and fried them in pork fat, these with coffee constituted our first meal since the morning of the day before.

Map of the Minnesota River valley shows Sioux Uprising sites mentioned by Ramer in his diary and letters. Drawn for Ramsey County History by Edward J. Lettermann.



°Commander of the garrison at Fort Ridgely. Marsh had under him Company B of the Fifth Minnesota Infantry Regiment. When the first terrified refugees from the Lower Agency reached the Fort, Marsh headed for the Agency with 46 men. They were ambushed near the Redwood Ferry which extended across the Minnesota River. Marsh apparently drowned in the river during the fighting.

†Capt. Hiram P. Grant of the Sixth Minnesota Infantry Regiment, who had been sent out from Fort Ridgely with about 150 men to reconnoiter the Lower Agency area, search for settlers and bury the dead. The force, however, actually was under the command of the Indian Agent, Major Joseph Brown.

We buried the dead and with the wounded in wagons reached the fort about midnite; we lay down to sleep without anything to eat, tired out, having marched in two days fifty four miles, almost without rest."

WHILE RAMER had been home on furlough to help with the harvesting, the Sioux twice had attacked New Ulm and Fort Ridgely and Governor Alexander Ramsey had entrusted to Henry H. Sibley the task of equipping and training an army to drive back the Indians and make the frontier safe for the settlers. Sibley, who first was named colonel and later brigadier general, proceeded to St. Peter, and then to Fort Ridgely. Here he learned that the Sioux were holding a large number of white captives at the Yellow Medicine Agency and he began to negotiate with Little Crow for their freedom.

Ramsey also was busy. Refugees from southern and western Minnesota were streaming into St. Paul, many of them destitute, terrified and bearing vivid tales of Indian atrocities. Indian warfare was scarcely conducted according to the rules of chivalry. The Sioux displayed a frightening tendency to fall upon peaceful, unarmed settlers, looting, murdering everyone in sight, finally putting the torch to cabins and crops. Panic and hysteria depopulated county after county. Ramsey and his government, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, feared that every Indian warrior in Minnesota had taken to the war-path.

And so the governor turned to the federal government in Washington for help. On September 6, 1862, Pope was named commander of the Department of the Northwest and left for St. Paul immediately. The troops he was to find under Sibley's command were untrained and ill-equipped.

AT FORT RIDGELY, these "raw recruits," Ramer among them, rested and drilled and waited. His diary continues the account of this brief respite.

On September 4, the day after the troops' return from Birch Coolie, he reported that "Two of the wounded died coming down last night." The next day, "Two more of the wounded died this morning and were buried this P.M. with military honors."

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, in the beginning, these citizen soldiers



The battered frying pan Ramer carried through the Civil War and the Indian War is shown here holding his copy of "U. S. Infantry and Rifle Tactics," dated 1861 (on the bottom) and his small copy of the New Testament. Items owned by Ramer Leighton and photographed for Ramsey County History by Henry Hall, Jr.

were almost as dangerous to themselves as to the enemy. At various places, Ramer recorded in his diary:

"This afternoon one of [the] soldier [s] in camp shot two of his fingers off."

"This morning one [soldier] of Co. A shot one finger off of his right hand."

"This morning there was an accident took place by a man carelessly handling a revolver and accidentally discharged it and shot another man that was standing near by in the side the ball did not take much effect."

"This morning a man slit his throat while on guard the cause of his doing so was supposed, that there was two cavely coming into camp and he took them to be Indians and thought he would kill himself rather than to be killed by them."

PERHAPS THIS TRAGIC incident demonstrates the fact that the terrible fear of the Indians was felt in some part by the soldiers as well as the civilians. Ramer seems to have maintained a cool head. In one letter home, written on September 23 to his parents, he apparently is trying to allay their fears:

"Mother I received your letter and was very glad to hear from home for I had not heard from home since I left there. You said in your letter that you [had heard] a great many stories about the Indians you must not believe them for there is not one

true out of every ten for we are right among Indians and among the troubles but we hear more reports [from] the eastern part of the state than anywhere else and there is not one in twenty that is true. . . .”

POPE DID NOT HAVE the benefit of Ramer’s calm advice. His official letters from St. Paul, published in *Minnesota in the Civil War and the Indian War*, indicate that he, too, was caught up in the general panic. He pleads with Washington for thousands of troops and horses, paints a wild-eyed picture of general Indian War developing all along the frontier, and appears to have been badly shaken by the barbarities of Indian warfare. It must be remembered, however, that the general was expressing the hysteria of those around him, and that there was a lack of specific information about the intentions and the movements of the other Indians living in Minnesota. He was not alone in his attitude toward the conduct of the war. He undoubtedly spoke for many others, as well as himself when, in a letter to Sibley, dated September 28, 1862, he wrote:

“ . . . No treaty must be made with the Sioux, even should the campaign against them be delayed until the summer. If they desire a council, let them come in, but seize Little Crow and all others engaged in the late outrages and hold them prisoners until further orders from these headquarters. It is idle and wicked, in view of the atrocious murders these Indians have committed, in the face of treaties and without provocation, to make treaties or talk about keeping faith with them. The horrible massacres of women and children, and the outrageous abuse of female prisoners, still alive, call for punishment beyond human power to inflict. There will be no peace in this region by virtue of treaties and Indian faith. It is my purpose utterly to exterminate the Sioux if I have the power to do so and even if it requires a campaign lasting the whole of next year. Destroy everything belonging to them and force them out to the plains, unless, as I suggest, you can capture them. They are to be treated as maniacs or wild beasts, and by no means as people with whom treaties or compromises can be made. . . .”*

**Minnesota in the Civil War and the Indian War*, Vol. II, p. 257.



A portable inkwell, combination toothpick and ear spoon, and a large-sized thimble designed to be worn on the thumb are among other relics of Ramer’s war years, now owned by his grandson, Ramer Leighton. Picture by Henry Hall, Jr.

THAT THE INDIANS originally had just cause for grievances against the whites had been obscured by the horrors of their attacks on unarmed settlers—attacks which did their cause fearful harm. Chief Little Crow earlier had explained the Indians’ position in a poignant letter to Sibley at Fort Ridgely, dated September 7, 1862:

“Dear Sir:

For what reason we have commenced this war I will tell you, it is on account of Maj. Gilbrait we made a treaty with the Government a big for what little we do get and then cant get it till our children was dieing with hunger—it is with the traders that commence mr a. J. myrick told the Indians that they would eat grass or their own dung. Then mr Forbes told the lower Sioux that were not men then Robert he was working with his friends how to defraud us of our money, if the young braves have push the white men I have done this myself. So I want you to let the Governor Ramsey know this. I have great many prisner women and children it aint all our fault the winebagoes was in the engagement two of them was killed I want you to give me answer by the barer all at present.

Yours truly,

Friend Little Crow, His Mark

(Addressed) Gov. H. H. Sibley, Esqr., Fort Ridgely.”†

†*Minnesota in Three Centuries*, Vol. III, p. 396.

By September 19, Sibley was ready to move out in search of Little Crow. Ramer's diary entries from September 20 to 22 describe the march.

"We started this morning quite early and marched eleven miles and pitched our tents we found a body of a white man and the bodies of two Indians we saw several Indians today."

"We marched 15 miles to day we crossed the Red Wood about noon by wading it . . . we found the body of a man (and buried it) which was recognized to be the body of Geo. R. Gleason."^{*}

"This P.M. at 8 o'clock finds us camped at Wood Lake 3 miles from Yellow Medicine the distance traveled today is 16 miles we saw nothing to day worthy of note."

BUT SEPTEMBER 23 was to be a different story, for it was here that Little Crow decided to give battle, leading his braves in an attack on Sibley's force. Ramer described the battle of Wood Lake in his diary:

"This morning revilie beat at four o'clock in the morning in order to be ready to march early, at six oclock we was just ready to sit down to our breakfast when the Indians attacked us. We was ordered into line and await further orders, (and while waiting we sat down and ate our breakfast) we was ordered out on double quick it was not long until they Skeedadled with a loss of 60 killed & 90 wounded, our loss was 4 killed and 30 wounded."

In a letter to his parents, written the same day, Ramer describes the fight in more detail, touching on how men from the Third Minnesota Infantry Regiment were attacked by one group of Sioux while away from camp foraging for food and how a second force, urged on by Little Crow, had crept into a ravine near the camp site and attacked from there.

"While we were eating," he wrote, "they . . . began to come in sight and soon they began to shoot at us it was not long until we was after them on double quick when we got in gun shot of them we halted and commenced firing on them we fired about half an hour and then we made a charge on them and then they skeedadled in a hurry

they had . . . secreted themselves in [a] deep ravine but we soon chased them out of that. . . ."

THE BATTLE of Wood Lake brought to an end the fighting in Minnesota. Little Crow and his band fled into the Dakotas. With a decisive victory behind him, Sibley moved to release the white captives and to bring the rest of the Sioux in Minnesota under his control.

In the same letter, Ramer describes the situation:

". . . this after noon a friendly Indian came to camp and states that they [are] in rather a bad fix the upper band of Indians say the lower band comensed the troubles and they may fight it out for they will neither help them fight, nor let them go through their country there are four bands of them, the upper band and Little Crow's band and Red Irons band and Wabashaws band wabashaws band is larger than either of the other two lower bands and they say that he wont help them fight I think that we have got a good thing on them. . . ."

On September 25, Sibley's force was camped north of the Yellow Medicine Agency, which Ramer described in his diary as a "ruinous looking place, the buildings were made of brick, but the Indians have burned them leaving nothing but the walls standing."

The next day, they reached the Indian camp.

"Today we marched 11 miles," Ramer wrote in his diary, "and came to the Indian Camp and pitched our tents near it the warriers having all left leaving none but the friendly Indians & half breeds with the most of the white captives this afternoon Gen. Sibley went to the camp and got the captives. . . ."

RAMER LATER visited the Indian camp and described it as "the most dirty, filthy, stinken hole that I ever was in, a tan yard is no comparison, at ten oclock there was an alarm raised that the Indians had attacked the provision train that was coming up we was ordered out on double quick we got out a half mile and was ordered to counter-march, the alarm being false."

On November 8, the entire command, with prisoners and Indians, moved to the

^{*}*Clerk of the Yellow Medicine Agency.*



Lower Agency where Camp Lincoln was established. A military commission was appointed to try the Indians and 307 were sentenced to hang. President Lincoln later commuted the sentences of all but 38, but the fury of the settlers did not abate. On November 8, Ramer noted in his diary:

"We were on the march at day light. The prisoners were shackled and in wagons. As we passed New Ulm at ten o'clock the citizens tried to get hold of the prisoners. The women were worse than the men. They threw stones like hail and hurt some of the prisoners very bad. . . ."

Reaching Mankato, Ramer wrote on November 12:

"This morning the weather is more pleasant and the citizens came in to see the prisoners it made me feel like I had got home to see where there is somebody living it is the first time that I have seen fair sex that wears the crinoline for two months, I never before thought they are so pleasing to the eye."

Company B of the Seventh Minnesota Regiment was stationed at Tivoli, near Mankato, that winter of 1862-63. On December 24, noted Ramer, "We received orders to be in Mankato at 7 o'clock A.M. the 26th to help in the execution of 38 of the prisoners."

HE SEEMS to have viewed this event as just another job to be done as part of the whole sorry business of war.

On December 26, he wrote in his diary, "We started to Mankato at 4 o'clock A.M. and arrived at 7 o'clock. At nine o'clock we were called into line and marched out to form one side of the square around the gallows. At 15 minutes after 10 the 38

Execution of 38 Sioux Indians at Mankato in 1862. From a lithograph owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

Sioux prisoners were brought and put on the platform and soon were hanging by their necks between heaven and earth. At 3 o'clock we started back to Tivoli."

The Seventh Regiment made its final Indian campaign, from Mankato westward to Dakota Territory and back to Fort Snelling, in 1863. On October 7 of that year, the regiment was ordered south where it took part in the Battle of Tupelo and the Battle of Nashville, embarked on an expedition to New Orleans and then to Mobile, which it occupied just before the end of the war.

LITTLE CROW did not live to fight during the campaigns in the Dakotas. He returned to Minnesota in the summer of 1863 on what seems to have been a horse-stealing expedition and was shot and killed by settlers near Hutchinson.

Pope remained in command of the Department of the Northwest through the 1864 expeditions into the Dakotas. Ramer became a sergeant and, with others of Company B of the Seventh Minnesota, was mustered out at Fort Snelling August 16, 1865. He was asked if he wanted to keep his gun.

"I did want it," he later wrote,^o "and would have been more than pleased to take it home, but I considered it an insult to ask me to pay for it (six dollars) and that the Government could keep it and if they needed the money so bad as that they could sell it to somebody else. I bade the old gun farewell and handed it over."

^oMinnesota in the Civil War and the Indian War, 1890, Vol. I, p. 366.



THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue W., St. Paul, Minn.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958 the Society erected a barn, behind the house, which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey county will be preserved for future generations.