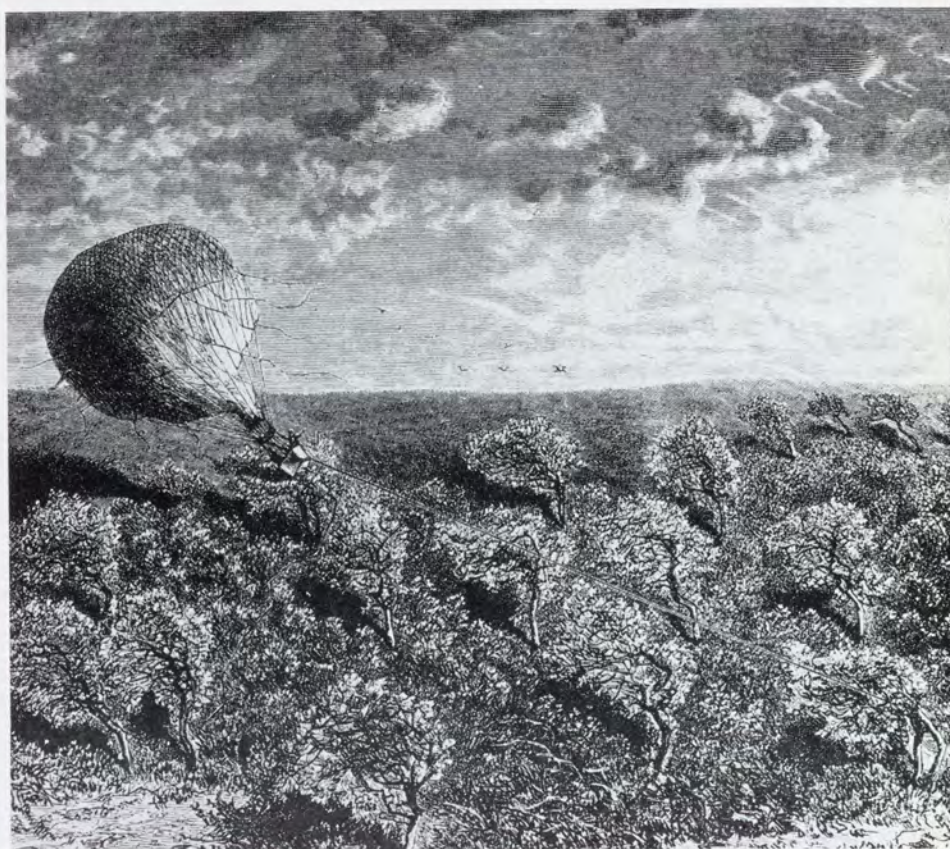


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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ON THE COVER: "The branches of the trees bend beneath the car," said the caption under this picture of a balloon ascension which ran into a bit of difficulty. From *Travels in the Air* by J. Glaisher and published in 1871, the picture shows the hazards balloonists encountered, particularly in forested areas, such as those around White Bear Lake. This and all other pictures on the following pages are, unless otherwise credited, from the picture collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.



St. Paul in 1853, from a drawing by J. M. Stanley.

Foolish and Childlike or Fierce and Savage?

St. Paul's Early Settlers And the Indians Among Them

By Edward J. Lettermann

IN THE history of America, the relationship of white man to Indian has swung wildly between cordial and aggressively hostile. To say that the white man, except for a few men of wisdom, misunderstood the Indian and his culture is to make one of the most obvious of understatements. Nevertheless, the whites seemed to regard the Indians alternately as foolish children and fearsome savages. There was truth in both attitudes, of course.

In the St. Paul of 100 years ago, these attitudes showed clearly in what was written

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about the Indians of the area by the men and women who knew them, particularly the early historians, missionaries and newspaper editors. For instance, the fact that the Indians, who were unused to "fire-water," had difficulties with liquor cannot be denied. But liquor was very much a part of frontier, pioneer life and temperance-minded writers, clucking over the problem, may have given later readers a prejudiced viewpoint.

Such quibbling aside, however, it is interesting to see the Indians who lived around early St. Paul through the eyes of the white people who lived there, too.

THE EARLY FRENCH fur traders and the British and Americans who followed them knew how to work with the Indians, but their relationship allowed the Indians to continue their usual pattern of existence, roaming the lake-studded woodlands in search of game and furs, setting up their bark lodges or skin-covered tepees wherever they pleased.

With the advent of the farmer-settler in the middle 1880's the situation changed completely and abruptly. From out of nowhere, it may have seemed to the Indian, came a horde of white invaders, intent upon the acquisition of land, which always had been the property of all. They cut down trees and built fences. They told the young braves that they must put away their weapons and take up the hoe and raise corn, which in the Indians' culture was woman's work. Neither the Indians nor the white settlers knew how to cope with this new situation.

Although the site of St. Paul was purchased from the Indians in 1837, the land was not surveyed until ten years later and finally offered for sale by the United States government in the fall of 1848. At the beginning of 1845, according to J. Fletcher Williams, an early historian, there were "about thirty families" living in St. Paul. By 1850 the population had risen to 1,294; by 1855 it was 4,716.

DURING THIS PERIOD, St. Paul virtually was surrounded by Indian bands, Chippewa (Ojibway) to the north and east, and Dakota (Sioux) to the south and west. As the seat of the Minnesota Territorial government, and the home of the "ex-officio superintendent of Indian affairs," the territorial governor, St. Paul often was visited by the Indians.

Those who had villages in the area were of the Medewakanton branch of the great Dakota or Sioux nation. Chief Little Crow's village of Kaposia was located in what is now South St. Paul. Chief Medicine Bottle's village was farther down the Mississippi River at Pine Bend. Chief Grey Iron's village, often called Black Dog Village, was located near Mendota and above him, on the Minnesota River, stood the villages of Chief Good Road and Chief Cloudman. Probably the Medewakanton living farther south along the Mississippi, Red Wing's and Wabasha's bands, came to St. Paul more for official business such as treaty-making and other conferences, than for trade. Members of Shakopee's Medewakanton bands, and of the Wapeton and Sisseton bands farther up the Minnesota River, also were frequent visitors to St. Paul for both official and unofficial business.

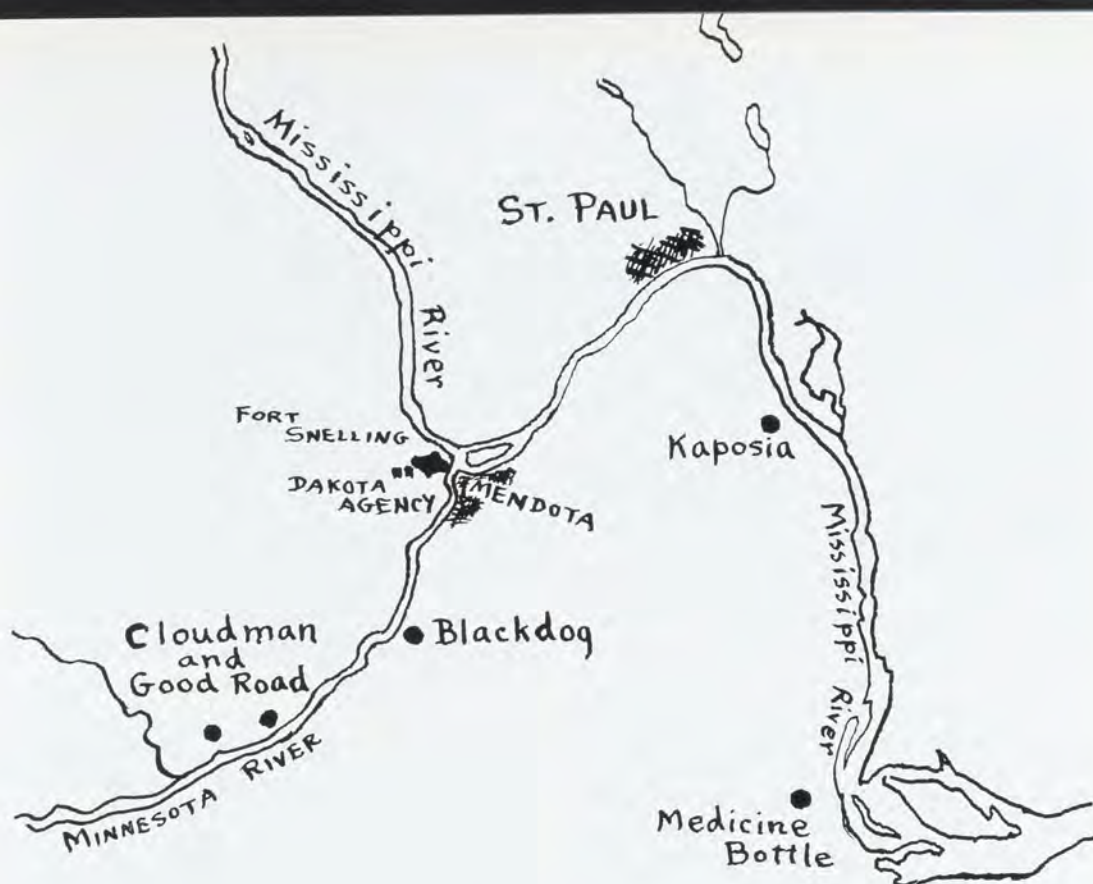
The ancient enemies of the Dakota, or

Sioux were the Chippewa (Ojibway) who also frequently visited St. Paul. Clashes between these traditional enemies on the streets of St. Paul are a colorful and somewhat hair-raising aspect of the city's early history, but, generally, the Dakota and Chippewa treated each other in a civil manner when meeting there.

Whatever their reasons for visiting early St. Paul, the Indians met with a wide variety of attitudes toward them on the part of the whites—hate or love, fear or daring, weakness or determination. Samuel Pond wrote that the Sioux, St. Paul's most frequent visitors, were "peculiarly quick to discern the true character of their casual acquaintances," and "soon found out all the strong points and all the weak points of a white man with whom they had to deal." Thus the Sioux dealt with the white man accordingly. They threatened the fearful; begged from the soft-hearted. Settlers who treated the Indian fairly and firmly, usually received fair treatment in return.

THE SIOUX were taught from childhood to accept life's hardships with stoical indifference, and this reticence led many early settlers to consider them simple and dull-witted. Some were, of course, but, as Samuel Pond wrote, the majority of them "have good common sense. They are quick to distinguish between sound argument and sophistry and many of them would reason with clearness, precision, and force. They were close observers of men and things."¹ Because "they were very sensitive and had a great dread of appearing in a ludicrous light," they seldom openly showed their resentment at being teased or ridiculed, but pent-up resentment may have contributed to outbursts of hostility against the white men.

The problem of liquor and the Indians was uppermost in the minds of many early settlers. In 1847, Harriet Bishop, St. Paul's first school teacher, wrote: "It must be borne in mind that St. Paul was a small trading post, giving yet no sign of its unprecedented growth. The council-fire of the red men was but just extinguished on the east, and was still brightly blazing on the west side of the river. Our village was almost daily thronged with them, where they frequently encamped in larger numbers than the entire adult white male population



Location of the Medewakanton Dakota (or Sioux) villages in the Ramsey County area during the 1840's and early 1850s. Map by Edward J. Lettermann.

of the Territory. Tragic scenes were often enacted by them when intoxicated and provoked by the fraud and impositions practiced upon them by the unprincipled whiskey seller."²

Dr. Thomas S. Williamson, missionary to Kaposia, St. Paul's nearest permanent Indian village, stated at about the same period: "This village [St. Paul] has five stores, as they call them, at all of which intoxicating drinks constitute a part, and I suppose, the principal part of what they sell."³

BETWEEN 1820 and 1840, when the American Fur Company had monopoly of the fur trade in the St. Paul area, whiskey was almost completely eliminated from the fur trade. When the Indians sold their lands on the east side of the Mississippi in 1837, the territory became white man's ground. No law forbade the sale of liquor there as was the case in Indian territory. So long as they did not "introduce liquors into Indian country" the traders and storekeepers were committing no offense against the United States.⁴

The Indians, wrote Samuel Pond, "were not tipplers, but either abstained from drinking ardent spirits or drank to intoxication. They did not seem to have any desire to drink intoxicating drinks in mod-

erate quantities, or in solitude, though in later times some of them told me they were trying to learn to drink without getting drunk, like white men. They liked to drink in company and to have enough whiskey to make all drunk."⁵ Such behavior was severely censured by the press and the missionaries and other religious leaders, and is reflected in the early histories of the period.

WHISKEY, then, became one of early St. Paul's chief attractions for the Indians. The Reverend Edward D. Neill wrote that under the influence of a rather disreputable group of whiskey sellers who had settled in St. Paul, the Sioux had become a nation of drunkards. Men, he said, would travel hundreds of miles to "the place where they sell Minne-wakan (supernatural water)" to traffic for a keg of whiskey.⁶ Gideon Pond wrote that the Indians "would have whiskey. They would give guns, blankets, pork, lard, flour, corn, coffee, sugar, horses, furs, traps, anything for whiskey."⁷ James McMullen, who settled in St. Paul in 1849, later wrote that, "If you had half a pint of



whiskey in those days and were willing to trade with the Indians, you could get almost anything they had."⁸

Their quest for whiskey did not always have a happy ending. There is the story of the young widow of an early settler who had kept a store of goods in his home for trading. Mrs. Mortimer was "endeavoring to close out the stock of goods belonging to her late husband.

"One day, she was in her house when an Indian stalked in, and seeing a camphor bottle standing on a shelf, took a deep swig, supposing it was whiskey. As soon as he detected the nauseous taste, he gave a grunt of rage, and seizing a measure, turned some vinegar into it from a barrel, supposing that also was whiskey. He dashed down a heavy draught of it without stopping to taste it. Mrs. Mortimer saw the storm coming and fled for safety to a neighbor's house, pursued, a moment after, by the infuriated Indian with uplifted tomahawk, but her neighbor disarmed him and sent him off."⁹

Then there was the story of Governor Ramsey's famous temperance speech to the Indians. At a grand council held on March 14, 1850, he warned them of the dangers of intemperance and urged them to stop drinking.

"The white men," he said, "have quit drinking." The interpreter translated precisely what the governor had said, but the Indians looked astonished. So the governor qualified his statement, adding "in a great measure." The interpreter rendered this literally: "in a large-sized vessel." One old chief exclaimed, "Perhaps they had, but most of them still use a small measure."¹⁰

THE INDIANS contributed much to the

Little Crow's Village at Kaposia as it appeared in 1848, from a drawing by Henry Lewis.

trade of St. Paul. An old settler recalled that "they used to supply the local market with fish, wild fowls, venison, bear meat, cranberries, furs, and products of the forest generally; besides moccasins, bead work, and trinkets of that class. They would always demand gold or silver for their products, which they would re-invest in ammunition, blankets, flour, cutlery, or anything they fancied. They were pretty sharp at bargain, too, be it known, and scarcely ever got over-reached."¹¹

The Treaties of 1837 and 1851 took from the Indians more than their lands. The annuities granted through these treaties took away their reason to work, hunt and trap, and live industriously. They began to depend upon the government for their livelihood.

Many of the braves and some of the chiefs did not realize what was involved in the sale of their lands, but those who did felt that since the white man had taken their hunting grounds, they now should clothe and feed them. Begging was an outgrowth of this feeling, and many Indians came into St. Paul to beg. "They were inveterate beggars" appears in almost every existing reminiscence of that day. Newson, writing of the 1850's in his *Pen Pictures of St. Paul*, told the following story:

"In these early days, it was common for the Indians to pounce into the kitchen of the lady of the house, and clean out her larder of all that was in it. I do not mean to say they would steal, but they begged so hard and so audaciously that it was

equivalent to it. Of course, the whites gave cheerfully because it was for their interests to do so, besides, they desired to keep on the good side of the red men so if possible to avoid an outbreak.

"ONE DAY while Mrs. Stees was scrubbing her floor, several Indians pushed into her kitchen and seeing a large dish of chicken and pig feed, the latter composed somewhat of dishwater, and supposing it was for them, seized it, sat down upon the wet floor, and before the good woman could make any protestation, had swallowed the whole, and then smacking their lips and grunting, left the premises. That night the chickens went to roost without supper, and the pigs squealed until morning for something to eat.

"The next day, about the same hour, the Indians made their appearance, but the rooster crowed, the hens cackled, the pigs grunted, for their mistress had circumvented the Indians by giving her dumb family an early meal. Once again the Indians gathered at the hospitable kitchen, and this time Mrs. Stees had thoughtlessly left her dishwater in a huge pot on the stove, and it was luke-warm. Mr. Indians seized and drank it before the presiding genius of the kitchen knew they were present. They soon after left, and were heard to exclaim: 'Me heap sick,' and the general contortions of their features clearly showed that they were telling the truth."¹²

Although Newson would not "say that they would steal," there is evidence that many Indians did do so, with considerable ingenuity. The following news story from the *St. Paul Pioneer* was headed "SUBSTITUTION OF A THIEF."

"The other day, an Indian came into the jewelry shop of Mr. Spicer, on Robert Street and while there, stole a watch. Mr. Spicer followed him up the street to Mr. Fuller's store and collared him, and seeing no one to assist him, left the Indian standing by the side of Mr. Fuller's store while he went inside to get someone to help him search the body of the Indian. Returning in two or three minutes, he found an Indian standing in the same spot, in the same attitude he had left the thief in, his blanket philosophically folded around him, but he was another Indian, who had taken the place of the thief during Spicer's absence—

while the thief himself slipped around the house and fled."¹³

NOT ALL the Indians who came to St. Paul in the early days had business there. Many may have come out of simple curiosity. At almost any time of year they could be found gaping at the new and wonderful sights the young settlement had to offer. They had plenty of time for sight-seeing, though in former years most of their time was used industriously.

The Indians' curiosity furnished the basis for many anecdotes. The Reverend Edward D. Neill built the first brick residence in St. Paul, a two-story house on Fourth Street near Washington. He recalled that "the Indians watched the erection of the . . . house with wonder, as they had not before seen bricks. They seemed to them to be as well adapted for pipes as the sacred red pipestone, and coveted them. Some even took a few without leave, and as they wore no capacious hats, hid them under their blankets, and carried them to their village, but when they began to scrape them were disappointed in finding that like Sodom's apples, they turned to dust."¹⁵

Not all the products of white civilization, however, proved such a disappointment. The same summer, a young man by the name of G. D. Bevan arrived and set up a tin shop—"a rude frame building," Neill calls it, and goes on to report: "For the first few weeks after its erection, it was the most attractive spot on earth to some of the Sioux of the Kaposia village. They stood near its window in eager expectancy, and as the tinner would throw out the tin scraps, the refuse of his shears, there was a scramble for their possession. At night they could be seen in their village with long tin pendants attached to their leaden ear-rings, and pleased as if possessed of the 'wealth of Ormus and of Ind'."¹⁶

THE BOYS and young men often came to St. Paul to dance and sing for the settlers, expecting to be rewarded with food and money. The May 27, 1851, issue of the *Democrat* describes such a visit:

"Our citizens were visited on Tuesday last by a company of twenty or thirty more juvenile Sioux from Little Crow's band, who danced the beggar dance in different parts of town. The young red-skins, from five to eighteen years of age presented a

grotesque appearance. They were naked and painted."

The Indians' manner of self-decoration, however, was no haphazard application of color, but a painstaking process, and designed to attract admiration. As one historian wrote, "An Indian young man passes hours in attiring himself. That green streak of paint upon the cheek, those yellow circles around the eyes, and those spots upon the forehead have cost him much trouble, and frequent gazings into his mirror, which he always keep with him."¹⁷

Perhaps the most touching story of one Indian who had a special reason for being in St. Paul is told by J. Fletcher Williams. In the spring of 1851, a dead Indian was found near Third Street. He had been stabbed, "evidently by another Indian," Williams related, although he did not say why he assumed this. The sheriff was determined to bring the murderer to justice, and knowing that a number of the dead man's fellow tribesmen were encamped not far away, he and a few soldiers went to the encampment where they found some of the Indians quietly cooking their evening meal. Wrote Williams:

"The officer in charge of the squad of soldiers asked one of them, Che-en-uwzhee-kaw, or Standing Lodge, if he knew anything of how their brother had met his end, when Standing Lodge very coolly and unconcernedly replied, 'I killed him!' On further questioning him, he stated that the dead Indian had committed some crime or offense, which, according to the Indian code merited death, and that he, the speaker, had been selected to give him his quietus, which he did.

"There seemed no other way than to apprehend the self-confessed murderer, and ascertain whether the statutes in such case made and provided would not cover the crime, as equally as if one white man had killed another. So the officer told Standing Lodge to come along. The Indian made no objection, but very quietly followed the officers to town. That night he slept in Sheriff Lull's carpenter shop, the jail not being tenable yet, and made no efforts to escape. Next day, a sort of preliminary examination was held. Standing Lodge never denied his guilt, but always said, 'I did it,' when asked. Some urged to let him



"Old Betts"

go, as it would only expose the county to considerable cost to imprison and try him, and it was scarcely worthwhile to take note of all the quarrels and murders among the Indians, as they were occurring every few days, and but few cared much how many Indians were killed. Others thought it ought not to be passed thus.

"FINALLY it was agreed to lay the case over until the grand jury met, about the middle of the month, and meantime, to avoid feeding Standing Lodge at public expense, to dismiss him on his own recognizance. This was explained to Standing Lodge, and he promised to be on hand when court met. He asked how many days it was, and, on ascertaining, took some sticks and cut notches in them, one for each day, and depositing them in his pouch, started off to join his band, who were hunting muskrats.

"Scarcely anyone ever expected to see Standing Lodge again. But, sure enough, on the first day of court, there he was, sitting on the steps, awaiting his fate, whatever it might be. The Prosecuting Attorney was unable to attend to business all that week, so the grand jury did nothing, yet

the Indian was in attendance promptly every day, and slept at night on the shavings in Lull's shop. Had he run away, no one would have objected, but he said he had given his word to be there, and must do so. He even complained, finally, that he was not tried.

"Finally, the case was called by the grand jury, and, though opposed by some, an indictment was found and returned. The case was never brought to trial. It was shoved over to the September term. Standing Lodge, meantime, being out at large, on his own recognizance, with his bundle of notched sticks as an almanac showing him what day to return. When the September term began, he was again on hand, but the judge, finding there was no intention to prosecute him, ordered the case to be dismissed. Standing Lodge was informed he could go his way. He shook hands with the officers as unconcernedly and stolidly as ever, folded his blanket around him, and marched off, an imperturbable stoic. There was really something noble about the fellow, a poor pagan and murderer, though he was, and the incident serves to illustrate one of the curious phases of our early days."¹⁸

TO RIDICULE Standing Lodge's simple faith that justice would release him because he had done nothing but his duty according to the accepted Indian method of preserving order only harms the true image of the Indians of Minnesota. Certainly, most of them did not possess the noble characteristics so often attributed them by many writers of fiction. But, as a rule, when sober, they were reasonably honest, trustworthy people; no less so than the average white settler.

Removal of the Sioux to western Minnesota under the terms of the Mendota Treaty of 1851 was not completed until nearly 1856. Even then, some Sioux could not be induced to join their relatives at the Redwood Agency under any circumstances. Among them was a woman who became well-known to later residents of St. Paul. Her name was Aza-ya-man-ka-wan (Berry Picker). She was called "Old Betts" by the whites, and her fascination with St. Paul and her dependence upon the sociability and the hand-outs she received there was only ended by her death in May of 1873.

"She was always welcome at the kitchen doors of the old settlers," Williams said.¹⁹

A century ago, a few earnest men seriously struggled with the problems of the Indians, while many unthinking men did little more than aggravate them. Whether or not the seeds of the great Indian wars of the 1860's and 1870's already had been sown in the villages on the eastern fringes of the great central plains will never surely be known, but such a conclusion does not seem unwarranted. That events could have been changed is doubtful, for the farmer-settler sought from the Indian what he was unable to give and yet remain an Indian—his land, his living, his self-respect, even his life.

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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.