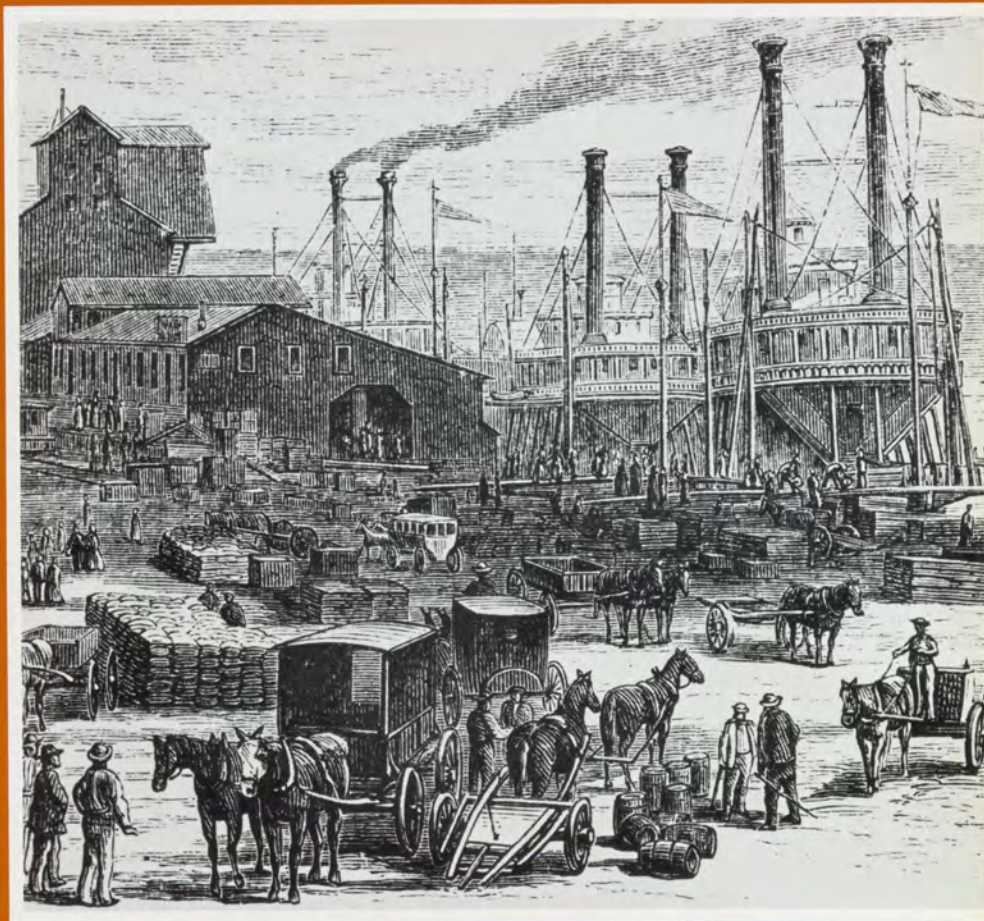


# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Fall

1971

Volume 8

Number 2

# Ramsey County History

Published by the RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

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*ON THE COVER:* This steel engraving of St. Paul's Lower Landing as it looked in 1853 shows the bustling river front during the boom years of steamboat travel on the Upper Mississippi. See story beginning on page 15.

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:* Pictures illustrating the story which begins on page 3 are from the author's scrapbook, except for the pictures of Battle Creek and the little railroad station. All other pictures used in this issue are from the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The editor is indebted to Eugene Becker and Dorothy Gimmestad, of the state historical society's audio-visual staff, for their help.



First school: The "Two by Four or Cracker Box" on the Hudson Road.

*Woodstoves, Hectographs--*

## 50 Years a Teacher, She Looks Back at Her First School

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article has been condensed from a portion of an unpublished manuscript by Alice Olson, 2045 East Seventeenth Avenue, North St. Paul. Her manuscript reflects Mrs. Olson's love for teaching, her feeling for the need for sympathy, understanding and friendship between teacher and student, and her sense of the importance of a good teacher in the life of a child. She describes her experiences throughout 50 years as a teacher and administrator in Ramsey County schools, during an era when much of the county outside of the city limits was small-town or rural.*

*Mrs. Olson was born in St. Paul in 1894 to Swedish parents, and she grew up speaking both English and Swedish. In earlier chapters, she describes her childhood — barefoot boys chasing cows along Lawson Street out to Phalen Park, and the train chugging below the Payne Avenue bridge toward "Swede Hollow" — and her own school years in a one-room rural school near what is now White Bear Avenue, and several miles north of Lake Phalen.*

*She describes her high school years at North St. Paul, her graduation in 1913, and her year at the Teachers' Training School in White Bear Lake. Mrs. Olson later graduated from St. Cloud State Teachers College and the University of Minnesota. However, the chapters excerpted and condensed here describe her first years of teaching, beginning in the fall of 1914, in a little school out on the Hudson Road near Tanner's Lake, on land now owned by Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company.*

BY ALICE OLSON

After graduation I returned home for the summer. I made two hectographs\*, knowing I might need a spare, and I organized "busy work," separating the easy from the more difficult so as to divide it between beginners and those a little older.

This "busy work" often is ridiculed, but to me it was a necessity. It is not possible to conduct a second-through-eighth grade class in any subject and, at the same time, keep tiny minds and hands busy with something worthwhile. In my own rural school experiences, those little ones were expected to

just "sit!" Only inanimate objects can accomplish this feat satisfactorily.

I had no typewritten articles but the hectograph was a God-send. Animals, birds, flowers, fish, anything could be hectographed. Reading words, numbers, problems, sentences, stories were duplicated and filed in order. Articles for special days such as Thanksgiving and Halloween, were filed in boxes.

That summer my mother gave me permission to keep all the money I could make by milking and by churning butter, which I sold. This included cleaning the barn at times, even on Sundays, but it kept me busy

\*A device which used gelatin to make a print.



**First Class: High-buttoned shoes, pigtails, big bows and bigger smiles. The author, third from left, back row, looks scarcely older than her pupils.**

and I earned nearly fifty dollars.

But I worried, for I did not have a school to teach the coming year. I contacted George H. Reif, superintendent of the Ramsey County schools, and a short time later he told me about a small school, District 12, out on the Hudson Road, that needed a teacher.

My father hitched our horse, Prince, to the buggy and drove me to see William Heckerth, a school board member.

When Mr. Heckerth saw me, he said, "I don't see why Mr. Reif always sends us such young teachers!" I still remember how that hurt me for I did so want to look older and I was really 19 years of age. To me *that* wasn't young. But I was hired and signed a contract for forty-five dollars a month for nine months, with a janitor provided during December, January, February and March.

IN AUGUST I visited the school. As usual, I walked; first a mile-and-a-half to the streetcar; then a ride to White Bear Avenue, and another walk to Minnehaha, followed by a two-mile walk out on the Hudson Road.

There on a knoll stood the little building. It truly deserved the name my first pupils told me it had: the "Two by Four or Cracker Box." The hillside next to the road had been scooped out so a small structure could be put up. On the wall on one side of the entrance was a board announcing a "\$50. reward leading to the arrest and conviction of anyone breaking into this building." At the north side of the building stood a lovely big oak tree. In back were the outhouses and, toward the front, a shed which held cordwood for the stove.

I unlocked the door. There was a small entryway, another door, and there was my first real classroom. It had long narrow windows, a high ceiling and, at the far end, a platform with the teacher's desk.

Through the middle of the room was a wide aisle. On one side were single desks for older students; on the other side toward the front were smaller double seat desks. To one side of the teacher's desk was the regulation jacketed stove and, farther over, a door which led to a small storage closet.

There also was a little old organ. I sat down to try it. Pumping alternately with my feet I managed to play. It worked, not too well, but it worked. I checked the supplies in the closet, an array of such miscellaneous items as shoe pegs, alphabet letters, number cards, multiplication tables. Not many books. I decided to wait with orders until I knew what the enrollment would be.

THE WEEK before school started, I again made a trip out to my school with a box of pictures and other materials to keep little ones busy during the first days of school. I found great joy in straightening up my desk, checking the water crock and the outdoor toilets, putting things away in the closet and hanging pictures. I felt this would be a home for quite a few hours for my pupils.

ON MY FIRST day of teaching I awoke earlier than usual, hurriedly ate breakfast and, carrying my lunch-box, a small suitcase with personal belongings and more home-made school materials, I hiked along the familiar road. I took no short cuts through the fields on my way to the streetcar for the dew was very heavy on the grass so early. It was a beautiful September morning, and I took as long steps as my high button shoes and tight hobble skirt would allow.

A few children were at the school when I arrived and they looked me over a little curiously. At nine o'clock I rang the little hand bell at the outer door and school began.

Opening exercises consisted of singing songs that they suggested. I had written my name on the blackboard before school started, and so I now introduced myself and each child in turn introduced himself. Last year's report cards were collected, books were distributed, I read them a short story, and told them the program was posted so they could check to see when the different classes were held.

At recess most of the children opened their lunch buckets — most of them were the familiar lard pails — and ate a snack as they crowded around the posted program before they ran out to play. The children were well-mannered and eager to learn. There were no discipline problems.

Looking back over fifty years, I cannot help but think of the many mistakes we who call ourselves educators have made. When I began my teaching career, it was considered one of the worst things one could do to allow a child to read Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn*. As a child I had so enjoyed those stories that I felt they could not harm children, so I brought the books and read them, a little at a time, to my pupils. But I shall never forget my feeling that my superintendent or the state officials probably would have reprimanded me. I hid the books in my desk just for security reasons.

I RECALL a similar incident concerning books. During teacher's training we were asked, "Why use time to read a book to children when they can read it themselves?" Here's why. There are many purposes for reading but good *oral* reading is an art. *How* we read is as important as *what* we read. One happy memory of my early school

Plays, pageants and other programs were important. The little girl is Edith Gausman, with her cousin, Leonard Ickler.



**First classroom: Wooden desks with fancy iron scrollwork and a row of hooks on the wall for coats. The author stands beside them.**

days was the reading of *Timothy's Quest* by the one teacher whom I disliked very much; yet, in the reading of that story I actually lived with Timothy and all his problems. That, and the pleasant memories of my high school principal's reading were incentives to create such memories for my own pupils. Years later three young men, Richard, Robert, and Albert Damrose came to visit me. Richard, who had served in World War II, said, "One of the things I remember most vividly was when you read *Swiss Family Robinson* to us. I'll never forget the boys in that story. How I enjoyed it!"

\* \* \*

I had made arrangements to room and board from Monday until Friday at the home of F. L. Gausman for twelve dollars a month. At four o'clock I dismissed the children, swept the floor, put work on the board for the next day, and picked up the pupil's written work for that day. Then I took my suitcase and, with Edith, my landlady's daughter, and other pupils who were walking home in the same direction, I tramped along the highway about two miles to my boarding place.

It was a typical farm home, a large white house standing on a knoll some distance from the road. It was a neat, attractive place surrounded by a lawn and flower beds. Back of the house was a large red barn, a granary, an implement shed, a silo and other buildings.

Mr. and Mrs. Gausman were hard workers who, like many another farm couple, had attained what they possessed from intensive labor in the fields about them. It was not uncommon for them to work from early dawn until after dark. And the chores of feeding stock, milking, and so on went on

day in, day out, all the year around.

IT IS DIFFICULT to put into words the character of these people. Louis Gausman always had a funny story to tell or an interesting incident to describe at mealtime, even when he was so tired he said he just wanted to "sit." Mrs. Gausman also had acquired the knack of looking for the silver lining, but besides that, she was a devoted mother.

I had a large, pleasant bedroom upstairs. There were no furnaces in those days but a floor register brought up heat from the dining room below where the heater stood. On winter mornings I could stand on that register as I dressed.

Breakfast was a hearty meal. We always had fried potatoes and ham or sausage and milk and coffee. I remember best the corn meal mush. It was cooked the night before, then sliced in the morning, fried in deep fat to a golden brown crust, and eaten with syrup on it.

The Gausmans had a hired man, Swan Peterson. I sometimes talked with him in Swedish. For a short time a hired girl, Ella Rentz, helped with the housework. Winter evenings were spent around the dining room table where the family often played checkers or cribbage and I, after checking the children's school papers, would discuss current events with Mr. Gausman or join in the fun with the others.

LIKE MANY teachers, I can recall each pupil in that first classroom, but one small boy, Leonard Ickler, stands out from the others. His mother had asked if he could attend because he was not quite six years old. I said he could, but she should not expect too much from him. A sweet youngster, with dark hair and large brown eyes, he was quick to notice everything, and he talked incessantly — if you let him. His teacher was important to him; she must know what he was doing and why! With the small enrollment of a one-room school, the youngest as well as the oldest was given the individual attention so important to developing minds and bodies. Leonard did well and before school ended in the spring his mother said to me, "Even if he hadn't learned anything else, he certainly learned to talk plainly."

My first month passed quickly and I received my first check. I shall never forget how good that felt. I took the bills of money

out of my purse and threw them up into the air. My mother laughed. She knew how I felt. My money! I had earned it!

A few months later, I took my youngest brother to the city to let him pick out a mackinaw of his own choosing and I paid for it. This precious feeling of independence and the opportunity of doing for others should be fostered in all young people.

\* \* \*

At school, during the winter months the children would bring small containers of food to heat on the stove. A container at the back of the stove was partly filled with hot water and the containers were set in this before school started.

TWO OF THE BOYS brought whisky bottles filled with coffee. The bottles were tightly corked and by morning recess the hot water in the container had expanded the coffee so that suddenly there would be a "pop! pop! pop!" as the corks blew off, much to the amusement of the children.

Across the road was a ravine with deep, sloping sides and through the lower part ran part of Battle Creek. Here was nature in all its beauty, unspoiled by man, with open patches of green grass, ferns and wild flowers in profusion during the spring months, and many stately trees. The children sometimes ate their noon lunch there, my ball team played there and our spring picnic was held there. A teacher, wherever she is located, can find much right around her school, be it country or city, to interest, educate and stimulate her pupils.

Every day, as well as each holiday or special occasion, offered an opportunity for learning. Songs, stories, and pictures — anything appropriate — gave each child a chance for creativity, whether it was *A Gingerbread Man*, *I Went To Visit A Friend One Day*, *I Just Took A Peek In The Pantry*, or *Spring Once Said To The Nightingale*. The nursery rhymes, songs or pieces I had faithfully learned I now passed on to my pupils. I shared my background of music and what I learned from my private dramatics lessons during high school with my pupils, from my first school to my last, years later.

As in my own country school days, the Christmas program was one of the highlights of the year, and the one time the parents came in touch with their children's teacher and with the neighbors and their

children. I can still see one little girl, dressed in a long white nightgown and carrying a lighted candle, reciting:

*"I am so very near asleep I scarce can  
keep from gaping,  
And so I think it must be time that  
people all were napping.  
So just before my eyes close tight, I  
wish you each and all goodnight."*

Back in the improvised wings an older girl stood ready to blow out the candle for fear of fire.

THE MONTHS glided by and I was approaching the end of my first year of teaching. As I tramped off to school with some of the pupils on a misty, moist Friday in late May I was planning all I wished to accomplish before school closed in another week. My older students must be well prepared for the next grade and I had planned a few tests on some of the subjects. There were report cards to finish, health cards to file, a final report to make to the county superintendent of schools, plans for next year's supplies, books and materials to put in order, and some picnic fun to plan for my small brood.

At morning recess that day I decided to get more wood. Out in the woodshed I stacked up the large logs and started to step over the threshold with my armful. As I did so, somehow I stumbled and went down into a puddle of rain water outside the shed. The huge logs scattered about.

I tried to move but couldn't. Then I noticed how my foot, encased in my high button shoes, fell from the leg. I realized I had broken my leg.

The children ran for Mr. Heskeroth who came and helped them get me back in the school. Then he went home to call Superintendent Reif. The only emergency agencies in those days were the people involved. My thoughts went to the children in spite of the increasing pain. Some of them sat in their seats. I told them to find work in their books so as to distract them, but it did not help much.

THE PAIN increased steadily. Suddenly I realized one little boy was crouched down behind the back of a seat.

"Earl," I asked, "What in the world are you doing down there?"

His tear-stained, freckled face appeared above the seat. He had hidden from the rest



**Battle Creek, now a park, ran through a deep ravine near the school. Here the children studied nature and held picnics.**

of the group to conceal his own emotions. Suddenly everyone, including me, started to laugh, and the air was cleared of all anxiety. Earl took his seat and everyone proceeded as though nothing had happened. Mr. Reif came and took me to the hospital and I spent a summer on crutches.

The accident cut my plans short. With only five days left of school, the pupils missed very little but I did worry about my first eighth grade graduating class of six pupils. However, Mr. Reif, and teachers from other schools managed well, and letters to me from my pupils described graduation, including the three gallons of ice cream District 12 got by mistake.

And so ended my first year of teaching. When the school board offered to renew my contract, raising my salary to fifty dollars. I accepted.

THE BREAK was a bad one and did not heal quickly. As August led into September of 1915 I knew I could not walk all those miles so I bought a horse, a little western bronco named Betty; a harness, a one-seated buggy and a side saddle. Automo-

biles were in use, but my salary would not allow for such an expenditure. My father built a stall for my horse, adding it to the wood shed beside my school. The school board paid for the materials, and I was ready for school again.

The weather on the first day of school was quite different from that of a year ago. As I jogged along it began to pour. I was as well equipped as possible, with raincoat and cap, but anyone who has ridden horseback, side saddle, on a little bronco pony with the rain coming down in sheets, knows how uncomfortable it is.

That year the little organ no longer worked well, so I decided it would be nice to have a piano. To raise money for this a basket social was held, along with a program in which the pupils all took part.

How very cooperative the parents were. Whatever was suggested the people of the community agreed to, and did all they could to make it a success. The school was a community center in which everyone was interested and the pupils made every effort to do their best.

As we drift more and more into mechanization in teaching, we drift farther and farther away from the human element, the loving arms around a worried child, the touch of a kind hand, the smile of understanding, or just the look of approval — or disapproval. I do not mean to belittle all the new methods, but I seriously wonder if we educators are not somewhat responsible

**First Ball Club:** Mrs. Olson, third from left in back, and her boys practiced and played ball on the grounds of Battle Creek across the road from the school.



Teachers met monthly with the county superintendent in St. Paul, and they often rode the rail lines which linked the city with the rural areas. Little stations (this one is near the Afton road) dotted the countryside around St. Paul.

for some of the unrest among young people today. How much real stability have we given our pupils? How much of "I really care what becomes of your future" have we made them feel?

DURING MY FIRST winter of teaching, Mr. Gausman often had his hired man take us to school on his sleigh, but this second winter he loaned me a cutter for my horse. There were no snow plows and at first the cutter and Betty did well, provided she stayed on the track of sleighs which had gone before us. Edith rode with me and we would pick up other pupils on the way. They stood on the runners behind me.

A few weeks earlier we had had a very cold spell. One morning my ten-year-old janitor, Wallace, could not get the fire started and when we arrived the school was very cold. I told the children to march up and down the aisles and to stamp their feet while I helped him start the fire. Perhaps as a result of this, I developed a cough and finally Mrs. Gausman called her doctor.

He was a typical country doctor who had been their family doctor for years. The weather was stormy but he was used to all kinds of weather. I can still see his kind face and his immaculate white beard as he checked me over. I recall looking at his checkered vest, carefully buttoned, and with the watch chain across it. He told me I had bronchial pneumonia.

I said, "But I must teach!"



He replied, "You'll teach again all right, but not for some time, young lady. You'll stay right in bed and keep warm."

Then he gave me two small pills which he took from his bag. In those days a country doctor carried his drugstore with him.

I missed teaching for only a week and my brother, Albert, substituted for me.

That winter I stayed through the weekends at the Gausmans and often went with them to Sunday School and church in Woodbury. This was a typical little country church with a cemetery next to it. Everybody knew everybody else.

ONCE A MONTH on Saturday mornings the teachers met with the county superintendent at the courthouse in St. Paul. Mr. Gausman made arrangements for me to leave my horse with a family at Red Rock, so I could take a train to St. Paul.

I recall sitting in the cutter and driving Betty down, down that steep curving Lower Afton Road; unhitching her and putting her into the stall, then catching a slow train which finally puffed into the old Union Depot. After the meeting I would shop before returning to the depot for my ride back to Red Rock.

The area in District 12 was farmland and families were few and far between. There were no commercial areas or taxpaying industries. That spring my parents sold their farm home and part of the land and moved to St. Paul where my father had built another house, and Mr. Reif told me to apply for another school. He knew that District 12 could not pay much higher wages.

He suggested District 1, the Edgerton School. It was only a mile from our new home and I could board at home and walk to school. And so I signed a contract for sixty dollars a month.

I think the big difference between youth and age is a changing sense of values. Youth looks forward, age looks back, youth strains for accomplishments, age evaluates accomplishments, youth dares, age questions. My new school was a step up my ladder and another challenge to which I looked forward.

MANY TEACHERS have thought that being friendly with pupils brings problems.

True, to some extent perhaps, but my experiences have taught me that not being friendly can lead to greater problems. A teacher must learn when to step in, when to ignore or maybe just forget.



**Sweet Girl Graduate:** How many today remember that great event, graduation from eighth grade? And that special dress? This is Helen Heckerth.

In more than fifty years of teaching, friendship with my students led to better and deeper friendships with both parents and children, for it is not just what we do about some situation, but rather how we do it.

I recall how, in my first school, I invited my four eighth grade girls into my home and made arrangements for them to take their examinations for entrance into North St. Paul High School, while the two boys took theirs in Woodbury. The girls enjoyed this experience, just as I had enjoyed a visit with my teacher during my early school years. I also remember how I depended on an older pupil to check the school attendance and how conscientiously she did it. And years later, I recall how I *expected* obedience from a wayward eighth grade pupil at Hillside School, *if* he wanted to graduate, and he agreed to it. There are innumerable such situations in any teacher's position, provided she is alert to them. And I have found that "All that you do for others, comes back into your own," is indeed true.



### THE GIBBS HOUSE

*Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.*

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 farm 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. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

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.