RAMSEY COUNTY
History

A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Special Issue:
150th Anniversary of
the Naming of
St. Paul
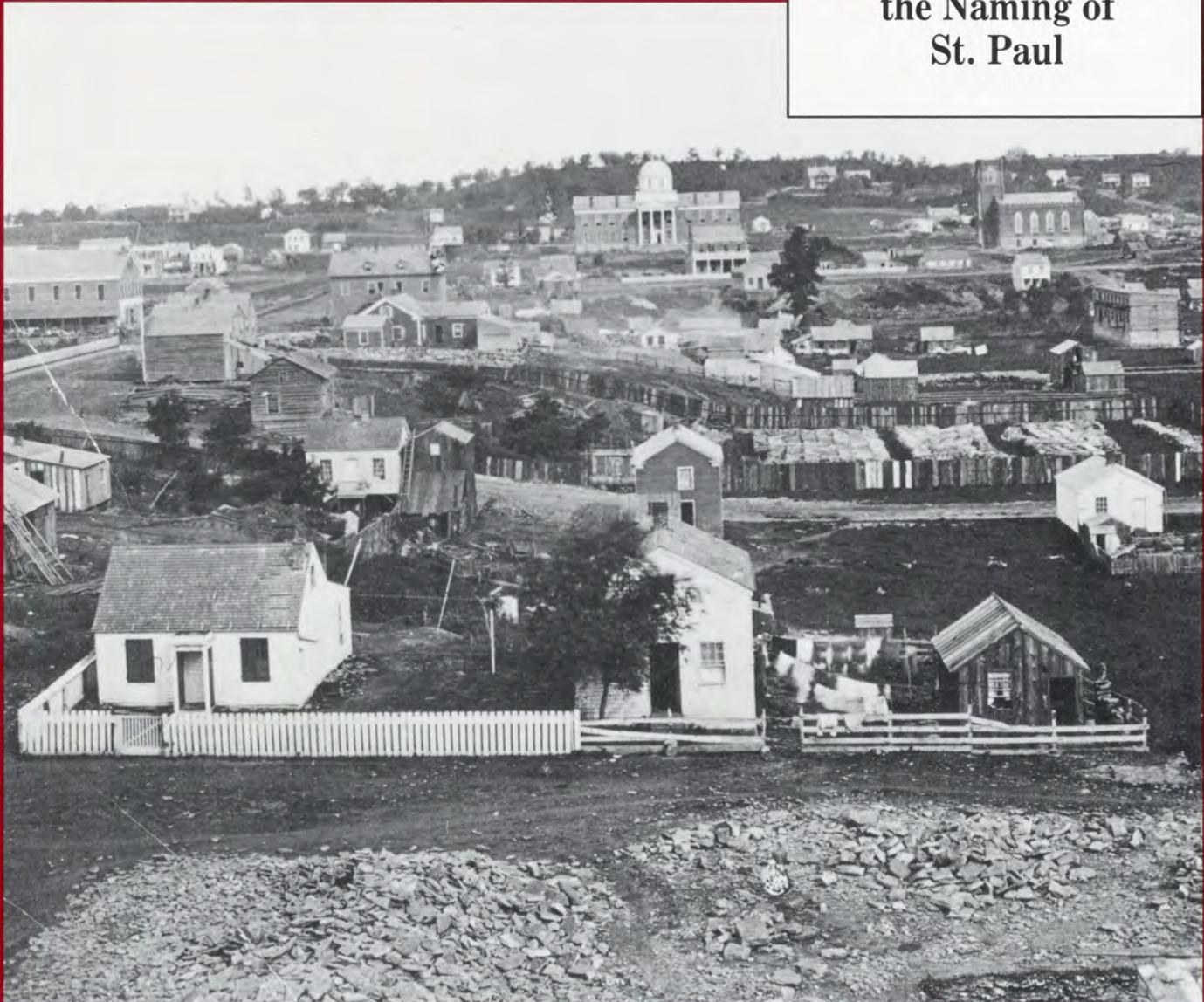
St. Paul in 1857. This is one of nine panoramic views shot that year by B. F. Upton from the roof of the Ramsey County Courthouse at Fourth and Wabasha streets. In this view to the north, the building with the pillars and the dome is the territorial capitol at Tenth and Wabasha streets. The articles beginning on page 4 are published in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the naming of St. Paul and trace the early history of the settlement on the Mississippi that once was known as Pig's Eye.

On the Cover: St. Paul was the capital of the Territory of Minnesota, when this view was photographed by B. F. Upton from the roof of the Ramsey County Courthouse in 1857. See articles on St. Paul's early years beginning on page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY
History

Volume 26, Number 3   Fall, 1991

CONTENTS

A Message from the Editorial Board

Four members of the Society's Board of Directors and Editorial Board have had the good fortune to serve on the St. Paul History Sub-committee for the writing of *Saint Paul – The First 150 Years.* The sub-committee came together under the auspices of The Saint Paul Foundation to assist the book's author, Virginia Brainard Kunz, with comment and criticism of her manuscript that celebrates the history and cultural diversity of the people of St. Paul. The opinions of the committee members were as varied as their ethnicity. The group included representatives from the Native American, Southeast Asian, African American and Mexican American communities of Ramsey County, as well as those of European ancestry.

The book that Virginia Kunz wrote reflects the experiences of their people and their vision for St. Paul and its cultural richness. Featured in this issue of *Ramsey County History* is a section of the book along with special articles on "Pig's Eye" Parrant, Abraham Perry's family and the Davern house, an early farm house set within an Irish community in what is now Highland Park. Together they all contribute to the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the naming of St. Paul.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

towns and the first run over the new iron road was made by a party consisting of St. Paul's mayor, John S. Prince, the city's aldermen, and a joyous crowd of approximately a hundred.

Economic distractions, however, had accompanied the Civil War. It was not until the late 1860s that lines were laid to link St. Paul with St. Cloud, Wayzata, Willmar, Breckenridge and Melrose.

As St. Paul began to emerge as the transportation hub of the region, the city began to change. Railroad depots dotted the downtown until 1879, when the railroads joined together to build the St. Paul Union Depot on the site of the St. Paul and Pacific's little depot (a block south of Third Street at Sibley).

The city, itself, no longer contained in the old downtown neighborhood, began to spread outward into its first inner ring neighborhoods. Jobs for the German, Swedish and Irish laborers who were arriving by steamboat and rail also moved outward from the city. The North End, Frogtown, the East Side, the West Side, and the West Seventh Street neighborhoods filled up with the families of men who needed to be close to work on the railroads.

In 1872, the first horsecar plodded along a two-mile track from Seven Corners to Lafayette and Westminster. In 1874, the Wabasha Street bridge replaced the St. Paul bridge, erected as a toll bridge in 1859. Gas lamps lighted the downtown streets. St. Paul's Volunteer Firefighters, who had protected the city since the formation of the Hook and Ladder Company in 1854, reluctantly disbanded in 1877 as the city moved to a paid force. A velocipede mania seized the city and cyclists raced around Armory Hall. St. Paul's pioneer days were over.

Virginia Brainard Kunz is editor of Ramsey County History *and the author of* Saint Paul – Its First 150 Years.

Who WAS 'Pig's Eye' Parrant, Anyway?

It is rare for a person to enjoy two reputations concurrently – famous and infamous. But Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant (if that was truly his name) accomplished that in the course of his eventful life.

"Pig's Eye" Parrant, for whom St. Paul first was named, was one of those colorful characters that inhabit western history. While he has been the subject of much legend and lore, not much is really known about him, beyond his contribution to the history of St. Paul. Parrant makes his first appearance in that history as a French Canadian voyageur who was hanging about Mendota, circa 1832, "waiting for something to turn up," in the words of St. Paul's early historian, J. Fletcher Williams. Parrant, at that time, was "past the meridian of life – probably sixty years of age." He is referred to in the old sources as "Paran," "Paren" and "Parrant," and he had been around: Sault Ste. Marie; St. Louis, where he had been employed by the fur traders, McKenzie and Chouteau; and Prairie du Chien, among other places.

Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent at Fort Snelling, apparently loathed him. Among Taliaferro's duties was the protection of the Native Americans from the nefarious practices of certain of the traders, and Parrant evidently caused Taliaferro no end of trouble. On August 23, 1835, Taliaferro noted in his journal that he had "ordered Pierre Parrant, a foreigner, prohibited from trade, not to enter the Indian country in any capacity."

Taliaferro's writ didn't extend far enough. On October 12, he again noted in his journal that Parrant, in defiance of the order, seemed to have entered Indian territory anyway, and if that was true, "a military force would be sent after him and he would be sent to Prairie du Chien."

Parrant's appearance did little to inspire confidence. Williams described him as a "coarse, ill-looking, low-browed fellow with only one eye. He spoke execrable English. His habits were intemperate and licentious." One of his eyes was "blind, marble-hued, crooked, with a sinister white ring glaring around the pupil, giving a kind of piggish expression to his sodden, low features."

Parrant proposed to set himself up as a seller of whiskey, an activity not looked upon with favor by the officers at Fort Snelling. Whatever his other failings, Parrant's judgment in this case was sound. A sergeant at the fort had paid $80 one cold winter night for a gallon of whiskey that perhaps cost the seller only a few dollars. Parrant also understood the meaning of "location, location, location," even at that distant time. The spot he chose for his business was the mouth of a little stream that flowed out of Fountain Cave, near the junction of present-day Shepard Road and Randolph Street. He chose wisely. Customers could paddle to his door, suppliers could drop off cargo, and the clear water of the stream could dilute the product and strengthen the profits.

Here, in his lonely gorge, about the first of June, 1838, Parrant erected his whiskey hovel. He was the first, according to historian William Watts Folwell, to stake a claim on the site of what became the capital city of the state. He soon was "driving a flourishing trade, selling whiskey to both Indians and whites," Williams wrote. "Occasionally a party of soldiers, bound on a spree, would come down to his ranch, get soaked with his red-eye and tangle-foot brands, and fail to report the next day. Hence a guard would have to hunt them up, and the poor fellows would sojourn in the guardhouse or wear a ball and chain for a period." Soldiers from the fort would descend on his place and search it but, Williams wrote, Parrant probably hid the liquor in the cave.

Whiskey-sellers, as was Parrant, were a serious problem for the Native American and the white population around Fort Snelling, but the commanding officers at the fort, and particularly Major Joseph Plympton, commandant in the late 1830s, seemed to be indifferent to it, one early writer charged. He suggested a somewhat draconian solution to the problem:

"The situation was bad enough but it seems that might easily have been improved. The commandant at the fort had but to send a file of soldiers to the shack of

the liquor seller, destroy his stock and his establishment, arrest him and send him out of the country, threatening him with death if he returned, and then the offending evil would have been removed. But Major Plympton did not take this course. He arrested and imprisoned the settlers [on the military reservation] because their cows trespassed upon the drill ground, but in only two instances did he attempt to punish the liquor sellers."

Before long, Parrant lost his claim. In the fall of 1838, he borrowed $90 from William Beaumette, a stone mason at Mendota. Parrant's "signature" on the note—an "X", since he was illiterate—was witnessed by that future governor of Minnesota, Henry Hastings Sibley. Beaumette sold the note to John Miller, a fellow stonemason who built Sibley's house at Mendota—the first stone house in Minnesota. When the note came due on May 1, 1839, Parrant was unable to pay it, and Miller took possession of Parrant's Fountain Cave claim.

Undaunted, Parrant moved three miles down the Mississippi and took up a new claim that extended from present-day Minnesota to Jackson Street, and from the river to the bluff. Near the foot of Robert Street, and on a small rise of ground at Bench Street, he erected another whiskey tavern and opened for business.

The little settlement huddled about two steamboat landings on the river still was nameless. Enter, one day in 1839, Edmund Brissett, a young French Canadian doing odd carpentry jobs. He was stopping at Parrant's tavern and he wanted to send a letter to Joseph R. Brown on Grey Island but lacked a return address.

" . . . I looked up inquiringly at Parrant," he recalled, "and seeing his old crooked eye scowling at me, it suddenly popped into my head to date it at Pig's Eye, feeling sure that the place would be recognized, as Parrant was well-known along the river. In a little while an answer was safely received, directed to me at Pig's Eye. I told the joke to some of the boys, and they made lots of fun of Parrant. He was very mad, and threatened to lick me, but never tried to execute it."

The name, foisted upon the helpless settlement as a joke, stuck until Father Lucien Galtier and his Chapel of St. Paul deliv-

Fountain Cave. Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant opened his first tavern at the mouth of the cave, near today's Randolph Street and Shepard Road.

ered the future city from the ignominy of being known throughout history as Pig's Eye, Minnesota. Parrant's itchy foot, however, gave him no rest. In 1844, he sold his claim to Louis Robert for $10 and moved on down the Mississippi to the Grand Marais, the "alluvial bottoms of the river some two miles below the site of the Union Depot in St. Paul," according to Folwell, who added that . . . "his sobriquet, 'Pig's Eye,' by which the lower settlement was at once known, still attaches to the locality."

Before long, Williams wrote, Parrant became embroiled in an argument with his neighbor, Michel LeClaire, over the boundaries of their respective claims. Finally, LeClaire hauled Parrant up before Joseph R. Brown, who was justice of the peace. Brown ruled that neither had established a legal claim to the property in question and suggested a foot race back to the disputed claims—a distance of eight miles—to settle the matter.

The odds were against Parrant from the outset. Along in years, he was easily outdistanced by the younger LeClaire. Soon after, Parrant left the area. What became of him is shrouded in mystery. An inventive writer known only as Col. Hankins published a novel, *Dakota Land, or the Beauty of St. Paul* in 1868 in which he purported to unravel the mystery of Parrant's last days.

Edward J. Lettermann, in an article in *Ramsey County History*, summarized Hankins' inventive account of how Parrant met his end. Hankins' flight of fancy begins with Florinda, a woman of doubtful character, who supposedly came upon Parrant in a whiskey shack up the Mississippi from St. Paul. She recognized him as a voyageur who had blackmailed her years before in Montreal. Lettermann continued:

"She demands the return of the blackmail money. Parrant agrees to give it to her at a prearranged spot, a half-mile below Mendota on the Mississippi . . . An ox cart driver who had fallen in love with Florinda, overhears the argument and stabs Parrant with a [stolen] knife . . . "

Be that as it may, J. Fletcher Williams has a more accurate and believable—if prosaic—account of what became of Pig's Eye Parrant. After losing his claim, Parrant started for Sault Ste. Marie, Williams wrote, but died before reaching Lake Superior "of a disease resulting from his own vices."

—Ronald M. Hubbs

This is Ronald M. Hubbs' fifth article for Ramsey County History. *He is the retired chairman of the board of the St. Paul Companies.*
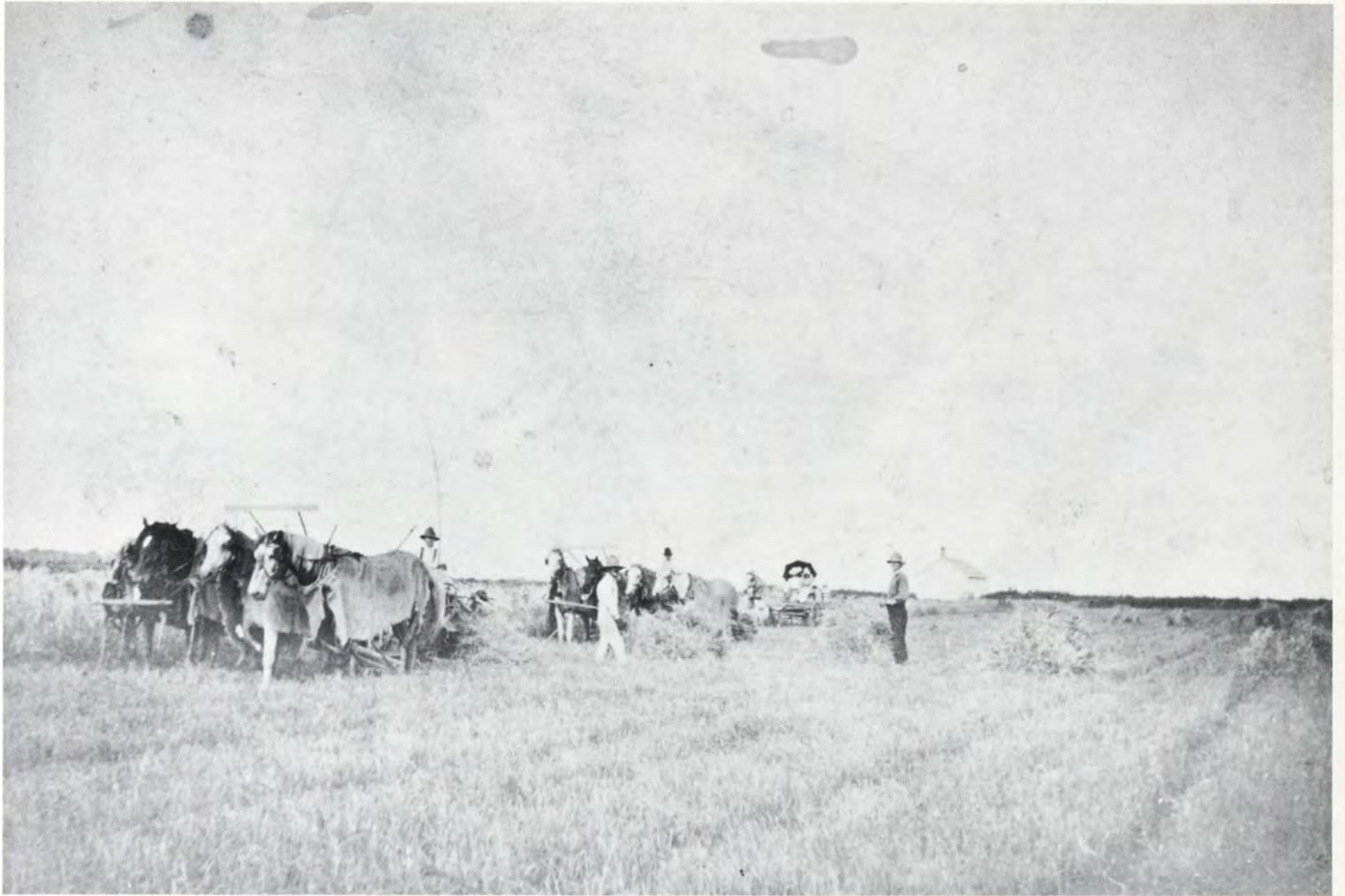
The Davern family working in the field north of their farm house, late in the nineteenth century. Today, this field is a residential neighborhood southwest of Montreal and Snelling avenues. See the article page 22 on the families and the homes of the Daverns, who were among the Irish immigrants who settled in what is now Highland Park in 1849, and on the Colvins who followed them.