

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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*Whistles, Crowds, Free Silver
Election Night – 1896*

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Fall, 1992

Volume 27, Number 3

The
Mexican-
Americans
and their
Roots in
St. Paul's
Past

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Growing Up
on The
East Side

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Mexican women attending a class in English presented by the St. Paul WPA's adult education department—April 23, 1936.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue of *Ramsey County History* matches in diversity the varied fall colors we now see all around us. Jane McClure writes in fascinating detail about the history of our Mexican American neighbors on the West Side of St. Paul. Tom Buckley reminds us that the presidential election of 1896, matching Republican McKinley with Democrat Bryan, involved in its day as much hoopla, politics and suspense as the election of 1992 appears to have so far.

Two of our regular features—Growing Up in St. Paul and the Historic Site essay—highlight the colorful East Side neighborhood. And finally we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church and its century of service to St. Paul's African American community in A Matter of Time for 1892. The Editorial Board hopes you will enjoy the richness of Ramsey County's history found in this issue.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

Postcards: A Full-blown Love Affair

Robert J. Stumm

Something we send out in the mail today when we're too lazy or harried to write a letter, the postcard was at the beginning one of the most venerated and cherished items in American society. During the height of the postcard epoch, which lasted from 1905 to 1915, billions of cards were produced in this country, leaving behind a remarkable visual record of a nation coming of age. Owing to its position at the time as a major rail center, St. Paul was featured on hundreds of individual views, a circumstance which has provided us with a rich but under-utilized historic resource.

A product of the all-transforming Industrial Revolution, the postcard was developed in Europe during the 1870s. Within a decade, the European continent was flooded with postcards, and in countries like Germany and England publishing and distributing involved thousands of workers. Entrepreneurs imported the postcard to America in the 1890s but demand was anemic because the postal service imposed a two-cent postage fee on private cards, as against a one-cent rate for government cards. This situation was remedied in 1898 when Congress passed the Private Mailing Act establishing the same one-cent postage rate for both government and private postal cards. Gradually the American public fell under the same spell which had made the postcard so popular in Europe. Demand for cards exploded and in 1908, just one decade after the Mailing Act was enacted, a phenomenal 670 million postcards were sold in the United States.

A combination of factors contributed to the rapid fire growth of postcards in what was, at that time, a very broad and diverse country. New developments in photographic technology played a major role in the swift and unprecedented acceptance of the postcard. The central player in this process was the Eastman Kodak Compa-



North on Robert Street, with the majestic Ryan hotel in the background.

ny, which in 1902 introduced a developing paper for photographers so they could directly reproduce their negatives on postcard stock. Eastman Kodak edged out its competitors again in 1903 when it started selling the first affordable camera capable of taking postcard size negatives.

To understand at all the inherent appeal of the postcard during the early years of this century, one must remember what everyday life was like in that period. While the telephone had been a part of our culture for more than two decades, at this juncture the phone system was still primarily an urban phenomenon and even where it existed it was at best unreliable. Also, calling long distance wasn't an option for most phone subscribers, and when it was available the cost was exceedingly high. Unless one lived in the same neighborhood, visiting a friend or relative was also a difficult propo-

sition. The horse and buggy was still the primary means of conveyance so even an excursion to a nearby town would require budgeting at least half a day in travel time alone. What this all added up to was that most Americans lived a very isolated existence.

While it would be a mistake to infer that the postcard revolutionized communication in this country, it most certainly provided a new and convenient way for people to interact. Like our modern telephone, the postcard was a quick and painless way to send a concise message to friends or loved ones. Unburdened from the task of composing a letter, one could write a three or four sentence note to Aunt Edna in Stillwater updating her on the status of your children or how your new job was going. Also, the postcard was a handy way to let someone know you'd be stopping by to visit on the weekend or an impending holiday. For a man and woman in the throes of love who lived in different towns, the postcard kept the fires of romance burning because they could exchange cards on a daily basis until the romance cooled or they ran out of money.

Above and beyond practicality, the postcard had an inborn inherent appeal for the men and women of the early twentieth century. An illustrated card gave its owner the thrill of experiencing vicariously far away places which they had only read or heard about. Collecting postcards was an incredibly popular pastime, and many collectors belonged to organized clubs which provided them with the chance to exchange cards with members in other states. It was not uncommon in a large city like St. Paul to find a shop that sold nothing but postcards, and in a truly cosmopolitan place like New York or Chicago there might be ten or more postcard emporiums.

America's full blown love affair with the postcard began to cool just prior to the



The Lower Landing, above, still there but vastly changed. The Dayton's Bluff Commercial Club, below, built in 1906, also still stands but has been altered beyond recognition. The Pioneer Building, right, remains in all its glory.



start of World War I. Government policy, which had been so instrumental in making the postcard a viable and desirable product, also helped bring about its decline. Most of the cards sold in the United States were printed in Germany, and when Congress upped the tariff rate on imported goods in 1909, the postcard industry was severely crippled. As a consequence, there was a noticeable drop in card quality, which badly undermined demand. There were also more subtle forces at work. Cars were now far more commonplace, so instead of mailing a card to Aunt Edna one visited her in person. America was also

embracing a new pastime, the motion picture, and why buy a view of New York or anyplace for that matter when one could see it depicted on a giant movie screen. The postcard was never threatened with extinction, but its days in the limelight were over.

During the heyday of the postcard, it provided an accurate barometer of the things people valued most in their community and St. Paul was no exception. St. Paul's identity was its downtown and the vast majority of cards showcased the still vibrant central business district. The park system was also a source of pride, and

During the heyday of the postcard, it provided an accurate barometer of the things people valued most in their community and St. Paul was no exception.



postcard publishers went to great lengths to produce the best views of Como and Mounds parks. Another important measure of a city were its schools and churches, and very few of these St. Paul institutions escaped the eye of the postcard photographer.

The flow of everyday life in the downtown, which existed nearly a century ago, is documented in dramatic detail in a view looking north on Robert Street. What I find so compelling about this scene is that due to the total absence of cars, horse-drawn vehicles could pull up and park in front of any building and cyclists could ride without fear in the middle of the street. At the far end of Robert Street is the Ryan Hotel, which for so long was the preeminent landmark in downtown St. Paul.

Postcard buyers of that era could also purchase a view of St. Paul's first landmark, the once tempestuous Lower Landing. Located at the foot of Jackson Street, it was the main steamboat port in Minneso-

ta in the period between 1850 and 1875. Long since superseded as a gateway by the railroads, the Lower Landing still exists but bears little resemblance to its former bustling self.

Because of their rarity at that time, skyscrapers appeared with great regularity on postcards, and far and away the most depicted St. Paul skyscraper was the still very distinguished Pioneer Press building. This structure, which sits at the corner of Fourth and Robert, was erected in 1889. Designed by Solon S. Beman, a Chicago architect, this 16-story edifice is one of St. Paul's last surviving examples of Romanesque Revival architecture.

Postcards also enable us to examine a community's social history as exemplified by a card which provides us with a long ago glimpse of the Dayton's Bluff Commercial Club. Built in 1906, this building served as the headquarters for what was for half a century the East Side's most prominent and powerful civic organization. Altered beyond recognition, this old clubhouse, which is located at 770 East Seventh Street, is now being utilized as a church.

Antique postcards, like their modern brethren, were used to promote restaurants which allows us to experience what it was like to dine at St. Paul's premier eatery, the Carling Cafe. Opened in 1898 by William Carling, this dining establishment was located at 347 Robert Street. The clientele, which included such men as railroad mogul James J. Hill, got to pick from a menu which featured a succulent array of French delicacies. In the 1930s the once-so-elegant Carling Cafe was converted into a cafeteria which managed to stay in business until 1966.

St. Paul's public education system was launched in a building, which often was misidentified as the St. Paul High School. The original Central High School, it was dedicated in 1883 and located at the corner of Tenth and Minnesota. Built to accommodate 500 students, it was the city's only high school until Humboldt High began serving children on the West Side in 1889. Between 1909 and 1912 the city built a series of neighborhood high schools, including a new Central High on Lexington Avenue. The old high school was abandoned and nearly two decades later in 1929 it was demolished.



INTERIOR CARLING'S UPTOWN RESTAURANT, ST. PAUL, MINN. 10365

The Carling Cafe, above, as it looked shortly after its opening in 1898; the original Central High School, below, and the old Town and Country Club, bottom.



ST. PAUL HIGH SCHOOL, ST. PAUL, MINN.



St. Paul, Minn., Town and Country Club.



Bird's eye view of the West Side, above, the author's favorite St. Paul postcard; the once-regal Windsor hotel, below, and a view of the playground on Harriet Island, bottom.



In an era when everyone at least had aspirations of one day becoming rich, the postcard allowed people the chance to dream by documenting how the wealthy lived. The best instance we have of this in St. Paul are the many old views of the Town and Country Club. Its first clubhouse, which was designed by Cass Gilbert, was built in 1890 atop a hill overlooking the Lake Street bridge. Three years later, Town and Country Club members greatly enhanced the prestige of their club when they built Minnesota's first golf course. Unable to meet the needs of a new generation, the clubhouse was razed and replaced by the present structure in 1956.

Cards also allow us to step backward in time to a nineteenth century downtown dotted with buildings like the Windsor Hotel. This once regal five-story hotel, which opened for business on January 1, 1878, was located at the corner of Fifth and St. Peter. The hotel, which had a decidedly European look, was the first building of any in Minnesota to have a passenger elevator. Frequented by such notables as Ignatius Donnelly and Hamlin Garland, the Windsor was one of St. Paul's last high class resident hotels. The hotel, which had become unprofitable, was sold in 1910 to Lucius Ordway, who then leveled it so he could build a more pretentious structure, the Saint Paul Hotel.

I'd like to end this article by sharing with you my favorite St. Paul card, a bird's eye view taken from the edge of a bluff on the city's West Side. By accident or design, the card provides us with a closeup perspective of an ethnic enclave situated on the Mississippi's floodplain, the West Side flats. A haven for first-generation immigrants, the West Side flats were settled initially in the 1880s by Jews from Eastern Europe; then over time it became primarily a Mexican-American neighborhood. A small and somewhat isolated community, the flats were zoned out of existence in the early 1960s. At first blush just a pretty scene, this vintage card clearly demonstrates the vital role postcards can play in our quest to understand the past.

This is Robert J. Stumm's second article for Ramsey County History. Now a freelance writer, he is a 1970 graduate of the University of Minnesota with a degree in history.



Saint Paul, Minn. Public Baths, Beach and Bathers, Harriet Island

The public baths, beaches and bathers at Harriet Island. Views of St. Paul's parks, as well as the city's vibrant downtown, were popular with postcard publishers, Robert J. Stumm observes in his article beginning on page 18.

R.C.H.S.
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