

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Ramsey County  
and Its Early  
Courthouses

*Page 19*

**Fall, 1993**

Volume 28, Number 3

**Newly Restored, Newly Renovated—  
The City Hall and County Courthouse**

*Page 4*



*Memorial Hall and the God of Peace, restored so that they shine once again in all their glory in the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse. See articles beginning on page 4. Photo by George Heinrich.*



## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

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Fall, 1993

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## An Award-winning Team



*Ramsey County History* has been awarded a Certificate of Commendation by the American Association for State and Local History. Above (from left) are some of the Editorial Board members who guide the publication process: Priscilla Farnham, executive director, Ramsey County Historical Society; Thomas C. Buckley; Virginia B. Kunz, the magazine's editor; John M. Lindley, Editorial Board chairman; Thomas H. Boyd; Arthur Mc Watt; and Thomas J. Kelley. Not pictured: Charlton Dietz, Laurie Murphy, and Dr. Thomas B. Mega. Photo by Richard Strom.



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## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

# The Return of the Cotters: A Family's Story

*Dorothy Cotter Chaput  
as told to Thomas C. Buckley*

*The story of Dorothy Cotter Chaput and her family reflects the early twentieth century migration of young Americans from the farm and small town to the city. That story has often been presented as one of families breaking apart and spreading across the country. But in this case it is about a family that returned to St. Paul after an absence of more than sixty years, found interesting jobs, stayed in or near the city, and remained close to each other. In addition, her personal story reflects what might be regarded today as a rather modern, but balanced life. As a young woman fresh out of high school, she quickly secured an interesting and well paying office position, but it didn't dominate her other interests and obligations.*

I have lived in the Twin Cities for seventy-two years, and for seventy of them I have been a resident of St. Paul. My story is connected with that of my immediate family, of whom I am the last survivor. All my brothers and sisters came to this city in their teens or early twenties to complete their educations or get a start on their careers. My parents eventually followed their children to St. Paul to spend their retirement years here. The cumulative total of years spent in this city by my parents, two brothers, four sisters and myself amount to 324, but if we add all our years in the Twin Cities they total 445.

In 1852 my grandparents Michael and Mary Cotter were thrifty Irish farmers who migrated to America from County Cork. They had been hurt by the potato famine and left before it wiped out the little they had left. They settled in Poughkeepsie, New York, where they formally renounced any allegiance to Queen Victoria (that wasn't difficult), and declared their intention to become American citizens. Five years later they moved west

and purchased a lot in what is now downtown St. Paul. After saving enough to make a down payment on a farm, they sold the lot and moved to Prescott, Wisconsin. However, according to family legend, the lot turned out to be more valuable. It eventually became the site of the Ryan Hotel.

It was at Prescott in 1859 that my father was born. He was also named Michael Cotter, and was said to be the first child of European ancestry born in the area when it became Pierce County. Grandfather purchased a farm near Plum City, Wisconsin. Father also became a farmer and bought his own farm, also near Plum City. He postponed marriage until his farm was paid for and the farmhouse was fully furnished. Papa wanted his wife to move into a comfortable home and he had the restraint to wait until everything was the way he wanted it to be.

Before his marriage Papa regularly drove his team to Stockholm on the Mississippi at Lake Pepin to conduct business. In winter he could sometimes drive the team across the lake on the ice to Lake City, Minnesota, but he usually took the ferry. He attended dances at Lake City, and that was where he met my mother, Ellen Darcy. Her family were farmers in northern Wabasha County who also had migrated from Ireland in 1852 because of the famine. They also had done well in America. Mother had been a country school teacher for a few years. When they were married she was twenty-one and he was nearly thirty-five. After their marriage, two of Mother's brothers married two of Papa's sisters. They also married later in life—not uncommon for Irishmen in those days. There were lots of people around Minnesota and Wisconsin of German and Scandinavian ancestry, but Irish Catholics looked for other Irish Catholics, and there weren't many in that area. As a result, three Cotters married three Darcys and

when they had children I had several double cousins.

My parents raised a family of seven children, two boys and five girls, born between 1895 and 1911. By the time the youngest, Genevieve, was born mother was thirty-eight and papa was almost fifty-two. The size of the family was surprising, since mother was in frail health when she got married. However, she grew stronger with each child and lived to be eighty-five. The children turned out to be a healthy group; all but one lived into their eighties or longer. My older brother John died a month short of ninety-four and my brother Earl was almost ninety-two.

My older two brothers and two sisters were born on the farm. When rural free delivery was established at the turn of the century, Papa got a mail route. Eventually the folks decided to sell the farm and move to town. The money was invested in buying a general store in Plum City which they named The People's Mercantile. The name came from the fact that Papa and Uncle Jim were supporters of William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic and Peoples Party candidate for president in 1896. I was the first of the children born in town, and when I became a teenager I worked in the store, as had my older brothers and sisters. That was where we gained our first business training.

Plum City had a high school in the early years of this century, but enrollment was small and it was closed shortly before America entered World War I. Later it was partially re-established, but only through the ninth and tenth grades. Those who wanted to complete high school had to go quite a distance to Elmwood or Spring Valley in the northwest part of the county.

Only my brother John was able to complete high school in Plum City, and soon after he joined the Navy. He served on a mine sweeper in the North Sea, and didn't



return until 1919, since after the Armistice they had to remove all the mines the British laid in the North Sea. My brother Earl, the second oldest, was to go into service, but the Armistice was declared before he had to go. All except Earl were all happy about that.

Times were tough after the war. Farm prices dropped and the customers fell further and further behind in paying their bills. Papa had difficulty paying his creditors and eventually had to sell the store. Declaring bankruptcy was a possibility, but we didn't consider that to be an honorable course for an honest man. Papa was over sixty by then and went to work as a farm hand in order to support his family and pay his creditors. It was quite a come down, for he was a well known and highly regarded man in the county. He helped organize the World War I Liberty Bond drive, and served on the County Board for more than sixteen years. Eventually he paid all his debts, but it meant that his children had to leave home early to make their own way in the world. We had to finish high school elsewhere, and we couldn't afford to go to college.

My older sister Dealia was the first to move to St. Paul; she left a year before me. I was just sixteen when I left Plum City in the August, 1921. Uncle Jim Cotter, Papa's brother, had sold his farm near Plum City for a good price and moved his family to Minneapolis during World War I. We were very close families, and I moved to Minneapolis to be near them. I spent many holidays at Uncle Jim's until my parents moved to St. Paul a decade later, after Papa had paid all his debts.

In the late summer of 1921, I lived with the McInerny family at 3725 First Avenue South while I enrolled in high school. I took care of their two children for my room, board, and five dollars a week. When school started I enrolled in the eleventh grade at Minneapolis Central High School. On my first day of school some neighbor children showed me the way. We talked so much I paid little attention to the number of blocks we walked. I had memorized the house number but, although I knew what the house looked like, I forgot to note the street number. When I headed back to McInerny's after school I was alone and realized I didn't know the street num-



*The Cotter family in St. Paul. Front row, left to right: Eleanor, Dorothy, Clare, Ellen (their mother), Dealia and Genevieve. Back row: Earl, Michael (their father), and John. All photos used here are from the authors.*

ber. I walked up one 3700 block and down the next until I got back to First Avenue. Being a small town country girl, new to the big city, I had never seen so many houses or so many people. After all, my graduating class at Central High was 413, about twice the entire population of Plum City, and the entire school enrolled more than 1,200 students.

School came easily for me. I was valedictorian of my small eighth grade class in Plum City, but I expected high school in Minneapolis would be more difficult. In spite of my concerns I did well and took advanced classes at Central. By my senior year I had earned fourteen credits toward a college degree. The dean of students at Central, Fannie Forester, told me I had earned more college credits than any student she had ever advised, and I must go to the University of Minnesota. But I told her I couldn't afford it and had to go to work. Papa was having a difficult time, but he managed to send me \$10 for spending money. When I went home during Christmas vacation in 1922, I gave the money back to him. He needed it more than I did, for that was the year he lost his store.

After graduation in June, 1923, I planned to spend the summer with the family, before looking for a job. However, by

then my older sisters Clare and Dealia and my brother John were working at the Golden Rule department store in St. Paul so I moved in with them at 1859 Selby Avenue. The owners, the Tierneys, had gone to the lake for the summer and we rented their house. My sister Dealia saw an ad in the paper for an office worker at the Stenson Company. She suggested I apply before I took the train for home.

Stenson's had a store in the Bremer Arcade and sold Maytag washers, Simplex ironers and Royal vacuum cleaners. On June 25 I went downtown wearing my best outfit, a white blouse, white skirt, and white school sweater. Sylvia Stenson, the company secretary, interviewed me. The position involved general office work, handling the billings, receiving payments from customers, and also taking dictation over the phone from Mr. Stenson who worked at the main office and store in Minneapolis.

I was hired on the spot, which I thought was fortunate for a seventeen-year-old high school graduate. I was paid \$75 a month, which I considered a good salary in those days, particularly for someone just out of high school. Mrs. Stenson wanted me to come to work the next day. I dared not tell her I planned to go home for the



summer, since she needed help and I needed the work. So I said nothing and went home to 1859 Selby and cried.

My employment with the Stensons turned out to be close, congenial, and long. I worked for them from the summer of 1923 until after I was married in 1926. Then I was asked to come back several times to help them out in emergencies, a pattern that continued into the early 1950s.

During that first three-year period I became the office manager with responsibility for laying out the St. Paul delivery routes and schedules for the truck drivers. I came to know the map of the city very well. I also served as Mrs. Stenson's personal secretary and arranged the company dances which were held at the Calhoun Commercial Club in Minneapolis and the Midway Commercial Club at Prior and University in St. Paul. I also arranged the summer picnic. The company employed fifty to sixty people; most were salesmen. The Stenson Company was the exclusive Twin Cities distributor for Maytag washers, and we usually had only one lonely repairman.

I went to work in the Minneapolis office for a brief period, then worked at their new office on University Avenue, across the street from the present location of KSTP. The Thompson Lumber Company had offices upstairs and the Bach Lumber Company was located behind the building. Every few months Mr. Stenson told me to add \$2.50 to my monthly pay check. I was soon making much more than John, who was the buyer in the luggage department, or Dealia, who was the buyer in gloves and neckwear, or Clare, who worked in women's cosmetics at the Golden Rule.

I lived with them until 1924. Over the winter of 1923-24 we lived on Lookout Place, on St. Paul's East Side, near Westminster and York, near where Interstate 35E was later built. It was another big house like the Tierneys'; its owners had gone south for the winter and didn't return until spring. When they returned, Clare and Dealia moved in with my brother Earl and his wife Cora who had moved up from Plum City. Earl had a milk route and later went to work for the E. L. Murphy Trucking Company.

In May of 1924 John and I took rooms in the Chaput home at 605 Dayton. The

Chaputs had eleven children. They had moved to St. Paul from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, in 1918, but by 1924 their children were grown and most had moved away to start families of their own. Mr. Chaput was a carpenter for the Soo Line railroad and Mrs. Chaput rented out the empty bedrooms to boarders. John and I were not the first of our family to live there. When my uncle James brought cattle to South St. Paul from his ranch in North Dakota, he stayed at the Chaputs', and my sister Genevieve also lived there for a short time.

I had been going out with Eddie Mahoney and, later, Willis Tuller. Eddie worked for the *St. Paul Dispatch* and stopped regularly at Stenson's to arrange their advertising. We went to dances at the Irish-American Club near Rice and University. We usually double dated with Eddie's cousin Tom Houghan and Ermel McClay. Ermel had come to St. Paul from Stillwater to begin her career. She roomed at the Plunketts' at a time when the future Judge Jerome Plunkett, was a cute little boy about four or five years old.

About a year later I began dating Willis Tuller. I had met Willis at a dance in Ellsworth, Wisconsin, when I was about nineteen. He had a good job with the Soo Line Railroad, drove a big car and lived on Park Avenue in Minneapolis where he also looked after his mother, who was not in good health. When I was in the hospital to have my appendix removed, he sent me a dozen roses every day. He proposed to me, but I didn't accept. He was not Catholic, and I had decided years earlier that I didn't want to marry outside the church. We parted friends, and he later went into the hotel business and moved to California.

Charlie Chaput, the next to the youngest of the Chaput brothers, was working in Chicago for General Electric when I moved in and I met him that spring when he came home to attend the graduation of his youngest brother Jean. About a year later he returned to St. Paul to work. I knew Charlie was interested in me when he asked me to stop seeing Willis.

Charlie and I planned to get married, but, like my father, we wanted to get some of the amenities, since we could rent an apartment that included basic furniture. In 1925 Charlie and I bought a radio. Then

we bought a Ford Model T car that belonged to a man who roomed at the Chaputs'. His company transferred him to Seattle and he didn't plan to drive out there, given the condition of the roads in those days. He dismantled the car and later sold it to us. Model T's were known to be easy to take apart or repair. The tires and bumpers were stored in Chaputs' attic; we brought them out to the garage and put the car back together.

Having a car was important, with my parents still living in Plum City. The nearest railroad stop was at Maiden Rock, on the Mississippi River, about ten miles away. If you couldn't get a ride with a farmer or mailman, you had to walk to Plum City. Our cars saw a lot of service driving family members to Plum City. We drove down once or twice a month.

I learned to drive before I came to St. Paul, when I was twelve or thirteen. My Uncle Ed Darcy, mother's brother, taught me. He was easygoing and one day gave me the keys and told me I could try driving all by myself. I planned to drive to the end of town, but couldn't find any place to turn around without going in the ditch, so I went off into the country. Mother became worried when I was gone so long, but I had everything under control.

After I got married Charlie usually drove, but I paid for half the car and wasn't going to be one of those women dependent on my husband to get around. Driving in the city required care since the stop-and-go lights were then on metal posts right in the center of the intersections. I did hit one at the intersection of Dale and Selby, but only enough to scrape some paint. It wasn't until the 1930s that you had to have a driver's license. All that was required was that you go to University and Prior, make out an application and pay thirty-five cents.

My two younger sisters Eleanor and Genevieve (Gen) followed my pattern in coming to St. Paul to finish high school and get started in life. Eleanor came to St. Paul in 1924 and Gen in 1926. Both lived with families that looked for hard-working country girls who wanted to earn their room and board by looking after children while they also finished high school and got a start on their careers.

Eleanor lived with a family named Sax-on and looked after their son Ronnie. They



lived at 1436 Osceola. Mr. Saxon was a traveling salesman who later sold cars. Ronnie also became a salesman and eventually sold cars. Eleanor became quite close to the Saxons, and Charlie and I got to know them as well. We bought our first radio from the Saxons.

Eleanor graduated from St. Paul Central in 1926, and went to work at West Publishing Company as an office girl. She stayed with West all of her working years and eventually became an office manager. She was allowed to buy stock in the company, something considered quite an honor, since the stock didn't trade on the open market. Unfortunately Eleanor was a smoker and she developed lung cancer when she was in her mid-fifties and passed away in 1964; she was the first of my brothers and sisters to die.

Our wedding date was set for Tuesday, June 29, 1926. Eleanor was my bridesmaid, so the Saxons gave a dinner party for us the night before, and invited our entire family. My parents and youngest sister Genevieve came up from Plum City and stayed with Uncle Jim Cotter in Minneapolis. They too were invited to the Saxons', along with my other sisters and brothers. It was a lovely affair although somewhat saddened by the fact that the Saxons' dog had been poisoned that day.

At the time I got married I was making around \$85 a month, but I managed to save a good amount of money for my wedding outfit. I had a marcel hairdo and bought my wedding dress, shoes, and hat at Atkinson's where my oldest sister Clare worked. We were married at the Cathedral and our reception was held at the Chaput home on Dayton Avenue. For our honeymoon we planned to drive all the way up to Detroit Lakes. Mother was concerned about Charlie taking me so far away, but she needn't have worried. We left in our Model T Ford and only had from Tuesday through Sunday, since we had to be back at work on Monday. We made it up to Elk River the first night. Neither of us had ever been up that way before. The roads were gravel and not that well marked, so we had quite a time wandering about the countryside and visiting various lakes. We got no further than Lake Mille Lacs and then decided to start back so we wouldn't be late for work. I considered it a rather elegant

wedding and honeymoon for those days, but I didn't plan to get married again. Charlie and I had been married nearly fifty-five years when he died in 1981.

At the time I got married the Stensons opened up stores in the Duluth-Superior and Omaha-Council Bluffs areas. They offered me the opportunity to go to either place and run the stores. Duluth was more interesting, but I didn't want to leave St. Paul. Most of my family were here by then and I had made a lot of friends. If I went to Duluth I would seldom get to Plum City to see my parents. But most important, I didn't plan to spend all my life as a business woman; I now had a husband and a home to establish.

Charlie and I lived in his parents' home right after we were married. Then after living a summer at 1255 Fairmount, we moved to an upstairs apartment at Mrs. O'Rourke's home at 35 Nina Street. It was just off Selby near the Cathedral. I used to go to mass every morning, then walk down to Dale and take the Dale Street streetcar over to University. There I would transfer and take the University Avenue car to the city limits to go to work at Stenson's. One morning I met Archbishop Murray right outside the rectory at the Cathedral. He lived there rather than in the bishop's residence because he felt it was a waste of money to heat such a big place. He told me that he had noticed I was at mass every morning and figured I came from a very devout family, which we were. He gave me his blessing right there on the street.

The apartment on Nina was convenient to downtown, just down the hill. It only cost five cents to take the streetcar through the Selby tunnel to Seven Corners and on to the downtown stores and movie theaters. However, Charlie and I had a car and had become modern urban motorists, so we always drove. For entertainment we usually went to the movies or dances, and visited friends to play cards.

My youngest sister Gen didn't arrive in St. Paul to live until 1927. While she was finishing high school, she lived with the Morgan family in the big red brick apartment building at 2338 Marshall Avenue. It's still there near the Marshall Avenue bridge and across from the Town and Country Club. The Morgans had a baby boy nick-named "Bubsie." Mandell Mor-

gan owned Morgan's Clothing Shop, Inc., at 9 East Fifth Street in downtown St. Paul.

Gen soon became almost a regular member of their family due to her quick thinking in an emergency. Their baby was allergic to most milk and required a special formula prescribed by the doctor and made up by Mrs. Morgan. One day the Morgans were gone several hours when Mrs. Morgan remembered that the formula was all used up. Gen only knew the name of the doctor. She called him up, got the formula, and had finished feeding the lad when Mrs. Morgan came home in a panic. After that Gen could do no wrong in their eyes.

Gen also got to know the Kriesel family. They moved to St. Paul from Stillwater and lived in the same apartment building at 2338 Marshall Avenue, where Mr. Kriesel was the caretaker. Gen went to Central with their daughters Ethel and Verna. After Gen graduated in 1929, she went to work at Atkinson's with my sister Clare.

Through Gen everyone in the Cotter and Kriesel families got to know each other and became lifelong friends. The parents, Emil and Minnie Kriesel, celebrated their wedding anniversary on June 19, the same day as our folks', so they were invited to celebrate their anniversary with us in Plum City. We all piled into the new Pontiac Charlie and I had recently purchased, and drove home. The car was so crowded that Gen and Bubsie had to sit on the floor in the back seat. It was equally crowded down home where the entire family had gathered, so Charlie and I slept in the car. It was just one of several regular auto trips we made between St. Paul and Plum City as long as our parents lived there.

In 1927 my sister Dealia married a lumber salesman. She was the only one of us to raise her family away from the Twin Cities. They lived in Alexandria and then moved to Winona, where he eventually owned two lumber companies and a third in Lanesboro. However, we had good train service to Winona by either the Milwaukee Road's Hiawatha or the Burlington Zephyr. In the 1930s the highway was totally paved, so we saw a lot of each other.

In 1931 my parents moved to St. Paul, the last of our family to do so. Even our grade school teacher had moved to St. Paul. Her name was Edith Robinson. She



had taught my sisters Eleanor and Gen in Plum City, and continued her teaching career in St. Paul. She taught at Longfellow grade school on Prior Avenue, a couple blocks north of Marshall. She began dating my brother John and they eventually got married in 1930. Edith had taught in the St. Paul schools for forty years when she retired. John took classes at the University and got a job as a clerk in the Sanitation Department. He eventually became the superintendent of sanitation in the 1950s and 1960s, working under Milton Rosen and later under Frank Marzitelli.

In the 1930s Charlie was a painting contractor, but the work was unsteady during the depression and times were difficult. I helped handle the paperwork connected with his business, as well as all of our family taxes and accounts. I worked on and off for the Stensons, and Charlie worked for a while at a furniture store downtown. Then he got a job with the contractor who painted the Highland Village Apartments. They were the lovely apartments on Cleveland Avenue, south of Ford Parkway. Charlie was brought in to do the finish work after the other painters had completed their work in each apartment.

Around 1940 Charlie went to work as a temporary employee for the St. Paul Public Works Department painting the High Bridge. In 1941 he became a regular painter for the Parks and Playgrounds department and remained there until his retirement in 1969. When his work became more regular, I worked less and less. With the additional time, and America's entrance into World War II, I joined the city volunteer services. There was a shortage of nurses and I worked at Ancker hospital helping care for the patients in the ward for the terminally ill. Charlie became a volunteer fireman in the evenings, and when the whistle blew he dropped everything and headed for the station at Ashland and Snelling Avenue. During that time I also joined the Guild of Catholic Women. Our main project then was to operate a rooming house near the Cathedral. It was for young ladies who were new to the city.

During the war years I also became a catechism teacher for the Archdiocese, and taught classes on religion for Catholic children attending the fourth through sixth grades in the public schools. This was nat-



ural for me, since I had obtained my formal education in public schools, and as a result of my work with the Stensons and my drives with Charlie, I knew the city. I usually taught in what were then the far corners of St. Paul. I took the streetcar out to neighborhoods like the East Side, the West Side, and St. Anthony Park, which seemed quite remote back in the 1940s and early 1950s. Sometimes when Charlie didn't need the car to get to work, I drove.

The children were excused from their regular school classes to attend, but the classes in religion had to be held away from the public school grounds. Sometimes I taught in churches and sometimes in homes, and usually in the mornings from nine to eleven. At the end of the year we generally held a picnic for the children. On those days I had the car, and since Charlie worked for Parks and Playgrounds, I became acquainted with the good picnic spots. We usually went to Como Park because that had the zoo, rides, and food vendors. I taught for twenty-three years, from 1941 to 1964.

Aside from my parents, only my two older brothers and oldest sister were in their early twenties when they came to St. Paul. The rest of us were in our teens, but we never considered ourselves cut off from our roots. We had the good fortune to come from a home with solid religious values, and we brought them with us even though our parents were back in Plum City. We had each other, as well as Uncle Jim's family in Minneapolis, to rely on. Then when



*Dorothy Cotter and Charles Chaput on their wedding day, June 29, 1926, and on their fiftieth wedding anniversary in 1976.*

you add good families like the Chaputs and Kriesels, and all the nice people we rented from or worked with, we were never alone. We had an extended family.

St. Paul and Minneapolis are much more crowded today, and in recent years seem to have lost much of their small town quality. People can still have a happy life here if they don't cut themselves off from their families. But St. Paul has been a fascinating city to grow up in over the past seventy years.

*Thomas C. Buckley, a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History, is an associate professor in social and behavioral sciences and adjunct associate professor of history at the University of Minnesota.*





*One of the six sculpted ground floor elevator doors, created by E. R. Stewart for the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse. See articles beginning on page 4. Photo by George Heinrich.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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