

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

A Field Engineer
And His Canadian
Travels

Page 12

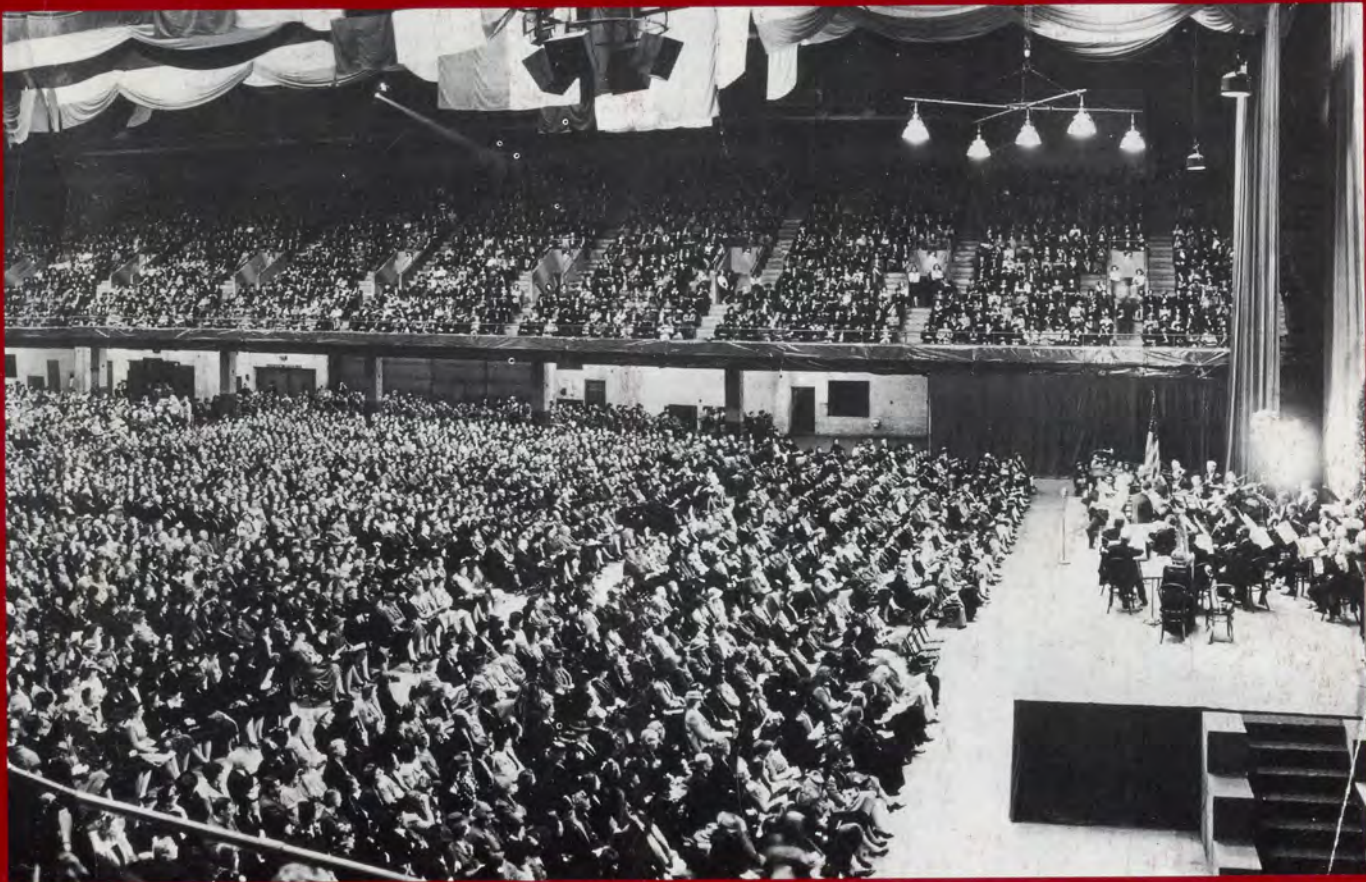
Fall, 1997

Volume 32, Number 3

The Women's Institute

And How It Revived Downtown St. Paul

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Orchestra and part of the crowd at a Women's Institute gathering in St. Paul in the early 1940s. Photo from the Women's Institute of St. Paul collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 32, Number 3

Fall, 1997

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Few participants in the current discussion of how to rejuvenate downtown St. Paul are likely to know about or recall that a similar debate in 1939 served as the impetus for the founding of the Women's Institute. In the lead article in this issue of *Ramsey County History*, Kathleen Ridder explains how local women, who were leaders in the community launched the Women's Institute and initiated a program in cooperation with the city's political and business leaders that substantially revived downtown retail activity and promoted St. Paul's civic and cultural for thirty-two years.

This issue then moves to Robert Garland's account of his grandfather's experiences as a turn-of-the-century field engineer in western Canada for his St. Paul employer. Next, Rhoda Gilman takes us back to the first decades of this century to examine the role Emily Gilman Noyes played in the struggle for woman's suffrage. The Fall issue concludes with Muriel Mix Hawkins' bitter-sweet remembrance of growing up at St. Paul's Fish Hatchery in the 1920s and 1930s.

Although these articles span more than a century, and their subject matter ranges from politics, business, civic pride, and social reform to an intensely personal memory, each writer provides powerful evidence for the strength and vitality of the citizens of St. Paul and Ramsey County as they coped with the manifest changes that took place in their community during this time.

John M. Lindley, chair, Editorial Board

Books, Etc.

Faces of Christmas Past

Bill Holm

Afton: Afton Historical Society Press,
1998

64 pages, \$15 (cloth)

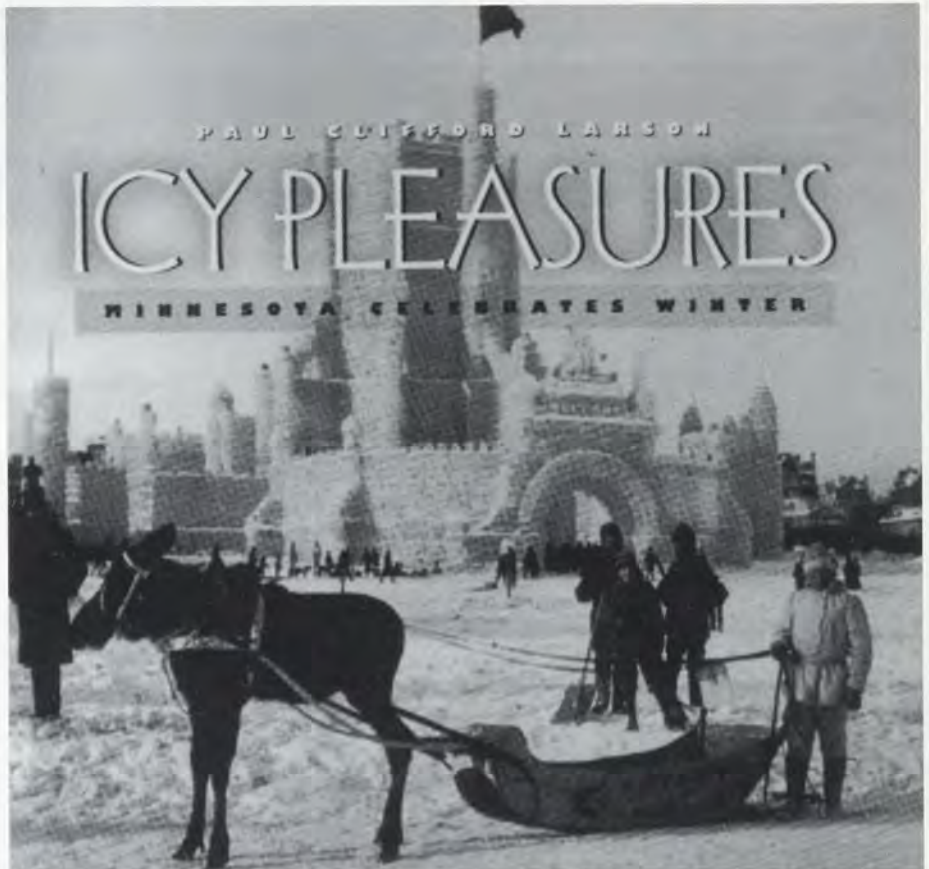
Reviewed by Virginia Brainard Kunz

This slender memoir will awaken memories for many, Icelandic (as is the author) or not. Bill Holm, currently associate professor of English at Southwest State University in Marshall, Minnesota, has captured the essence of the Christmas season in all the color and flurry—and perils—it brings to households from the small towns (his is Minneota) of America to its cities.

Who among of us has escaped the ritual of the holiday baking, the chilling hike to church on a snowy evening, the fragrance and beauty of the glistening tree, the drift of music by great composers? Holm observes: "In towns like Minneota, the solid front of Christmas habit brought even the atheists to church on Christmas Eve. A Hindu could not have escaped appearing in the manger scene, toasting the holiday afterwards with garishly decorated butter cookies dunked in thin coffee."

He sees the "ritual of the Christmas card list" as a "visible emblem of spiritual packrattery." And as for the Christmas letter, xeroxed or not, it's "a necessity, even a pleasure." While often "comically guilty of two great human failings, bragging or complaining," the real message of the Christmas letter, he points out, "lives under the language. I am alive, it says, still on the planet. I have not forgotten you."

Memoirs are intensely personal, and this from Bill Holm is no exception. With wit and grace, he writes of his par-



Paul Clifford Larson's *Icy Pleasures*, a celebration of Minnesota's winters. Photo from the book.

ents beginning life together in a depression era "unpaid-for farm, a drafty shack of a house, kerosene lamps, a pump over the sink and a two-holer outhouse;" of a mother who had "only two speeds, high and off," who "invented beauty—as she understood it." He describes his own boyhood as the star of those inevitable Christmas card snapshots, dressed up in a Hopalong Cassidy outfit or posing in front of the family's new Dodge.

"At Christmas," he writes, "the gavel of tradition bangs on the table to call the house to order." This is the Afton Historical Society Press' annual Christmas

reader, and it's a delightful, warm-hearted book for readers of all ages.

* * *

Two more new books from the Afton Historical Society Press look to a past that is still within the reach of many Minnesotans.

Icy Pleasures: Minnesota Celebrates Winter

Paul Clifford Larson

160 pages, 160 illustrations, \$40
(cloth)

This is a bracing account, written with considerable humor, of Minnesotans' inventive and energetic relationship with the weather. While *Icy Pleasures* tends to confirm the suspicion that the last ice age still maintains a grip on the state, the book also mixes hardship with hilarity in tracing how the state's people have learned to cope with its Siberian reputation, as well as its quasi-Siberian reality.

Larson, an award-winning author, tells again the story of how, in 1885, a group of St. Paul businessmen and journalists planned the first Winter Carnival, perhaps the largest outdoor festival ever held in freezing temperatures, and thereby brought the joys of such winter sports as tobogganing and ice skating into the limelight. Winter, in a sense, caught on although cold weather sports weren't exactly unknown in parts of the state. Ice hockey and curling were popular in northern Minnesota. Skiing was introduced by Norwegians who settled in remote areas of the state and, Larson writes, the first ski tournament to be held in the United States was sponsored by the newly formed Minneapolis Ski Club in 1885.

Elsewhere in Minnesota, winter celebrations have flourished. Bemidji has made the mythical logger Paul Bunyon the centerpiece of its festivities. And there are others in Biwabik, Chisholm, Cloquet, Duluth, Ely, Eveleth, Fergus Falls, Glenwood, International Falls, Mora, Red Wing, Tower, Virginia, Walker, besides Minneapolis and St. Paul. The author touches on them all. Above all, however, *Icy Pleasures* is a long-awaited and much-needed history of the famous St. Paul Winter Carnival, of its early years with its lavish ice palaces, of Louis W. Hill's role in reviving in 1916 what had become an off-again on-again Winter Carnival.

Larson begins his account where the state began—Fort Snelling—and he observes ruefully that the first winter there in 1819–1820 was a shock to the inhabitants of that lonely outpost. He moves on to James M. Goodhue, St. Paul's pioneer newspaper editor whose mission in his short life was to promote the settlement of Minnesota Territory, never



A classic Minnesota L-house. The arrangement of the rooms, with the kitchen porch opening to east and south where the barnyard lies and the formal front of the house facing the road to the north, is typical of these farmhouses, Gabler writes. Photograph from the book.

mind the weather. "Goodhue," Larson writes, "had anticipated the major themes: (1) cold is healthful, (2) cold is energizing and uplifting, and (3) cold is fun. However, in describing in vivid detail some of the state's memorable snowstorms—the blizzard of January 1873, the "long, vicious winter of perpetual snowfall in 1881," and the "deep snow followed by gales in February 1909—Larson goes on to point out that none of the above is true, and that much of what has been written about Minnesota winters is myth.

For example, deep snowfalls are more common in upstate New York than in Minnesota, he notes; temperatures between the northern and southern sections of the state vary considerably, and the lowest temperatures are not the norm. Furthermore, the state's shaky reputation as "salubrious Minnesota," as a "resort for invalids," was the product of imaginative boosterism. "Here, under the influence of bright skies and pure air, the spirits riot in happy consciousness of fresh health and energy," a state official once proclaimed, "and the ordinary burdens of labor and thought become luxuries." The state, he crowed, was "the sanatorium for consumptives."

Ice Palaces is a carefully researched, closely documented and richly illustrated contribution to a history that

reaches beyond Minnesota's borders. Larson, who lives in St. Paul, is an independent historian and consultant specializing in architectural and Midwest history. He is the author of the award-winning *Minnesota Architecture – the Life and Work of Clarence H. Johnston*, also published by Afton Press.

Death of the Dream—Classic Minnesota Farmhouses.

William G. Gabler
128 pages, 87 illustrations, (\$35 cloth)

Stunning photographs and a well-reasoned text document a particularly American dream in this vivid description of the disappearing farm homes of the Minnesota prairie. Writer, photographer, amateur geologist, Gabler discovered the somber remnants of nineteenth century farm life during a 60,000-mile journey through southern and western Minnesota.

"It seemed to me," he says of his work, "that something wonderful has passed away, and nothing was coming in its place. The old farmhouses were doomed. There was no way to save them, but their great homeliness and variety could be recorded in photographs." And he has done so in the eighty-seven images published here. However, he moves beyond the pho-

tographs themselves to chronicle the lives of these settlers and link them with their dwellings. "The rigorous discipline and unavoidable originality of pioneer life created a classic style of architecture," he writes, a style that combined the values of a new mix of settlers with new technology.

Gabler is particularly interested in how industrialization between 1862 and 1893 helped pioneer farmers realize their own American dreams. Minnesota's immigrant farmers, he writes, "were part of an advancing wave of settlement whose leading edge broke the virgin prairie to grow wheat to mill into flour to make bread—the very foundation of western civilization."

He discovered an unusually high concentration of their abandoned classic farmhouses in Yellow Medicine and Lac Qui Parle Counties of west central Minnesota, near the South Dakota border, where, he notes, Norwegian, Swedish, and German settlers "created a local expression of the industrialization of the American economy." Their hard work, he writes, produced the plain and simple farm homes that reflected the virtues of pioneer life. He describes the farm itself and its farmyard, and he includes the floor plan of the classic L-house, which with its harmony and unity "became representative of much of the farming way of life in the Midwest."

The photographs alone make this book an important document of a way of life that has vanished.

* * *

The Minnesota Historical Society Press also is out with a book of stunning photographs.

*Jerome Liebling:
The Minnesota Photographs,
1949–1969*

Jerome Liebling
129 pages, 118 photographs, \$45
(cloth)

With this collection of photographs representing twenty years in his professional life, Jerome Liebling



A Red Lake woman, captured in a Liebling photograph in 1954. Photograph from the book.

demonstrates vividly the extent to which photography has become an art form. His book doesn't tell a story so much as it reflects the lives of many people as well as the resources that undergird those lives.

He has photographed rail yards, stock yards, grain elevators, the trading pit of the Grain Exchange in Minneapolis and the Minnesota state senate chamber when Lieutenant Governor Karl Rolvaag was presiding in 1960. Then there are the workers themselves: a young seamstress at the Munsingwear Knitting Mills in Minneapolis; a slaughterhouse worker in South St. Paul; a migrant worker picking beans near Le Sueur. A young girl on St. Paul's West Side looks pensively into the camera in 1962. Long-forgotten scenes come to life, such as University Avenue as it looked in 1950, the State Capitol in background and streetcar tracks in the foreground, and the majestic Metropolitan building in downtown Minneapolis in 1957 as it awaited destruction.

There are photographs of a candlelit banquet at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1964, a Honeywell board of directors meeting in 1965. Bundled up men and women shiver in the cold at a Minneapolis bus stop, and spring roils the waters of the Mississippi near Nicollet Island. His camera has captured the vicissitudes of life: children at a state home, the blind at a home for the blind, homeless men sleeping in Minneapolis' Gateway Park in 1959.

Liebling moved from New York to

Minnesota in 1949 and spent the next two decades teaching photography and film at the University of Minnesota. He also traveled the state, recording the social, cultural, and political changes of those years. He has produced two award-winning documentaries and has exhibited widely. He is now professor emeritus at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts.

*Dear Poppa—The World War II
Berman Family Letters*

Compiled by Ruth Berman
Edited by Judy Barrett Litoff
St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press
317 pages, 45 illustrations, \$29.95
(cloth), \$15.95 (paper)

"Dear Poppa: I have had the German measles. I had some books from the library and Momma returned them and got me two books and I can read both of them."

As they did for thousands upon thousands of servicemen, letters like these helped hold families together during the dark days of World War II. "Poppa," for the Berman children—David, nine; Betsy, six, and Sammy, four—was Dr. Reuben Berman, a Minneapolis physician who served overseas as a United States army doctor. His wife Isabel not only wrote to him herself but also typed letters from the children as they dictated them to her. Included are many of her own letters, as well as Dr. Berman's from England where he was stationed during much of the war. Too young to write to her father, Ruth Berman collected the letters and selected 340 of them for publication.

This is a heart-warming reflection of a family coping with the sadness of separation and using everyday ordinariness as a refuge from their anxiety about the war. There is also much about a 1940s Minneapolis that will awaken memories for many people. For example:

"Dear Poppa: We went to dinner at Harry's café. We had roast beef, and apple pie, mashed potatoes and gravy, salad. Momma had two cups of coffee."

"Dear Poppa: I went to the symphony concert at the Cyrus [Northrup] auditorium [at the University of Minnesota]. . . . It had a famous pianist named Casadesus. He played gardens in the rain."

But there is the longing: "Dear Poppy: I am tired of having you to be overseas. I hope it is not a long time for the war to be over. I don't like to wait this long. I wish you were back in a minute. You are the nicest man in the whole world."

The book is greatly enhanced by Judy Litoff's Introduction, "America's Children at War," which places the Berman family within the experiences of other World War II families; by Ruth Berman's Prelude, "The Berman Family at War," and by a Postlude, again by Ruth Berman, which describes what happened to her family after the war ended. "Dear Poppa" himself has contributed an Epilogue, an account of his years overseas.

Ruth Berman earned her doctorate in English at the University of Minnesota and lives in Minneapolis. Judy Barrett Litoff is a professor of American history at Bryant College and an editor of other collections of wartime letters.

A Postcard Journey Along The Upper Mississippi

Robert Stumm
Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers,
247 pages, \$16.95 (cloth)

This book represents a six-year labor of love for Robert Stumm, a frequent contributor to this publication. For years he has been a dedicated collector of the picture postcards which, a century ago, offered a colorful portrait of American life. (Other views from his collection appear on pages 21 and 23 of this issue.)

Now Stumm has combined the fruits of this delightful hobby with his love and knowledge of the great river's history to present a frozen-in-time picture of the Upper Mississippi Valley as it was at the beginning of this century. The postcards, some in black-and-

white, others in a faithful reproduction of their original colors, date from 1905 to 1920 and, with Stumm's accompanying text, they trace the waning days of the steamboats, and the last years of the great wave of immigrants from Europe who settled the valley during the nineteenth century. It was a time when communities along the river were transforming themselves into rail centers, even a time when the button industry overtook lumbering as the economic engine of the region.

This is a unique book for those who like to contrast what they actually are seeing with how it all once looked. Stumm moves the reader down the river from St. Anthony Falls to Cairo, Illinois, where he ends the journey. He points out in his Introduction that he has paid special attention to "three very remarkable towns: Galena, Illinois, Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, and Navoo, Illinois." Each, he writes, has a unique and long heritage above and beyond the typical river town and each possesses a magnificently preserved historic district.

A Postcard Journey Along the Upper Mississippi is both an historic timepiece and a modern travelogue for those who treasure the history of the river and of mid-continent, small-town America.

Virginia Brainard Kunz is editor of *Ramsey County History*

Also in Print:

Until They Bring the Streetcars Back, by Stanley Gordon West (Lexington-Marshall Publications, Bozeman, Montana, (\$12) is a fast-paced and rather sensational novel. The author, a 1950 graduate of St. Paul's Central High School, has as his hero Calvin Gant, a Central High School senior of about the same era. Gant's father is a motorman on the Twin City Rapid Transit Company's Grand-Mississippi line and there is enough authentic detail here about Central's emotional and actual environment to make any local history buff happy.

West spins a story about a young man trying to be a good fellow but who is caught up in several dilemmas at the same time. He's almost too good and the dilemmas are almost too bad, but

that does make for good and engrossing reading.

In the Deep Midwinter is St. Paul native Robert Clark's third book and first novel. His earlier works included a biography of James Beard and *River of the West*, the story of the Columbia River. In his new book, set in St. Paul in 1949 and the 1950s, Clark explores the conservative world of the upper middle class in an eastern-facing midwestern city. His central character is a lawyer whose brother has just been killed in a hunting accident in North Dakota.

He focuses first on the MacEwan family, then follows them home to a house on Portland Avenue, to church at St. Botolph's (which might be St. John's Episcopal Church), to Nathan Hale's statue off Summit Avenue, to the river, to the Minnesota Club, to the lawyer's office. Clark evokes the words, sights, and smells with accuracy and affection.

F. Scott Fitzgerald in Minnesota: Toward the Summit by Dave Page and John Koblas (North Star Press, \$14.95) is a study of Fitzgerald's years in St. Paul from 1896 to 1922 and it tells readers everything they might want or need to know about the novelist.

In these pages Fitzgerald is surrounded by his friends, all of them local St. Paulites in familiar local settings. Page and Koblas have drawn their material from a mass of letters, interviews, and journals, as well as Fitzgerald's own books and short stories, and they have managed to inject clarity and order into their collection of facts.

The authors also introduce several interesting conjectures about Fitzgerald's attitude toward the Roman Catholic Church, toward sports, towards women, school work, Summit Avenue and St. Paul itself, and they draw parallels between his writings and his own life. While Fitzgerald may have turned his back eventually on the city of his birth, he lived a full life among many friends during the years he spent in St. Paul.

Patricia Sweney Hart



Logo of the Women's Institute of St. Paul, designed by Mrs. John S. Dalton. Photograph from the Women's Institute of St. Paul collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

R.C.H.S.
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