

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

A Field Engineer  
And His Canadian  
Travels

Page 12

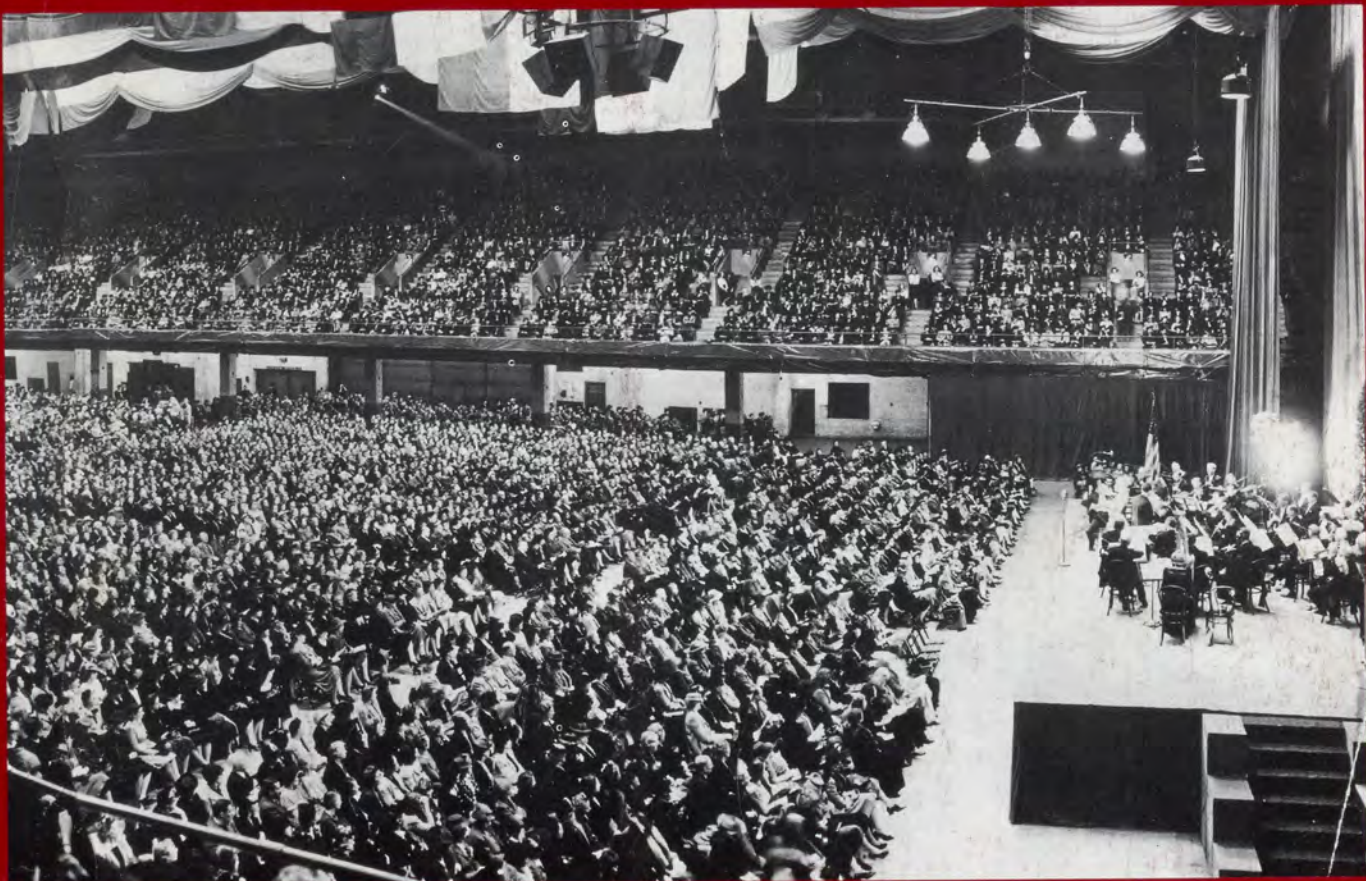
Fall, 1997

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*



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## 'A Beautiful, High-Minded Woman'

### Emily Gilman Noyes and Woman Suffrage

*Rhoda R. Gilman*

Reminiscing in 1972 about her long-ago days as a suffragist and birth control advocate in St. Paul, Sylvie Thygeson described Emily Noyes as "a very beautiful, high-minded woman." She went on to recall how Emily Noyes "begged me to come over to Summit Avenue where the elite lived. . . . She wanted me to be her house guest and mingle in the social life and talk to these women about the larger views I had on suffrage and on the woman question." Thygeson, an attorney's wife, who moved in less fashionable circles, declined the invitation, although the two women were working closely together on the cause of suffrage—and on a good deal more. Thygeson was at the time vice president of the St. Paul Woman's Welfare League, while Noyes was serving as its president.<sup>1</sup>

The stated mission of the Woman's Welfare League was to "protect the interests and promote the welfare of women; to encourage the study of industrial and social conditions affecting women and the family; to enlarge the field of usefulness and activity open to women in the business and professional world; to guard them from exploitation and as a necessary means to these ends to strive to procure for women the full rights of citizenship." An unannounced part of its activity was support for a clandestine birth control clinic that Thygeson and several others had organized in defiance of Minnesota law, which at that time held it a crime to share or even to possess information on contraception.<sup>2</sup>

The willingness of the socially prominent Mrs. Charles P. Noyes to use her position and influence and even risk public disgrace in the cause of human rights was part of her heritage. She came from a family that had been deeply marked by the bitterness and violence that confronted



*Emily Gilman Noyes. Photo is from the author.*

the early abolition movement. Her father, as a young merchant in Alton, Illinois, had defied the town in opening his warehouse to the printing press of antislavery publisher, Elijah Lovejoy, and he had stood beside Lovejoy on the November night in 1837 when the abolitionist was

gunned down by a mob. With his business ruined and himself prosecuted in the state of Illinois for disturbing the peace, Winthrop Sargent Gilman moved to St. Louis and later to the East Coast.<sup>3</sup>

Thus it was in New York City that Emily Hoffman Gilman was born in



1854. In addition to social activism and public service, she also inherited a tradition of scholarship. Her brother Arthur helped found Radcliffe College, and Benjamin, another brother, became director of the Boston Art Museum. A cousin, related distantly but well known to the family, was Daniel Coit Gilman, founder of Johns Hopkins University. In Emily the inclination toward scholarship blossomed in 1919, when she published a two-volume collection of family correspondence drawn from six generations of Gilmans in America. Her meticulous work in assembling, editing, and annotating the contents of *A Family History in Letters and Documents* was worthy of a professional historian. The book also reflects a perception of how each generation responded to the changing circumstances and cultural milieu of American society.<sup>4</sup>

In 1866 Emily's older sister Helen married Daniel Rogers Noyes of Lyme, Connecticut. Noyes was in poor health, and doctors recommended the bracing climate of Minnesota, then known for its therapeutic quality. The couple moved to St. Paul in 1868. There they were joined by Daniel's younger brother, Charles Phelps Noyes, and the two men formed a partnership with Edward N. Cutler, going into the wholesale drug business. In 1874 Charles and Emily were married.

The firm prospered. The brothers built fine houses in the Summit Hill neighborhood and became part of the St. Paul business and cultural elite. The Charles Noyes family lived at 89 Virginia Avenue. They traveled often to Europe and spent many summers at White Bear Lake, first in a home on Lake Avenue and later in a larger house on Manitou Island.<sup>5</sup>

While Daniel and Charles Noyes both played active roles in the civic life of St. Paul, and especially in the work of the Minnesota Historical Society, Emily and her sister Helen became part of a polite ladies' group for the discussion of literature, moral issues, and social problems. Undoubtedly one of their recurring topics was the rapid emergence of women into the urban, industrial work force. This trend was deeply concerning many Twin Citians during the 1880s and 1890s when



*A discussion group of serious-minded St. Paul women exploring social and cultural issues. Emily Noyes is on the right; Helen Gilman Noyes (Mrs. Daniel Noyes) is seated at left at the table. Fredericks & Koester photograph, Minnesota Historical Society.*

both Minneapolis and St. Paul underwent explosive growth and young women flocked in from rural areas to find jobs in what today would be called sweatshops. Emily, however, did not stop with discussion. She played an active part in establishing the St. Paul YWCA as a residence and gathering place for single women and helped organize a women's employment service in the city.<sup>6</sup>

As the struggle for suffrage gained momentum in the early decades of the twentieth century, Emily Noyes became its acknowledged leader in Ramsey County. Not only did she help to found the Woman's Welfare League there in 1912; at the same time she served as vice president of the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association, and in 1913-14 she became part of a small "State Central Committee" that sought to organize support for suffrage by legislative districts. In 1915, when legislative hearings on a bill for woman suffrage drew overflow crowds to the State Capitol, she was one of several state leaders who addressed the Senate committee on behalf of the measure.<sup>7</sup>

Later, after the struggle was won, she became a founding member of the Ram-

sey County League of Women Voters and was named its honorary president. Shortly before her death in 1930, she was one of six Minnesota women named to the honor roll of the National League of Women Voters.<sup>8</sup> Like many other suffrage advocates, however, she saw the right to vote not only as an expression of equality for women, but as a means for improving the condition of society and of families.

In 1915 a nephew of the Noyes sisters, Robbins Gilman, arrived from New York to direct a new settlement house in northeast Minneapolis. He called on the Noyes families and introduced his bride, Catheryne Cooke Gilman, to his two aunts. Catheryne Gilman was herself a professional social worker, deeply influenced by Jane Addams and committed to the causes of suffrage, temperance, social hygiene, and women's rights. As she moved into an influential role on the Minnesota Child Welfare Commission and organized the Women's Co-operative Alliance in Minneapolis to promote enlightened parenting and stronger families, she found a firm supporter in Emily Noyes.<sup>9</sup>

The Robbins Gilman family continued



to have regular contact with "Aunt Lily" (her family nickname), and in her will Emily Noyes provided a trust fund with a modest annuity for their daughter. Her stated reason was that she had too often seen women demeaned by having to ask a husband for each penny they spent. Every woman, she said, should have at least a little money of her own, and she would make certain that young Catherine did.

It is just possible that Emily's affection for her nephew's wife and daughter balanced a certain sense of loss in relation to her own family. Of her six children, two girls died in infancy and early childhood. Emily's oldest child and only surviving daughter, Julia Gilman Noyes, was married in 1898 to Henry de Forest, a wealthy Long Islander twenty years her senior.<sup>10</sup> The course she chose in life was far different from that of her mother.

A portrait of Julia de Forest in later years has been provided by her granddaughter, Alice Sedgwick, who noted that Julia may have been regarded by Long Island high society as somewhat provincial because she came from St. Paul. But Alice goes on to say that "my grandmother became a great lady in everybody's eyes. You cannot imagine the stately progression of her day: interviewing the cook in the bedroom in the morning, reading the mail at her desk before lunch, followed by sherry, followed by lunch, then a little walk around the garden, changing to a long dress in the afternoon, pouring tea at five even if she was by herself. And no day varied from the day before or from the day after. . . . She loved expensive clothes; she loved respectability, but mainly she must have loved being grand."<sup>11</sup>

Julia's daughter, Alice Delano de Forest, married Francis Minturn Sedgwick in 1929. It was a celebrated wedding that united two prominent New York families. The disastrous story of the brilliant, unstable Sedgwick children has been chronicled in the widely read book *Edie*, published in 1982. Its focus is Edith (Edie) Sedgwick—great granddaughter of Emily Noyes—who became a living symbol of what the mass media called the "youthquake" of the 1960s. A fashion model whose beautiful, haunted face and



The Charles P. Noyes residence at 89 Virginia Street in 1890. Photo by Haynes, Minnesota Historical Society.

emaciated figure were familiar to millions of magazine readers, she was best known as the darling of Andy Warhol's wild pop-art set and the star of his underground films. Like a roman candle flashing across the Greenwich Village scene, she burned her way through alcohol, sex, drugs, anorexia, and mental breakdowns to flame out at the age of twenty-eight.

The story of Edie's short life, told in the words of family and friends, along with the recollections of celebrities who crossed her path, has the stature of a classic American tragedy. It also has relevance as a sad sequel to the family history that Emily Noyes compiled. Still another generation, it appears, was marching to the beat of American life, even as the tempo accelerated madly and self-indulgent desperation replaced faith in the future.

## Footnotes

1. Sherna Gluck, ed., *From Parlor to Prison: Five American Suffragists Talk About Their Lives*, p. 47 (New York, Random House, 1976).

2. Quotation in Barbara Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors: Clara Ueland and the Minnesota Struggle for Woman Suffrage*, p. 78 (St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1995); Gluck, *Parlor to Prison*, p. 48–53.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, information here and later is based on recollections of various members of the Gilman family. See also Charles P. Noyes, *Noyes-Gilman Ancestry* (St. Paul, privately published, 1907). A copy is in the Minnesota Historical Society. Emily Gilman Noyes contributed heavily to this book, and the lengthy section she wrote on her father clearly testifies to his influence upon her.

4. This book was privately published in St. Paul. Only 200 copies were printed. One is in the Minnesota Historical Society and others are in the possession of family members.

5. Land records indicate that Charles and Emily Noyes purchased the house on Lake Avenue in 1878, although there is a local tradition that it was built in 1874 as their "honeymoon cottage." It is now known as the Fillebrown House and is owned by the White Bear Lake Area Historical Society. In 1881 they bought land on Manitou Island, but the date at which they moved is not clear. The house there is no longer standing.

6. For conditions at the time, see an article by the author on "Striking Maidens of 1888" in *The Union Advocate* (St. Paul), February 24, 1997, p.6. For community efforts to assist working women, see Lynn Weiner, "'Our Sister's Keepers': The Minneapolis Woman's Christian Association and Housing for Working Women," in *Minnesota History*, 46:189–200 (Spring, 1979). No comparable study of the St. Paul YWCA has yet been done.

7. Stuhler, *Gentle Warriors*, p. 78, 80, 112.

8. Barbara Stuhler, "Organizing for the Vote: Leaders of Minnesota's Woman Suffrage Movement," in *Minnesota History*, v. 54, p. 299 (Fall, 1995).

9. On Catheryne Cooke Gilman, see Elizabeth Gilman, "Catheryne Cooke Gilman: Social Worker," in Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter, eds., *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays*, p.190–207 (St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977). On the work of the Gilmans at the Northeast Neighborhood House, see Winifred Wandersee Bolin, "Heating up the Melting Pot: Settlement Work and Americanization in Northeast Minneapolis," in *Minnesota History*, 45:58–69 (Summer, 1976).

10. The six Noyes children were born in 1875, 1876, 1880, 1884, 1886, and 1893. The last three were Charles Reinold Noyes, Robert Hale Noyes, and Laurence Gilman Noyes. See *Noyes-Gilman Ancestry*, p. 44.

11. Alice (Saucie) Sedgwick is quoted in Jean Stein, edited with George Plimpton, *Edie: An American Biography*, p. 45 (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1982). An early photograph of Julia with her mother appears on p. 44.

*Rhoda R. Gilman retired in 1992 after thirty-four years as an editor, researcher, and administrator on the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society. She has written several books and many articles on Upper Midwest history. Her husband, Logan D. Gilman, was a son of Robbins and Catheryne Gilman and a great-nephew of Emily Gilman Noyes.*





*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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