

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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A Field Engineer
And His Canadian
Travels

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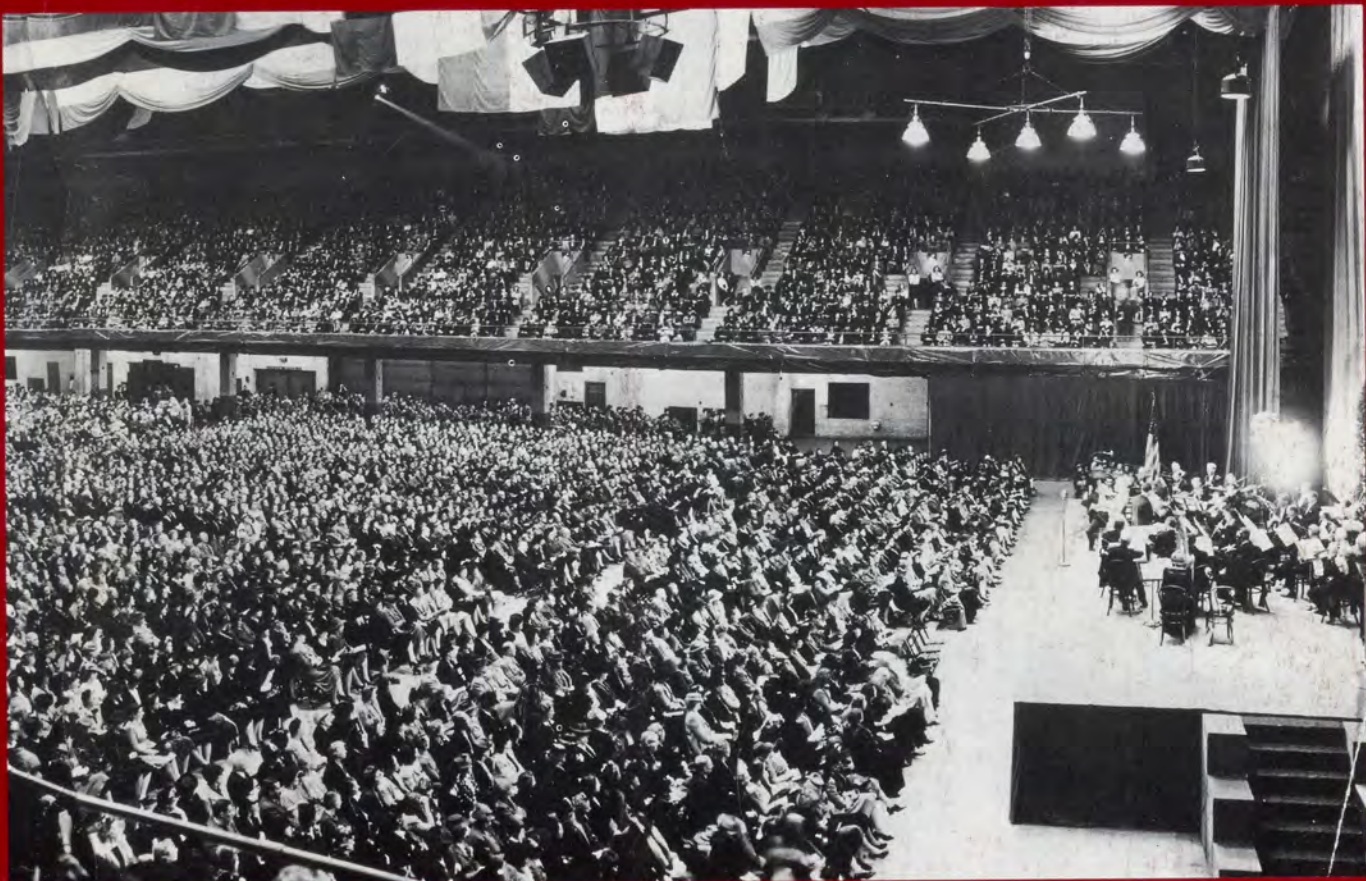
Fall, 1997

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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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

Letters to the Editor

What Flood of 1897?

In the spring, 1997, issue of *Ramsey County History*, Mary Emma Wilson asked, "Wasn't the old Italian community flooded a lot?" Your answer stated that "... in 1897, floodwaters rose to the rooftops of 'Little Italy'..." I lived on the Upper Levee for eighteen years (1934-1952) and I have never heard of the "flood of 1897." I asked older friends who had lived on the Upper Levee about floods. One friend said his father was born in the Levee community in 1893 and had never seen any floods on the Levee. The first flood any resident remembered was during Holy Week in 1951. Also, the term "Little Italy" was never used, at least in my or my neighbors' presence, until recently. We referred to this area as "the Upper Levee," or simply "the Levee."

Len Vignalo, St. Paul.

The information about the 1897 flood came from a Minnesota Historical Society photograph of the flood which appeared in *The Mississippi and St. Paul*, published by the Ramsey County Historical Society in 1987. The term, "Little Italy," has been used since the early 1900s and described other communities around the country where Italian immigrants also settled. It very likely was coined first by the newspapers of the day.

Wabasha Street Bridge

The article in the last issue of *Ramsey County History* on the Wabasha Street Bridge as "the last of its kind in Minnesota" was interesting. Wasn't its predecessor, the old St. Paul bridge, the first to span the Mississippi?

Ruth Johnson, St. Paul.



A view from the High Bridge of "Little Italy," the Italian community on the Upper Levee, during the flood of 1897. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

No. The first bridge anywhere on the entire length of the Mississippi was completed in 1854 by a group of Minneapolis entrepreneurs. It was a suspension bridge linking Nicollet Island with Minneapolis. The St. Paul bridge followed in 1857 and was replaced through a series of reconstructions between 1888 and 1900.

About Those Balloons

News stories about those colorful balloons we've seen recently made me wonder how new all this is to Minnesota.

Robert Burk, Inver Grove Heights.

Balloon ascensions provided high drama in pioneer St. Paul. The St. Paul Advertiser reported on August 29, 1857, that "Mr. William Markoe of this city proposes to give a magnificent balloon ascension in his new large balloon called the 'Minnesota' as soon as \$500 worth of tickets shall be sold to repay, in

part, the heavy expenses to which he has been subjected." Tickets cost \$1 each and apparently he raised the money. Nancy Woolworth, writing in the fall, 1965, issue of *Ramsey County History*, noted that Markoe's first balloon ascension took place on October 8, 1857. His balloon, according to the Advertiser, was fifty feet in height and required 700 yards of linen to make it.

Harriet and the Panic

Norma Sommerdorf's article on Harriet Bishop in the summer issue of *Ramsey County History* revealed a new string to her bow—her foray into real estate. Apparently she was caught up in the real estate mania of the 1850s, a painful experience for her.

Lois Percival, Woodbury.

Author Sommerdorf speculates that the Panic of 1857 brought her down, as it did so many investors of that time.



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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