RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Fall, 2002 Volume 37, Number 3

St. Gaudens' *New York Eagle:* Rescue and Restoration of a St. Paul Icon

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Lost Neighborhood
Borup's Addition and the Prosperous African Americans Who Lived There

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A duplex at 555–561 in one of St. Paul's Lost Neighborhoods. This and other houses in the long-since razed Borup's Addition were the homes of pioneer African Americans who came to St. Paul after the Civil War. See article beginning on page 4. Photo by Camera Shop, Minnesota State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society collections.

Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. ISSN Number 0485-9758. Fax 651-223-8539; e-mail address admin@rchs.com.; web site address www.rchs.com

RAMSEY COUNTY
History

Volume 37, Number 3 **Fall, 2002**

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Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

A Message from the Editorial Board

In February 1998 the Board of Directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society reviewed the Society's Mission Statement and reaffirmed and adopted the following statement:

> The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve, communicate and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county.The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship of this history.

This issue of our quarterly magazine once again carries out the Society's goal of discovering and communicating Ramsey County's past. Historian David Riehle gives us a fascinating look at another of St. Paul's "Lost Neighborhoods," known as "Borup's Addition" in the late nineteenth century when this area was home to prosperous African Americans. Next, Christine Podas-Larson describes the construction of the ten-story New York Life Insurance Building, completed in 1889 at Sixth and Minnesota, and the creation of its magnificent sculpture, the *New York Eagle,* by the renowned Augustus St. Gaudens and his brother Louis. Although the building was torn down in 1967, the *Eagle* has survived and soon will soar again over St. Paul at Summit Overlook Park.

Long-time Society member and family historian Joanne Englund's "Growing Up in St. Paul" essay focuses on her grandmother Minda's experiences in spiritualism while living in the Midway district. Included is a remarkable photograph of Minda and the other women who worked at the Bohn Refrigerator Company about the time of World War I. Finally, *Ramsey County History* returns to an earlier era in state and local history with an account of the life and times of the colorful fur trader and entrepreneur, Norman W. Kittson.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Books

Old Times on the Upper Mississippi

George Byron Merrick
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001
Paper, 253 pages plus appendices and index.

Reviewed by Paul D. Nelson

Move over, Mark Twain.

For a century Mark Twain has, through three books—*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn,* and *Life on the Mississippi*—controlled our national memory of the great era of the Mississippi riverboat. Now, thanks to the University of Minnesota Press, we have the benefit of a writer and rememberer who could hold his own with the master. George Merrick originally published *Old Times on the Upper Mississippi* in 1909. The University of Minnesota Press republished it last year as part of its Minnesota Heritage Series.

Merrick and Twain had much in common. Both grew up on the river with no grander ambition than to work on the fabulous steamers that ruled the Mississippi. Both achieved their dreams. Twain, of course, grew up in Hannibal, Missouri; Merrick in Prescott, Wisconsin, just across from where the St. Croix and Mississippi merge at Hastings.

Twain turned his youthful memories first into fiction with *Tom Sawyer* (1876), then memoir and travelogue in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), then fiction again with *Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Merrick, an amateur writer, took a different path. His book is a straightforward memoir wrapped around a history and explanation of riverboating during its glory years, the two decades before the Civil War.

Merrick enjoyed an idyllic childhood, one now inconceivable in the United States of America. He and the other lads of Prescott, from fourteen years down to seven, were pretty generally abroad from the opening of the river in the spring until its closing in the fall, hunting, fishing and exploring, going miles away, up or down the river or lake, and camping out at night, often without previous notice to their mothers. With a "hunk" of bread in their pockets, some matches to kindle a fire, a gun and fishlines, they were never in danger of starvation, although always hungry.

The son of a freight agent and merchant, Merrick lived on the Prescott levee, a constant and attentive witness to the sights and sounds of the busy waterfront. He learned to identify a steamboat by the sound of its bell, to prowl the levee at night watching for thieves among the cargo piles, and to thrill at the sight of fatwood torches lit on the steamer decks to illumine night landings. "The rosin would flare up with a fierce flame, followed by thick clouds of black smoke, the melted tar falling in drops upon the water, to float away, burning and smoking until consumed . . . giv[ing] this night work a wild and weird setting."

As a teenager Merrick started work on the river belowdecks as a cub engineer, working his way up both literally and figuratively, through most of the trade's skilled positions. Writing fifty years later, Merrick recalled the inner workings of the river craft with amazing detail. He described the duties of the various officers—the mate, the mud clerk, the engineer, the steersman, and the pilot—how the engines worked (and how they failed and got fixed), how the boats blew up or sank, and how the Civil War and the railroads killed the steamboat industry. He tells us, too, about the people and accommodations—the bars, the food, the music, the racing, and the decorations.

He wrote amusingly about the professional gamblers. Though smaller-stakes operators than their Lower Mississippi counterparts, they displayed a host of skills, manual and psychological. They worked in pairs but pretended not to know each other. They drank conspicuously but did not get drunk. "While pretending to drink large quantities of very strong liquors, they did in fact make away with many pint measures of quite innocent river water, tinted with the mildest liquid distillation of burned peaches." They used marked cards, and Merrick described how they did it. So far as he was concerned, their victims deserved no particular sympathy.

"I cannot recollect that I had a conscience in those days; and if a 'sucker' chose to invest his money in draw poker rather than in corner lots, it was none of my business. In that respect, indeed, there was little choice between Bill Mallen on the boat with his marked cards and Ingenuous Doemly [Ignatius Donnelly] at Nininger, with his city lots on paper selling at a thousand dollars each, which to-day, after half a century, are possibly worth twenty-five dollars an acre as farming land."

To his memory Merrick added research. He gathered as much as he could find about the earliest Mississippi pilots, going back to the keelboat days. He compiled lists of all the Upper Mississippi steamers from 1823 to 1863, and the fate of each. He detailed freight and passenger rates for all the main stops from Galena to St. Paul. Anyone who wants to know how the steamboat business worked will find it in *Old Times.*

The most famous and astounding portions of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* dealt with the demanding art of piloting the great river, mastering every inch from St. Paul to New Orleans, by day and at night, in high water and low, upstream and down. Merrick confirmed everything that Twain observed.

> The pilot has acquainted himself with every bluff, hill, rock, tree, stump, house, woodpile, and whatever else is to be noted along the banks of the river. He has further added to this fund of information a photographic negative in his mind, showing the shape of all the curves, bends, capes, and points of the river's banks, so that he may shut his eyes, yet see it all, and with such certainty that he can, on a night so perfectly black that the shore line is blotted out, run his boat within fifty feet of the shore and dodge snags, wrecks, overhanging trees, and all other obstacles by running the shape of the river as he knows it to be—not as he can see it.

These are Merrick's words, not Twain's. For most people in St. Paul and Ramsey County today, the great local rivers are pieces of scenery, thoroughly bridged, dredged, dammed, and tamed. Not so long ago they teemed with life and danger. Writing more than ninety years ago, Merrick saw the memory of that era fading. "To most men of our day, the life of those who manned the steamers of that once mighty fleet is legendary, almost mythical. Its story is unwritten." He wrote his book to preserve that memory, "to tell something of these men, and of the boats that they made sentient by their knowledge and power."

Both Merrick and Twain understood that preserving the memory required not just history but also stories, adventure stories. Merrick told several, including some that happened to him. One occurred on a stretch of water familiar today to thousands of weekend boaters, the St. Croix between Prescott and Stillwater. For his first solo run, Merrick agreed to replace a pilot taken ill for a night-time run on a steamer laden with cargo and passengers. Six miles above Prescott a fast-moving storm hit: "First a terrific wind out of the north, followed by torrents of rain, and incessant lightning, which took on the appearance of chain-mail as it shimmered and glittered on the falling rain drops." Then it got worse. At one point Merrick found himself, to his surprise, running downstream rather than up: "the force of the wind on the chimneys had turned her bow down-wind and downstream." Throughout the crisis the boat's captain deferred to the novice pilot, for such was the unbending tradition of the river. All survived.

In 1861 Merrick joined as engineer a military expedition up the Minnesota River from Fort Snelling to Fort Ridgely to ship cannon from the fort for use against the Confederates. "The Minnesota River is the worst twisted water course in the West. No other affluent of the Mississippi can show as many bends to the mile throughout its course. . . . Up this crooked stream the problem was to force the largest boat that had ever navigated it, and a stern-wheeler at that."

What's more, the river ran at spring flood stage. Merrick's description of how they made it—going in reverse at times, using ropes tied to trees to haul the boat, dodging giant overhanging limbs that carried away chimneys and portions of the cabin, even forcing the way through a flooded forest for a short-cut—makes fascinating reading. It is hard to see today's Minnesota as the same river.

St. Paul is a river town. Without the steamboat traffic of Merrick's era, the 1840s through the 1860s, the city would have had no reason to exist. *Old Times on the Upper Mississippi* brings this era to life in a delightful and informative way. Though it does not deal much with St. Paul specifically, the book describes extremely well the culture of river life in which St. Paul grew from a village to a city. Merrick's portrait of Prescott and its commerce in the 1850s could just as well be St. Paul in the 1840s. As a memoirist and chronicler, George Merrick is the Mark Twain of the Upper Mississippi.

Paul D. Nelson is an attorney and former managing editor of the Minnesota Law Review. *His recent book,* Fredrick McGhee: A Life on the Color Line 1861–1912 *won the 2002 Scribes Book Award from the American Society of Writers on Legal Subjects. He also is a member of* Ramsey County History*'s Editorial Board.*

"To Work for the Whole People" John Ireland's Seminary in St. Paul

Mary Christine Athans, B.V.M
Paulist Press 2002
436 pages, photos, index, $39.95

Reviewed by Ronald J. Zweber

The recent release of the St. Paul Seminary's 108-year history adds a new resource to the existing documentation on the many aspects of the Catholic Church's involvement in St. Paul's history. This well-researched book by Mary Christine Athans, B.V.M., a recently retired history professor at the seminary, chronicles not only the history of the seminary but also provides an early background on what is currently known as the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis.

This book provides insight into the seminary as an institution, but more importantly it has substantial biographical information on Catholic leaders and those having a tie with the seminary, including familiar names in St. Paul's history; Joseph Cretin, August Ravoux, John Ireland, James J. and Mary Hill, Cass Gilbert, Clarence Johnston and others.

The book is arranged chronologically with the first section providing a history of the establishment of the Diocese of St. Paul in 1850 and the arrival of the French-born Bishop Joseph Cretin in 1851 to this frontier community.

From the diocese's establishment until the opening of the seminary in 1894 the (Arch) Bishops needed to provide for the education and training of future priests. The author outlines the European and American options available to Cretin and Bishop Thomas L. Grace, the second bishop of the diocese.

The early years of the diocese did not allow the serious formation of a seminary because of a lack of financial resources and enough priests to staff it. However, Grace was instrumental in securing land both for the future University of St. Thomas and the preparatory seminary Nazareth Hall (Arden Hills).

Bishop Grace's successor was the legendary John Ireland, whose life has been well chronicled. He become bishop in 1884 (archbishop in 1888) and remained so until his death in 1918. During these thirty-four years, he became a high-profile leader on many issues in Minnesota as well as nationally on issues of temperance and Catholic colonization.

Both Grace and Ireland were involved in the opening of St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, in September 1884, on the current St. Paul campus of the University of St. Thomas. "From 1885 to 1894, it was several schools: a junior high school, a high school, a junior college, a minor seminary, and a theological seminary—all under one roof." It became clear to Archbishop Ireland that serving so many age groups in one institution would not work in the future. From this initial institution, four separate educational institutions developed: St Thomas Academy, the College (now University) of St. Thomas, the St. Paul Seminary and the preparatory seminary Nazareth Hall. All but Nazareth Hall are in operation today.

Creating a separate theological seminary had been the dream of Grace and Ireland and it came closer to reality when in 1890 James J. Hill announced he would donate $500,000 (more than $10 million in today's dollars) for the creation of the St. Paul Seminary. The author details Hill's background and the unique story of Hill, a Methodist, providing such a substantial gift to his wife's faith. So unusual was a substantial gift from a non-Catholic, that it was noticed by the reigning Pope Leo XIII.

The chapter, "If It Hadn't Been For A Woman..." chronicles Mary Theresa Mehegan Hill's life-long association with the pioneer Catholic Church leaders in St. Paul. Because of her family's arrival in St. Paul in 1850, she had cultivated relationships with the early Catholic leaders, especially Msgr. Louis Caillet, prior to meeting her future husband. After her marriage and James J. Hill's financial successes, the Hill family became leading donors to Catholic-related projects.

Little was done to create the seminary between Hill's announcement in 1890 and 1892 due to Hill's pressing business matters with the Great Northern Railway. "Because it was his [Hill's] intention to supervise all the details of the building complex, he felt it was better to delay the seminary rather than turn the direction of it over to those who might squander the money".

Hill's substantial contribution was split between buildings and an endowment. Hill was very involved in decisions relating to the construction of the initial buildings. The endowment trust agreement allowed him, and later trustees, to be involved in the operations of the seminary for many years.

The author presents interesting correspondence that outlines the relationship between Hill, John Ireland and Cass Gilbert, the architect of the initial six seminary buildings. Hill and Ireland were the same age, but Gilbert was younger. "The relationship between Hill and Gilbert was strained from beginning to end." As imagined, these three larger-than-life gentlemen did not always get along but needed each other to achieve their dreams.

The initial buildings were completed in December 1894 and the seminary dedication took place on September 4, 1895. Twenty thousand people attended the dedication. It was during Ireland's dedication speech that he stated this new seminary would be "to work for the whole people." In Hill's speech during the dedication he attributed his substantial gift to his wife's Catholic faith and their association with Msgr. Louis Caillet.

The author tracks the growth and expansion of the Seminary, including the chapel designed by Clarence Johnston and a residence hall designed by Emmanuel Masqueray. Johnston was a prolific St. Paul architect and Masqueray had previously been the chief architect for both the Cathedral of St. Paul and the Basilica of St. Mary (Minneapolis).

In addition to the biographical sections relating to each archbishop, who is automatically the president of the seminary board, sketches are also provided on each of the twelve rectors who have lead the seminary, as well as numerous faculty members and other staff.

The author does a good job of addressing how the seminary has adapted to changes in its history. Concerns like the African American seminarians and the issue of race, the rise of modernism, the use of Latin in classes, the repositioning of the seminarians from living an almost cloistered existence into being more connected with people, parishes, and communities they would eventually serve, the rise of social justice, as well as interdenominational inroads, are also discussed.

A large section of the book covering more recent years outlines the lengthy multiple-year discussion and process to have the seminary make a transition from an independent institution to a School of Divinity of the University of St. Thomas. A number of reasons were involved in the affiliation, including the reasoning outlined by Bishop William Bullock, that with "five thousand St. Thomas students on a fifty-acre campus, and one hundred seminarians on a thirty-four acre campus, the college needs to expand and the seminary in some ways needs to contract. They really are the answers to each other's problems . . ." This transition was effected in 1986.

This book may be too detailed for some readers without a Catholic background and/or theological interest, but anyone with an interest in St. Paul's history will find this book informative and entertaining.

Ronald J. Zweber is a St. Paul banker, second vice president of the Ramsey County Historical Society, and a member of its board of directors.

SPIRITUAL SCIENCE

The New Philosophy

MAGAZINE

SPIRITUAL SCIENCE MAGAZINE

A National Magazine of Spiritual Philosophy and Scientific Upliftment

PUBLISHED MONTHLY

Subscription $1.55 a year. Foreign $1.70
Single copies 15 cents.

Edited by FRANK MICKLEY
357 West 60th St., Los Angeles (3) Phone TH. 2104

Ownership and Management of Magazine:
"National Federation of Spiritual Science Churches"

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LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA - FEBRUARY, 1949

Volume XV - Number 12

Minda was a Spiritualist and apparently subscribed to the Spiritual Science Magazine, *copies of which were found among her belongings after her death.* *See Growing Up in St. Paul article on page 17.*

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

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

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