

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

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

Page 12

Fall, 2002

Volume 37, Number 3

*Lost Neighborhood*

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

—Page 4



*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.*



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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 37, Number 3

Fall, 2002

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## 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



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## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

### Seeing, Talking to, Calling on Spirits: Grandma Minda's Adventures in Spiritualism

*Joanne A. Englund*

**T**hey came from Scandinavia in the 1880s, from lands where worn, old mountains live in communication with the heavens and the sea, and rushing streams send their messages over high waterfalls that flow in hushed voices past your feet as you walk the land with eons of ancestors long gone.

From farms deep in the fjords, those youth who had little or no chance of owning their own land turned toward America, and walked the pilgrim's path toward the ships that carried them here. All of my grandparents or their parents made that walk about 1880, either from Norway or Sweden, and eventually made their way to be with relatives in Wisconsin and the Crookston area of Minnesota. Lumbering and jobs with the railroad brought them there and later brought them to St. Paul and work at the Minnesota Transfer Railway. Eventually my father worked for the Street Railway, housed in the streetcar barns on Snelling and University, where he helped build those plentiful yellow streetcars.

I don't know what their personal experiences and realities were in regard to their mythologies, gods, or spirituality. I have no artifacts to document those relationships at the time of their arrival here in Minnesota except for my paternal grandmother's trunk (*ano* 1821), and spinning wheel (*ano* 1876), probably made around Trondheim, Norway. These were in my grandmother's house when we sold it in 2000. They have been donated to Vesterheim Museum in Decorah, Iowa. The front of the trunk is decorated with a village scene of six buildings and a puffy, four-pointed, crosslike symbol in the center. In each of the four corners, the symbol is repeated and enhanced with three-pointed, tulip-like forms radiating out from each of the angles. The curator was fascinated upon seeing the symbols. He said that these are hex symbols fre-



*Minda at ninety-two. All photographs for this article are from the author.*

quently found in fabric designs and are intended to keep away evil spirits and the little people who come out at night and help themselves to things. This is the first time he has seen them on a trunk or any other piece of furniture.

My grandmother, Minda, left home for Denver, Colorado, around age sixteen. From a newspaper photograph and article, we know that while there she joined the Salvation Army. She never spoke of any of it even when asked. Minda married Paul Sands, a lumberjack from Luck, Wisconsin. He went to Denver to get her and bring her back. They were married in

Lead, South Dakota, and moved back to Timberland, Wisconsin, for a short while, then soon to Minneapolis, then St. Paul.

It was 1910 when Minda and Paul bought a lot on Edmund Avenue, between Albert and Pascal, north of what would later be the Montgomery Ward location. Nearby on Hamline Avenue was the Bohn Refrigerator Company where Paul worked.

For the first summer, the family lived in two small tents on the front of the lot while Paul built a shack in his spare time on the back of the property. The family then folded up the tents and moved into the shack while he had a house built on the front of the lot. The shack wasn't luxury, but it was livable. City water and gas were supplied; sidewalks and gas street lights were in place about the time the lot was purchased, but it was many years before curbs, oiled streets, and electricity were installed.

By 1916 they had moved into the new house. During World War I, with women entering the workforce, Minda went to work at Bohn Refrigerator, along with Paul, who worked as a tinner and on the enameling and baking line. She worked nights and he worked days, so that someone was always home for the children. But the plan was short lived. Paul died unexpectedly and quickly after only two weeks of illness during the flu epidemic, December 16, 1918. Audrey was twelve, Gladys was nine, and George was three. By the following summer the family had to move back into the shack so that the house could be rented to help pay the bills.

For a while after Paul died, Minda was allowed to transfer into Paul's higher paying job while most of the men workers were off to war. After the soldiers returned, though, she was laid off and on her own to find work to support the children and pay the mortgage. She then





*In this photograph taken around the time of World War I and titled "Women employees of Bohn Refrigerator Co. St. Paul Minn.," Minda Sands Wilson photograph. We can be reached by phone (651-222-0701); e-mail (admin@rchs.com); FAX (651-223-8539); or our web site (www.rchs.com).*

found work in a more typical woman's job as a night-shift short-order cook at "Parsley's," a local restaurant located at 1559 University Avenue. She took in roomers so that an adult would be with the children at night. And she did marry again. She met Laro Lorenzo Wilson while working at Parsley's and they were married in May of 1923. Laro tore down the shack and used the materials to add two bedrooms to Minda's home, and they moved back into the larger house. The marriage was short-lived, however. Some five years later Laro left and never was heard from again.

Minda, like many mothers of her era, was left to carry her cargo alone, weaving through jobs and tenants to keep her house and its family self-sufficient and together until the children were grown. To help with the finances, Audrey soon quit Central High School and got a job at Montgomery Ward at about age sixteen.

Minda managed to pay off the mortgage and keep the home; when adult, Audrey and Gladys married and moved away. But soon the depression came, and Audrey's family moved back home in 1933. Al, her husband, was unemployed, and Minda had no tenants and rent income. By then, I was three. My Uncle George was eighteen. By sharing resources, we could all survive together. That move provided me with the constant watchfulness of an extended family—my grandmother, Uncle George, and others who came to visit or stay with us, in addition to my parents,

I don't know if Paul's departure had a direct effect on Minda's interests in spiritual connections and belief systems or not. She never said. I never thought to ask. At some time, though, she investigated Spiritualism, Spiritual Science, Christian Science, Jehovah Witnesses, and any relationship with a world larger than this conscious one. She would invite

in and question the Jehovah Witnesses who came to the door until they were exhausted and left. Among other quests, she followed the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy. Christian Science was a religion that made sense to her. It focused on reason, knowledge, and positive natural/spiritual-healing instead of sin, fear, and evil. Christian Science was started by a woman. Since Grandma was an enthusiastic supporter of strong and intelligent women, I expect this also fueled her support. She may have been a participant at times with the Christian Science Second Church that organized in Minneapolis between about 1911–1917.<sup>1</sup>

Minda was also a Spiritualist. Among her papers I found more than a year's collection of the monthly "Spiritual Science" magazines from the National Federation of Spiritual Science Churches, Los Angeles, California. I believe that Minda may have attended some Spiritu-





is seventh from the left in the front row. Ramsey County History would like to hear from anyone who recognizes other women in this remarkable

alist meetings in St. Paul or Minneapolis, too. Stored with the magazines was a stack of carbon-copied lecture notes from a series of fifteen lectures on Mysticism. From their content and condition, it appears that someone must have used them for presentations.

At least one Spiritualist society formed here in the early 1900s. The Minnesota History Center has on file information about the State Spiritualist Association and Minnesota Spiritualists from 1905-1916. In her scrap book I found an obituary clipping from a 1935 newspaper for an F.J. Clifcorn. It announced his funeral service to be held at the Central Church of the Spirit, Eighth Street and Lafayette Road, St. Paul; the Reverend Robert Schmus, pastor of the church, officiating. State records show that Reverend Schmus died in 1948.

Modern spiritualism was also organized by women—two sisters, Katherine

and Margaret Fox, in 1848 in New York. Whether or not that feminine connection had an influence on Minda's involvement, I do not know. She was always quick, though, to tell me about the accomplishments of women in leadership and had the highest regard for Eleanor Roosevelt, whose picture she had pinned to her wall.

Minda saw spirits regularly, talked with spirits, called on spirits, and knew before the media did when an acquaintance or famous person was joining the spirit world. On a few occasions I remember grandma coming to the breakfast table and announcing that she had just seen an open casket. She would tell us that it contained either a child, a woman, or a man, and would give a general age range of the person. Although she could not identify the person, frequently we would soon hear that a friend or family member of that description had died.

Minda and a few of the neighbors

would meet regularly and hold their own spiritual meetings. She owned a set of seance trumpets. Made of thin sheet aluminum, four inches in diameter at the base, tapering to a half-inch at the top, the tallest one reached thirty-two inches into the ether. I'm not clear about how the trumpets attracted the spirits, nor do I know how the trumpets arrived. I do know that on prearranged evenings, Grandma would have the trumpet set up in the center of a card table in her room. A few neighbors would arrive, probably including Mrs. Blomker and Mrs. Simson, and they would pull the shades, close the doors, turn out the lights, and sit around the table, all finger tips barely touching the edge, waiting for messages from the spirit world.

I was invited to join them once when I was maybe eight or nine years old, but I wiggled the table and was told to stop. I don't remember being invited to join





*The Shack in 1913, not luxurious but livable. Paul and Minda pose with a group of neighbors.*



*Paul and Minda's new house built when the neighborhood was almost empty of homes and trees. The family moved into this house in 1916.*

them again. I understood that the trumpets sat on the center of the table top and acted like antenna to signal the spirits who then came and stood by you or circled around the room, communicating with those present by air motion, touch, and thought.

On another occasion, I remember asking grandma if she had seen my toy piano. I had looked everywhere and couldn't find it. She said, "Stand quietly and listen for it to tell you where it is." I stood still

and clearly recall hearing it play a note or two and I went to where the sound came from. There, on a nearby chair under a pile of clothes, was my lost piano. I was a convert.

Lately, in her old writings, I have found notes of hers such as these written to a friend at about age ninety. It expresses her general attitude about life.

The longer I live, the grander I think this planet is, even good and bad. Nature is Na-

ture and we just have to put up with it.

—letter to Clara and Ed Gullickson, Timberland, Wisconsin, 3/20/70

Yes, I manage to keep busy. Can't get around so fast any more. I am surprised that I ever would be in this condition that I would have to slow down. I remember Ma said, too, in her younger days, she never thought the time would come when she would be tired, but the time came. I am glad so much is not expected of us when we are aged, speaking for myself. I feel like I wish I could be strong as I was and work like I used to. Maybe if we did not work too hard at any time it would be that way. It does not seem right somehow, but I expect there is no other way, but I do think if we never work hard, as Jesus said, every thing in moderation, good food, I think of course is essential. Food to build strong bodies and then use common sense at work. It is good to be able to be around and not suffer pain. I am fortunate in being one of them. I marvel at times How lucky I am, in so many ways.

Minda enjoyed all of life and made every act into a positive challenge. During the 1930s she did day work for families living on the Mississippi Boulevard. She often told me how helpful it was to work for successful wealthy families and to learn their ways of cooking and cleaning and managing their day-to-day affairs. She enjoyed telling me how these families were always positive in their approach to events, always looking for the opportunity in a situation, not the problem. She talked of their supportive respect for each other and for their children. One fun bit of advice she shared with me was that she was told not to clean before company arrived but to clean thoroughly after they had gone. Then the family could enjoy the clean house for a longer time.

During the 1940s, Minda worked in a laundry and spent her days pressing men's white shirts on the mangle. She would compete with herself to increase the number of shirts pressed and to improve the quality of her work. Of course, this made her employer very happy, but her fellow workers resented it. She would tell me, "Work is a joy when you use it to test yourself to find out what you can do." That job ended when she accidentally badly burned her arm in the mangle—probably moving too fast.



Grandma liked to dance. My mother recalls going with her to the dance hall on Lexington and University when my mother was in her teens. In her sixties Minda again took up dancing and insisted that her partner dance every dance of the evening with her. I think she and her friend, Johnson, went dancing a couple of evenings a week. They took the streetcar down University Avenue to Rice Street to what was the German Hall before World War II. Its name was changed to the American Hall during the war. I remember when a special pair of black leather dancing shoes with arch straps and high heels arrived by mail order—impressive, especially in her size 11—and she wore them dancing from then on.

Nothing got wasted, including the fallen apples from our backyard apple tree. She would sit quietly by the lilacs and peel apples while the bees crawled all over her arms and hands. Minda loved the relationship with the bees and relished the attention from people as the bees swarmed on her. After a couple of hours of peeling, her fingers would be deeply blackened from the action of apple's acid on the iron knife blade; black fingers and bees, she was an awesome sight.

In her nineties, grandma fell from a chair while dusting the living-room venetian blinds and broke her hip. She decided that she was going to lie in bed and focus on healing it. My dad requested that she let a doctor look at it even if she chose to do nothing else. After some hesitation, she agreed. The doctor told her that it would heal by itself, but it would take a long time and meanwhile her other muscles would weaken. He suggested that inserting a simple metal pin would help it along by holding it steady and she would be walking much sooner. She thought for a few moments then gave her approval. She was soon on her feet again.

During her last days, bedridden at age ninety-five, she focused totally on deep breathing. One afternoon, I watched for a long time and finally said, "It's not worth it, grandma. It's okay to go." I think she died the next day.

Minda first knew this neighborhood in the second decade of the twentieth century as open field, almost empty of homes and trees. Over the years, those first thin



*Paul and Minda in 1914.*



*Minda with her granddaughter Gladys, around 1930 when Minda was about fifty years old.*

elm trees planted there grew tall and wide. Most are gone now, and others have moved in. In her later years, she would look quietly out the west window and say,

"I used to be able to easily see Snelling and University Streets over a half mile away." That was when the streetcar barns were new and the Montgomery Ward complex, including its landmark tower, was just being built. Year by year the neighborhood filled in.

My mother and father continued to live in the house until my dad died in 1983. My mother lived there until she broke a hip in 2000; then she moved to an apartment near Lake Como. We sold the house that summer—ninety full and active years after the land was purchased.

As I get older I find that unless we stop for a few moments now and then, we run through our own history, often without noticing. In every step we take through time, a small clump of invisible soil sticks to our shoe. In addition to our own experience, we walk our days and see our world through stories lived before, not even feeling the silent brush of them against our skin and soul, unless we take the time to look.

### **Endnote**

1. The Minnesota History Center archives have information about this church. I have not yet researched it.

*Joanne A. Englund was born and raised in St. Paul. Retired from St. Paul city administration, she is a past president and member of the Ramsey County Historical Society's board of directors.*





*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

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