

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

*A Different  
Sesquicentennial*

Remembering Fredrick McGhee

Paul D. Nelson

—page 13

Fall 2011

Volume 46, Number 3

*Gone But Not Forgotten?*

The Survival of Outdoor Sculpture in St. Paul

*Moira F. Harris, page 3*



*In 1958 Sculptor Robert Johnson crafted a golden eagle as a corporate symbol for Minnesota Federal Savings and Loan. The eagle and rock weighed 1,100 pounds, stood eighteen feet tall, and the eagle had a twenty-three-foot wingspan. After the savings and loan merged with another financial institution, the eagle took flight in mid-1986 to the campus of Northwestern College in Roseville, where it was installed near the school's entrance gates. Eagle photos at Minnesota Federal by Jay Pfaender; at Northwestern College by Moira F. Harris.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 46, Number 3

Fall 2011

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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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

Public art, like all reflections of popular sensibility, has changed over the years in Ramsey County. Molly Harris looks back at the evolution of our outdoor art, from zinc and cast-iron fountains and war heroes, to the Germania and eagle figures that graced insurance-company buildings, down to the colorful sculptures of Charles Schulz *Peanuts* characters. Leila Albert recounts the history of St. Paul's West Side, where people of Mexican descent were drawn by work opportunities and stayed to raise their families. Albert's accompanying book review essay and a current Landmark Center exhibit also highlight this community's struggles and achievements. Doug Heidenreich shares evocative memories of growing up in the West End neighborhood, where vacant lots acted as playing fields, and the coming of spring brought hollyhocks, rhubarb, and the trash man hauling away ashes produced by winter's coal-burning furnaces. And Paul Nelson notes the sesquicentennial of the birth of Fredrick McGhee, a pioneering African American criminal defense attorney and civil rights leader. As you settle down for a good read, don't forget that a membership makes a great holiday gift for anyone with personal Ramsey County memories.

*Anne Cowie,*  
Chair, Editorial Board

# *Growing Up in St. Paul*

## The West End Neighborhood in the Nineteen Thirties and Forties

*Douglas R. Heidenreich*

Somewhere, probably in a shoebox filled with curved, faded, brittle pictures shot about seventy years ago on a Kodak Brownie camera, I have a short letter from Gerhard Bundlie, a lawyer who was the mayor of St. Paul in the early nineteen thirties. The letter, on official mayor's-office stationery, congratulates my parents on the birth of a son who had been born on February 29, 1932. That was me.

My parents were ordinary people; they didn't know the mayor nor did they have any particular "social" standing. My dad was, throughout his working life, a milkman—a driver for the Sanitary Farm Dairies Company in St. Paul. My mother was, as they said in those days, a "housewife." Although I thought nothing about it until later in life, there were relatively few kids of my age in my West End neighborhood, just off of West Seventh Street, a couple of miles east of Fort Snelling. I can only assume that the mayor took the trouble to congratulate my folks because not many people were having children in the depression years.

The neighborhood was sparsely populated; my few pals and I could always find plenty of open spaces in the vacant lots that dotted the area and on the nearby unpopulated hillsides adjacent to Lexington Avenue, which crossed our street (Otto Avenue) about two blocks from my home. After clearing an empty space of weeds, we would play a makeshift form of football or baseball in the summer. In the winter, we would take to the street for an hour or so of "hockey" played on the packed surface of the poorly plowed streets. We used hockey sticks, sometimes cracked or worn and taped together, hand-me-downs from an older sibling or another kid who had been able

to buy a new stick, and one of us could usually provide a puck, but that was about the only way in which our game resembled hockey, as we used clumps of snow to mark the goals, and we ran from one end of the "rink" to the other on the icy surface wearing street shoes or rubber overshoes. Of course, from time to time, maybe two or three times during a game, a car would come through, and we would stand aside while the vehicle passed, sometimes crushing one of our

makeshift goal-markers. We played until dark or until one of us was summoned to supper by his mother. The common form of that summons was a loud calling of the boy's name from an open kitchen door.

Across the alley that ran behind our house was the home of an elderly couple and their adult son, who was a mail carrier. The old man had driven a Ford Model T but had abandoned it in the open lot next to his home. We kids often sat behind the wheel of this relic, moving the levers, twisting the thick steering wheel back and forth, and making what passed in our minds for automobile noises.

In my early youth, a young boy about my age lived next door to us; he and his parents lived in the small home owned by the parents of my friend's mother. This elderly (or so it seemed) couple were immigrants from some exotic area of Eastern Europe—"Bohemians," we called them, using the same term by which we referred to many of our neighbors, whom in later years we would call "Czechs."

These folks were what we thought of as classic Eastern European immigrants; my friend's grandmother, a short, stocky, grey-haired woman, walked almost daily to stores a few blocks away, wearing a babushka and carrying a black bag to transport the produce and other items that she purchased. On Saturdays she often baked kolacky, a Czech pastry of which the modern "Danish" would be a feeble imitation. On the rare occasions when I was invited into the tiny, warm kitchen, and given one of these prune-, poppy-seed, or apricot-filled delights, I felt blessed to have this special treat. The grandfather was a taciturn,



*Doug Heidenreich, left, at about age seven, with his brother, Ray, who was then about fourteen, in the backyard of their home at 997 Otto Avenue in St. Paul. Photo courtesy of Douglas R. Heidenreich.*

somewhat gruff man who smoked a pipe, the distinguishing characteristic of which was a metal cover that fit over the bowl with an open hole in the center to allow the air to come in and the smoke to drift out.

A wooden fence, composed of vertical warped and weathered boards, separated our back yards. The fence was, when I was quite young, torn down, as was the rather large chicken coop in that neighbor's yard, where for some years the family had raised maybe twenty-five chickens at a time. The board fence was replaced by a wire fence; the chickens, however, were gone, never to be replaced.

The presence of chickens in neighborhood back yards was not unusual in the nineteen thirties and early forties. From the yards of at least two other neighbors on our block could frequently be heard the clucking of a brood. Occasionally my mother would send me to a neighbor's house to ask whether we might be able to buy a dozen eggs, as the chickens often produced more than the family that owned them could use.

Similarly, many people owned dogs, which commonly ran loose, there being no rules against it. My dog, Skipper, a frisky and affectionate Springer Spaniel, was a hunter of sorts; about once a week he would get on the trail of a rabbit, run it down, and proudly bring home the frightened creature, wide-eyed and quivering, in his mouth. He also, much to one neighbor's dismay, would sometimes refresh himself during the hot summer days by plunging into the small pool that they had built in their back yard as part of a decorative "rock garden."

My parents told me that when they had come to this neighborhood, maybe five years before I was born, a man who lived less than a block away had kept a cow, though the cow was long gone by the time I was aware of my surroundings. Most of the nearby residents had flower or vegetable gardens or both. My mother almost always grew flowers in the back yard, though she usually planted just a few vegetables. In the spring I would have the unpleasant but unavoidable task of digging up the earth in preparation for the planting.

My other duties included shoveling snow in the winter from the sidewalk at the front of our house and, during the



*The class photo for the third grade at Adams School in St. Paul in 1940. The author is in the striped shirt in the center of the second row. Photo courtesy of Douglas R. Heidenreich.*

summer, cutting our somewhat weedy and uneven lawn with a balky, human-powered lawnmower. For a few years I also had to take out the ashes produced during the winter by the coal-fired furnace in our basement. Finally, each evening I was expected to wash the supper dishes. Our family ate relatively late—at about six o'clock—and I soon learned that if I moved things along by clearing the table as quickly as possible once we had eaten, I could maximize my after-supper play time with my friends. I had to wash and dry the dishes by hand and take out the garbage generated by the evening meal before I was free to spend the balance of the evening having fun before darkness signaled the end of the day for me.

Backyards were marked by four things in those days: one or two rhubarb plants; a small, or sometimes large, clump of hollyhocks; a garbage can, always near the alley, as far as possible from the house; and, during the winter, a pile of ashes produced by the coal-burning furnaces that all homes used for heat. Some homes also had coal-or wood-burning stoves that generated ashes. My grand-

parents, who lived on the "West Side," had such a stove in their kitchen well into the nineteen forties, though I have just a dim recollection of the big black coal stove in our small kitchen at home, that appliance having been replaced early in my life by a gas stove that bore, I believe, the brand name, "Bristol Universal."

Similarly, our ice box that used blocks of ice to cool our food, was replaced when I was quite young—I was about four years old, I think—by an electric refrigerator. Thus, our family no longer had need of an ice delivery, though, as noted below, the ice man continued to be a regular visitor to our street.

• • •

In the spring the hollyhocks would begin to bloom and the rhubarb would come up no matter how hard the winter had been. We kids would eat the rhubarb raw, taking a stalk into the house and, if we were allowed that indulgence, dipping it in sugar as we ate each bite. Our moms made sweetly sharp rhubarb sauce or, occasionally, rhubarb pie. While the hollyhocks bloomed in the back yard, typically bridal wreaths and fragrant lilac bushes, some-

times in the form of hedges on lot lines, bloomed in front yards.

So too in the spring a trash man would come by to haul to some unknown destination the winter's accumulated ashes, and the fifty-gallon, metal garbage can would begin to smell, efforts to clean it notwithstanding. Once a week the garbage man would empty the neighborhood garbage cans into the back of a rickety dump truck (One of my dad's favorite jokes went this way: "What has four wheels and flies?") The answer: "A garbage wagon."), and toss the can back somewhere near the yard from which it had come. On occasion, we kids might, to our mothers' consternation, play at being

Errol Flynn or some similar swashbuckling film star, using makeshift wooden swords and garbage-can-cover shields.

The other visitor to our alley was the rag man. About once a week, a weary, decrepit horse moved slowly through the alley, pulling a wagon, atop of which an equally dispirited man slumped, calling periodically, "Rags." How much, if



*Doug Heidenreich when he was about twelve with Skipper, his dog. Photo courtesy of Douglas R. Heidenreich.*

anything, he paid for rags I never knew. Where he took them, I never knew. As nearly as I can tell, he was the only Jewish visitor to our neighborhood. As far as I know, there never was a single Jewish resident, nor was even one Black or Asian resident. The annual class pictures that were taken of my grade-school classes contain no black, brown, or yellow faces. The students' family names suggested, as I recall, Scandinavian

or central or eastern European roots. I don't recall ever seeing a black face in the schools that I attended through the twelfth grade, though our high-school team played football against some of the fine black athletes from other St. Paul schools like Marshall and Mechanic Arts High—both schools that, like Monroe, exist no more.

The street in front of the house also saw some regular visitors. One was the "vegetable man," a large, rather swarthy gentleman named Joe, who drove a horse that pulled an open wagon piled with fresh vegetables and fruit that Joe sold to the housewives who, hav-

ing been summoned by the sound of a big, brass, hand bell, would cluster around the back of the wagon, stopped in mid-block, often bargaining and arguing about the quality of the goods. Joe appeared about twice a week, while other delivery men (always men) came every day.

The "ice man" stopped on our street a couple of times each week, as many of the neighbors continued to have the



*Doug, center, and his two cousins from Rochester enjoy a summertime treat. Photo courtesy of Douglas R. Heidenreich.*



old-fashioned ice boxes. To the best of my recollection, the ice man came in a truck. He would note the signal in the window of a customer (a card that could be turned to announce the amount of ice desired), pull the appropriate sized block of ice (sometimes chipping a large block in half if necessary) from the back of the truck, and, grabbing it with a big pair of tongs, sling it onto his back (protected by a black, rubber device that fit over his shoulder), and deliver it to the customer's back door.

Some folks saved a few pennies by patronizing a nearby ice-house, typically a small, dark, cool shed-like building where one could purchase a block of ice to take away. Responsibility for the ice transaction typically fell to a child with a wagon. On hot summer days, one might see a small boy pulling a wooden wagon in which rested a twenty-five pound block of ice. Commonly, as the lad shuffled along, he sucked a shard of ice that he had been given by the person in charge of the ice house.

The milkman came every morning, leaving whatever the customer had ordered. The milk was delivered in heavy, glass, reusable bottles sealed with a round paper cap that fit into a recess at the top of the bottle. On cold winter days, if a householder failed to bring the milk into the house promptly, the milk would freeze, and the expanding liquid would push the paper cap up on a white, icy column an inch or two in height.

• • •

When the time came for me to go to school, I was entered in the kindergarten class at Adams Elementary (K through eight) school about three blocks from my home. My older brother, my only sibling, was nearing the end of his grammar school career, being then, I think, in the sixth grade. I have no recollection of his walking with me to school, though I suspect that he had that responsibility for a year or two. Many of the kids in my class



*When an itinerant photographer came by the Heidenreich home one day in the early 1930s, a very young Doug was decked out in cowboy gear and posed on a patient pony so that his family might have a charming keepsake for years to come. Photo courtesy of Douglas R. Heidenreich.*

drank each day a small bottle of milk, provided free through a federal program designed to see that kids at least had some milk each day. I never partook of that opportunity; my mother insisted that I didn't need it, as I got plenty of milk at home.

My dad, unlike many neighborhood men, had a steady job throughout the depression years and beyond. He delivered milk on retail (house to house) routes early in his career, but later drove a wholesale route that served grocery stores, hospitals, railroads, and other commercial enterprises. He would rise every work day at about four a.m. and go off to work, returning about three p.m. after he had completed his route and taken care of the necessary bookwork. Early in his career he drove a horse and wagon until the milk company switched to trucks. When he returned home in mid-afternoon, he would hang his blue-and-white striped coveralls on the back of the

basement door, and have coffee and a light snack. He then took a nap until it was time for the family to have supper.

Most of the time my dad had a car and could drive to work. For a while, however, we were without a car after my dad gave our old Dodge to the coal merchant to satisfy a coal bill. He then took the streetcar to work for some time (My memory is hazy about those things) until, in late 1937, we were able to acquire a "new" demonstrator 1937 Pontiac six. That was our car for the next ten years. It was to be the first car that I would drive with any frequency, though I learned to drive essentially on the 1938 Chevrolet owned by my occasional employer, the genial owner of a nearby filling station.

I worked off and on for the proprietor of the Phillips 66 service station at the corner of West Seventh Street and Otto Avenue, about two blocks from my home, from the time I was about fourteen years old until I graduated from college. My job basically was to sell gasoline and oil to the customers at the pump. The most common order—"a buck's worth"—would get the customer something close to five gallons of gas plus a windshield-cleaning and, if the customer wanted it, a check of the oil and water levels and even the tire pressure. Customers were mostly neighborhood residents, though a good number stopped on their way to more distant homes to buy gasoline and talk with the boss, who always was ready with a story or a joke. I was paid well—a dollar an hour by the time I left college and entered the army at the age of twenty-one.

• • •

During the years of World War II, almost everybody had to make do with the prewar vehicles that they had when automobile production shut down as war loomed. A few 1942 models were produced, but for all practical purposes, no new cars were available to civilians from 1941 until about 1946 or 1947. The war



*Nattily dressed in a suit with a bright tie, the author, then about fifteen, poses outside his home prior to an important family event. Photo courtesy of Douglas R. Heidenreich.*

was marked by fervent patriotism and propaganda that was designed to make us all hate “the Japs,” commonly held to be sneaky, little, yellow bad guys who had “stabbed us in the back” at Pearl Harbor.

We heard, read about, and believed the stories of Japanese cruelty and American heroism, and we listened on the radio to songs like “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” and “Remember Pearl Harbor.” Of course, the Germans, who declared war on the United States a few days after Pearl Harbor, came in for their share of obloquy as well. There was talk of a “Fifth Column” and some Americans were regarded with suspicion by “loyal Americans” who wondered whether their neighbors had been members of the pro-Nazi “German-American Bund.” Posters admonishing that “Loose Lips Sink Ships” appeared in public places, and stenciled messages on covers over street-corner storm sewers urged, “Men 17 to 50 Join Your Navy.” Now we kids played soldier—Americans against the Germans

or Japs (We never bothered much about the Italians, though we knew that Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator, was a bad guy), and we went on Saturday afternoons to the nearby Garden Theater, where we paid a nickel to see films about the war.

My brother, like most of the boys his age, couldn’t wait to enter the service. Because he was not yet eighteen years old, our parents had to agree to allow him to enlist in the U.S. Navy. He served from 1942 until the end of the war, visiting us at home a couple of times when he was given leaves after he had completed boot camp and before he shipped out to the South Pacific. His two closest friends also served; one was killed in action, while the other survived. Nearly all of the young men, and some of the young women, “went to war.” Any apparently able-bodied young man who was not in uniform was regarded with suspicion and presumed to be a “draft dodger” or shirker.

On what was called “the home front,” we collected scrap metal for scrap drives and grew Victory Gardens. Synthetic inner tubes replaced real rubber tubes, and new tires were almost impossible to obtain; recapped tires had to do. Meat and coffee and sugar and gasoline were rationed.

My friends and I continued to go to school, reaching the eighth grade about the time that the war ended. “The boys,” including my brother, came home. Returning veterans who attended college under the GI Bill were often housed in Quonset huts, miniature villages of which quickly sprang up near college and university campuses. Most of the Victory Gardens went fallow, and we kids listened to our older siblings’ stories of their military careers. My brother soon married his high-school sweetheart and started a family. I went on to St. Paul Monroe High School, where I met a new group of friends, some from the relatively affluent area that we neighborhood kids called “the hill,” some from as far west as Fort Snelling, and some from as far east as the edge of downtown St. Paul.

We weren’t grown up yet, but we were on the way.

*Douglas R. Heidenreich is a retired attorney who teaches at William Mitchell College of Law. He served as the school’s dean from 1964 to 1975 and is the author of a history of the College (1999) and numerous articles about the law. This is his first contribution to Ramsey County History.*



*Unlike his older brother, Doug Heidenreich, back row right, was too young to serve in World War II. Once he was an adult and had finished college, he, like so many of his male contemporaries, donned a uniform and did his part for a few years. Photo courtesy of Douglas R. Heidenreich.*

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

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*Torre de San Miguel (Tower of St. Michael) is a major landmark on St. Paul's West Side and a powerful emblem for Minnesota's first urban barrio. For more on the history of Mexican-Americans in this neighborhood and Minnesota, see page 20. Photo by Lelia R. Albert.*