

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Volume 47, Number 3

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for Car Buyers:
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the Local Automotive Scene
for Fifty Years*

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A 1970s postcard of the Gibbs Farm Museum, showing the east side of the Gibbs farmhouse at 2097 Larpenteur Avenue, alongside a photo of Ethel Hall Stewart from the 1950s. Photo of Ethel Hall Stewart from the Ramsey County Historical Society archives; Gibbs Farm Museum postcard courtesy of Steven C. Trimble.

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Volume 47, Number 3

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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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A Message from the Editorial Board

Until now, few people associated with the Ramsey County Historical Society knew much about the Society's origins. Some may have heard of Ethel Hall Stewart, but even they were not likely to know what role she played in the Society or how she was able to save the Gibbs Farm. Thanks to historian Steve Trimble, we know who Ethel Stewart was, the part she played in the creation of RCHS, and why she was so determined to preserve the Gibbs farm and turn it into a museum. From rural Ramsey County, we turn to University Avenue in the 1950s with Peter Myers's study of the auto and truck dealerships that once populated that busy thoroughfare. Joanne Englund then gives us an insightful memoir of growing up along University Avenue and how it's changed from her youth to a street that today bustles with all manner of new activity and questions centered on the impact of building light rail transportation there. In our concluding article, Mary Jo Richardson recounts how the alumnae of St. Joseph's Academy, which closed in 1971, keep the memory of their school alive and contributing to the health of our community.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Hands-On Historian:

Ethel Hall Stewart and Preserving the Gibbs Farm

Steven C. Trimble

Ethel Stewart was a historian with a deep feeling of responsibility for recording facts and information that could be of value later. But she was also a teacher and as facts presented themselves to her, she sought out ways of arranging the information so it would arouse the interest of others.¹

—S. B. Cleland

A large crowd milled about the grounds of the pioneer homestead near the northwest corner of Larpenteur and Cleveland Avenues. Visitors were greeted by men and women wearing garments that dated back a century. Along with members of the general public, there were descendants of the original owners, historians, area residents, and several people who arrived by horse and buggy. One of the most interesting sights was a group of Dakota “in full tribal costume . . . many of them descendants of those living in the area 100 years ago.” It was October 2, 1954, and the Gibbs Farm Museum had just opened to the public for the first time. In the midst of things was a proud Ethel Stewart, whose efforts are credited for making this day happen.²

While the preservation of the Gibbs Farm was the crowning achievement of Ethel Stewart’s life, it was only one of her many accomplishments. She was a highly energetic woman whose life revolved around family, church, and community. Her family’s values and early experiences helped her to develop a passion for history and a love of nature. Ethel believed in learning-by-doing and had a special interest in preserving the past in a hands-on manner. Her persistence helped her make major contributions to Ramsey County’s heritage.

Her Early Years

Ethel Collingwood Hall was born in Rochester, New York, on November 27, 1879, the oldest of Edward and Jennie Hall’s six children. On a beautiful April day in 1886, seven year-old Ethel, her mother, and younger sister, Avis, stepped off the train at the small wooden St. Anthony Park station. Her father met them, having already moved there to become a partner in the St. Anthony Park Furniture Factory.

The family moved into a five-room cottage on Long Avenue, only a few

how her daughters went down to meet their father “and he would point out the birds’ nests, the names of the birds . . . and the wild places . . . right among the trees,” that abounded in wild flowers. Their uncle came one day with a beautiful pink bouquet of lady slippers. They became Ethel’s favorite, and she always had at least one in her garden.³

These early experiences may explain Ethel’s life-long interest in nature. Around 1888, the Hall family moved into their newly completed house at 981 Bayless Avenue. By now, Edward had begun a career in real estate and city directories started listing him as “E.C. Hall, Real Estate & Loans,” with offices at 2362 University Avenue. Ethel later wrote about the new house and its location, with “the woods about them, the wild flowers, the birds, the gophers, the skunks and the whip-poor-wills at night.” Along with



An outdoor scene from the opening day at the Gibbs Farm Museum on October 2, 1954. Many visitors came in period clothing and some arrived in horse-drawn buggies. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

her family, she sometimes drove into the countryside around their home looking for fresh vegetables or to visit the post office in southeast Minneapolis.⁴

Ethel's life of community service was likely inspired by her parents. When a neighborhood Mothers Club was formed, Jennie Hall was one of the officers. When a Congregational Church was organized in July 1886, Edward Hall was the clerk and served on the initial Board of Trustees. The Halls, however, were not one of the thirteen charter families of the church because, as Jennie explained, "my husband was such a hard-shelled Baptist that it was very difficult for him to change to another church." Even so, she added, "all our interests were with the Park church from the beginning."⁵

As an adult, Ethel fondly remembered the tight-knit nature of the small, isolated neighborhood. "The community life centered around the church, chiefly," she recalled. "There were sociables, pic-



A formal Hall family photo circa 1910. Back row from left: Avis; Howard; Ethel; and Ruth. Front row, Jenny; Ford; Katherine; and Edward. Photo courtesy of Norman Clarke.

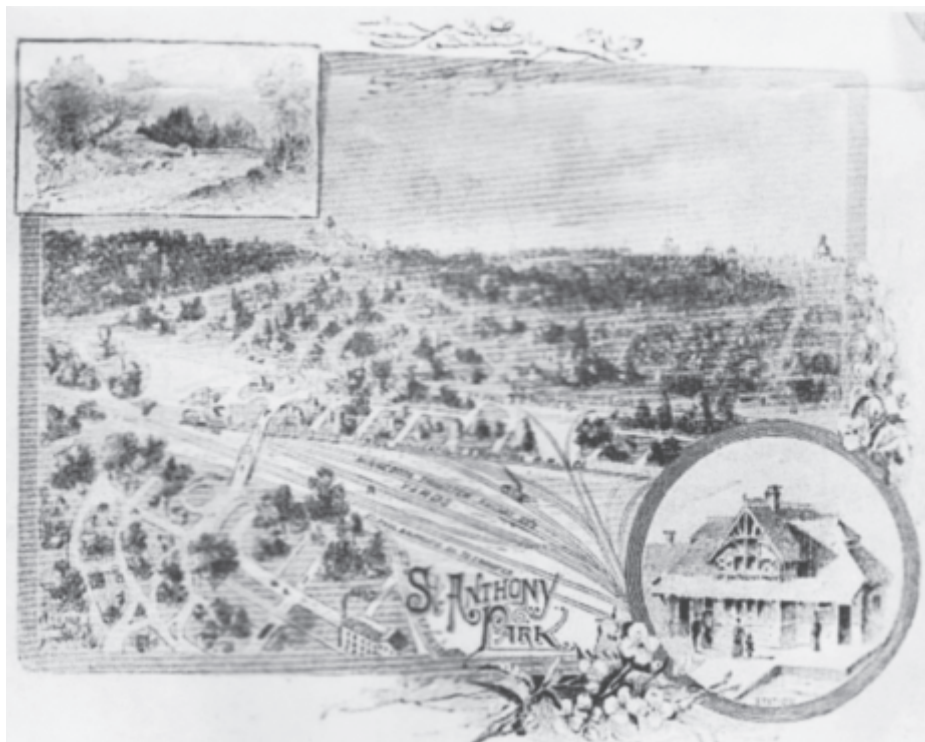
nics, toboggan parties, and ready welcomes for all newcomers to the Park." The depot was also a center of activity,

for "it was the only way to come to, or leave St. Anthony Park, except by horse and buggy." There were two trains a day—morning and evening—and a trip to Minneapolis or downtown St. Paul on the "short line" was "an event to look forward to."⁶

Educational Influences

The Hall children originally went to Baker School, but ground was soon broken for Murray School at Como and today's Hillside. There were not enough students who enrolled in the fall, so the first classes began in January 1888 with one teacher and nine students, including Ethel.⁷ As the neighborhood slowly grew, the Halls gained new friends. Patty Bullard, who was about Ethel's age, wrote that "the Halls were our first formal callers." She remembered that it was "one perfect summer day," when "in fresh 'dress up' afternoon dresses, they rang our front doorbell." The two remained close friends the rest of their lives.

The Stewart family played a major role in Ethel's life and she would marry, Clarence Stewart, her childhood sweetheart who came to the neighborhood around the same time. Polly wrote that their little group "didn't lack for romance. . . . In winter we expected to see Clarence pulling Ethel on his sled, along the park. . . . There she sat, her warm



E. V. Smalley of St. Paul was a journalist and editor of The Northwest Magazine, a monthly publication devoted to informing readers about the northern tier of states from Minnesota to Washington. The April 1886 issue contained a glowing article promoting St. Anthony Park as a rural community that was a desirable place to live. This bucolic illustration with its inset drawing of the train depot that provided easy access to nearby Minneapolis and St. Paul reinforced Smalley's point. At the same time this article appeared in print, Ethel Hall and her mother arrived in St. Anthony Park from the East and took up residence there. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

hood tied under her chin. Red cheeks glowing round and plump, beaming and self-possessed.”⁸ Ethel was active in the St. Anthony Park Congregational Church. She was a part of the Christian Endeavor Society and was elected its secretary in the 1890s.⁹

In 1894 she entered Central High School. One of her classmates said, “With the organization of the freshman class, she took an active part in its affairs. She was soon participating in the activities of the entire student body.” She was a member of the Debating Society and “she became one of our leading debaters because of the logical and convincing manner of her presentation.”¹⁰ Ethel also served on the editorial board of *The World*, the school’s literary magazine, in a variety of roles. In 1897, Ethel was also part of the Central High School “Literary Academy,” a society comprised of twenty students chosen by a faculty group “from among those whom they consider to be the brightest members of the school.”¹¹



MRS. C. H. STEWART is president of the Hibbing branch of the American Association of University Women, which published “The Story of the Arrowhead Country.” In August 1929, this photo of Mrs. C. H. Stewart appeared in a Duluth newspaper and reported that she was the president of the Hibbing branch of the American Association of University Women, which had published *The Story of the Arrowhead Country*. Duluth News Tribune photo. RCHS archives.



A portrait of Ethel Hall at the time she attended St. Paul High School, today’s Central High. Photo courtesy of Lynn A. Kloek.

She wrote at least one story for *The World* and it reflected her interest in local history. “Life to Live,” was a fictional tale of a bitter feud between two bands of Dakota. One small group dwindled away, until a chief, “scarcely more than a boy” wandered alone. Overcome with grief, he screamed and jumped off a cliff and died. Afterwards, there came “an answering laugh from the lake. . . . Many of you have heard it, heard its laugh and felt it in awful fascination; it is the laugh of the loon.”¹²

When Ethel graduated from Central High in 1898, she was among the top ten honorees on the “list of honor” that was chosen by a faculty committee. Another faculty panel also chose Ethel’s essay “In Freedom’s Cause,” to be read at graduation. Her composition, which was summarized in *The World*, examined the role of Lafayette in America’s struggle for independence and showed the development of her historical thinking. In this essay, she went beyond just stating facts to offer important context and historical lessons. “The story of the struggle for liberty began” with men “who were willing to make the cause of freedom their own,” Ethel wrote. “The long struggle contained a period of darkness and doubt . . . but every such time has its light as well as its shadows . . .” when fighting “for the rights of mankind.”¹³

“Miss Ethel Hall will leave tomorrow

for Mount Holyoke,” said a short notice in the September 11, 1898 issue of the *St. Paul Globe*. She was off to college. It is not known why she chose that school, but her cousin had graduated from there in 1896. Ethel joined the *Mount Holyoke* staff in 1899 and served as the publication’s literary editor in 1901. One of her contributions to the school’s magazine was an essay on William Cullen Bryant and Cummingtown, Massachusetts, Bryant’s boyhood home and lifetime writing retreat.

She described the rooms with their old furniture and “portraits of men and women long dead, and children now grown to middle age.” Ethel observed



An early photo of 2151 Commonwealth Avenue, where Ethel and Clarence Stewart lived after their marriage. Photo courtesy of Lynn A. Kloek.

“that among all this mahogany and walnut stands the old yellow pine cradle . . . in which all of the Bryant babies were joggled to sleep. It is in fact the oldest link in the chain which binds the elusive past to the present.” Given Ethel’s later approach to preserving historic structures and material culture, her visit to this New England landmark may have influenced her thinking when she took up the cause of the Gibbs Farm in the 1940s.¹⁴

At Mount Holyoke, Ethel received a classical education that included Latin and Greek languages, English literature, including Anglo-Saxon, and Bible studies and mathematics during her first

year. She later added history, chemistry, and German. According to one source that consulted with Ethel's daughter, she also did some teaching at Cummington between 1898 and 1901.¹⁵

When her father took ill in 1902, she left Mount Holyoke before graduating and returned home to help take care of the family. Later she would enroll at the University of Minnesota and graduate in 1903 with an emphasis in history. At the University, Ethel joined the Gamma Phi Beta sorority and often went to their events. At the same time, she continued to be active in the St. Anthony Park neighborhood. In July 1902, for instance, she "entertained at a ping pong social Tuesday evening" for the members of the Christian Endeavor Society.¹⁶

Married Life

After finishing college, Ethel began teaching. In 1903, she filled a seventh grade vacancy at Hancock School and remained there for three years.¹⁷ Then on June 26, 1906, Ethel Hall married Clarence Stewart at the Congregational Church and preferred to be called Mrs. C. H. Stewart the rest of her life. At the evening wedding, Ethel was "gowned in a lace-trimmed dress of white batiste" and carried "bride roses." The Wah-Tah-Wah Club decorated the church and her Gamma Phi Beta sisters sat in reserved seats. There was an informal gathering following the ceremony at the Hall family residence. According to a newspaper account of the nuptials, the newlyweds would soon leave for the West and would be "at home" in Spokane, Washington after January 1, 1907.¹⁸

Ethel and Clarence lived in Spokane for around eight years. After the death of Clarence's mother, the Stewart family, now including seven-year-old Thain and five-year-old Margaret, returned to St. Anthony Park and moved into 2151 Commonwealth, which was the Stewart family home.

Shortly after they relocated in 1915, a daughter, Jean, was born. The *St. Paul City Directory* for that year lists Clarence as a draftsman for the Great Northern Railway and also reports that Clarence's father lived with the family. Eventually Clarence's job as a consulting engineer required the family to move



A portrait of Ethel Stewart and other family members, probably from the 1930s. Back row, left to right: Jean Stewart and James Dale. Middle row: Margaret Stewart Dale; Ethel Hall Stewart, holding her granddaughter, Sally Dale; Jennie Hall; and Ruth Hall. Seated: Thain Stewart and Clarence Stewart. Photo courtesy of Norman Clarke.

to northern Minnesota, where he worked on new schools that were being built in Nashwauk and Biwabick and as the resident and consulting engineer for the Hibbing Power Plant from 1925 to 1929.

In 1924 and 1937, the Mount Holyoke Alumnae Association sent Ethel questionnaires that she completed and returned. The answers she supplied to the college's questions provide some glimpses of Ethel's life in the 1920s and '30s. Under "Profession," she wrote "administered the household." In addition to tending to family needs, Ethel was, however, very involved in community matters on the Iron Range. She served as president of the Hibbing Women's Club

from 1927 to 1929. While she modestly wrote that her leisure time activities included "informal historical research," she successfully researched and helped produce a historical map of the Minnesota Arrowhead Region.

Between 1921 and 1930, Ethel noted that she had engaged in "constant substitute teaching junior and senior high and junior college." She worked in Nashwauk from 1921 to 1922 and in Hibbing's public school system the following two years. During the decades covered by the college's questionnaires, Ethel was also vice president of the Minnesota AAUW, on a church religious council, was president



An aerial photo from around 1935 of the Gibbs farmhouse, center, and its surrounding grounds, looking southwest. The street shown at the top is Larpenteur Avenue. RCHS photo.

of the Minnesota branch of the Mount Holyoke Alumnae Association, and served two terms on a YMCA board. At the bottom of the 1937 survey under special hobbies, she wrote “nature and the woods and interior decorating.”¹⁹

By 1929 the Stewarts had returned to 2151 Commonwealth. That year the St. Paul city directory listed Clarence as an electrical engineer. Ethel was again on the list of members of the Women’s Circle of the Congregational Church and its Religious Education Committee. This would be a time when Ethel began to accomplish some of her personal priorities. As before, the three passions of her life were her family, her church, and local history.

Family and church were the focus for the next decade. She always made sure that there was time for the family. Her daughter Jean felt that Ethel “enjoyed doing things with and for them.” Almost every weekend they would have a picnic in the country, either in a pasture, by a lake, or a river. On one of these outings, their car broke down and while it was being repaired the whole family sat and watched an anthill being built. Jean said, “Mother would be riding along in the

car and say ‘Stop! We have to look at that flower.’”²⁰

Among the records at the Ramsey County Historical Society, there is the observation of Ethel’s minister, who said she “loved her home. There she was as meticulous about details as she was with facts. She loved every flower in her garden and knew its name and its ways.” The backyard wild flower garden she and her husband created still blossoms today.²¹

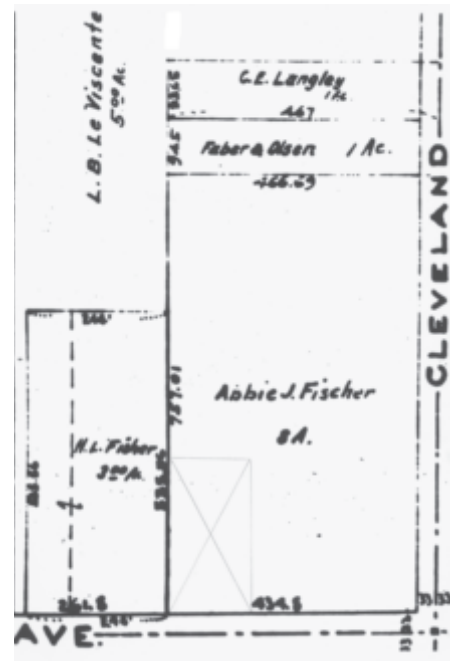
Ethel’s interest in plants went beyond her garden borders. She loved being outdoors and with family and friends and often walked along segments of an old Dakota trail and “even discovered several that had not been known as being native to the area until then.” One frequent companion felt that Ethel’s preoccupation with local history came from a belief that “people who settled here deserved to be recognized.”²²

Ethel was involved in her church’s youth activities. According to her daughter, she was especially interested in working with young boys who some observers “might have . . . called delinquent, but she only called them ram-bunctious.” She spent considerable time with these young people and got them

engaged in hands-on activities that included writing Biblical stories that they acted out with puppets they made. The boys also printed a small paper and, with the help of Clarence, the electrical engineer, made an electric Bible map.²³

History and St. Anthony Park

Ethel took a leadership role in her church’s golden jubilee celebration held in May 1936. She organized a “Pilgrimage over the Indian Trail.” The trek started at the Gibbs and Nelson Greenhouse, where Frank Gibbs, a son of Jane and Heman Gibbs, the pioneers who had first settled in Rose Township in 1849, gave a short talk about the family’s pioneer homestead. Then the group walked along the old Indian trail to the church’s former location at Raymond and Wheeler, while Ethel pointed out “places of historic interest along the route.”²⁴ Ethel and other members of the historical committee of the church’s Woman’s Union researched and wrote a performance for the golden anniversary celebration that included



A portion of the land plat of the area where Cleveland and Larpenteur Avenues intersect in Falcon Heights. The box that has been added in pencil in the lower left of Abbie J. Fisher’s property shows the location of the Ramsey County Historical Society’s purchase of the Gibbs home. A parcel of land that Lester LeVesconte owned is identified in the upper left-hand portion of the plat. RCHS archives.

nearly a hundred participants. They even issued a small booklet named *Followers of the Trail: A Pageant of Early Minnesota*. Although Ethel is not listed as the author of the booklet, she definitely was deeply involved in the research and writing because Ethel and her mother, along with two other members of the committee, took out the copyright on the publication.

Ethel even wrote her family into the performance. In one scene, Mr. and Mrs. Hall and their daughters, along with the Gibbs family, processed down the church's center aisle during the singing of a hymn. In another scene, after Mr. Hall gave a short report on the charter membership of the church, he was asked whether it was time for him to abandon the Baptist faith and join the local church. According to the script, he responded: "Your doughnuts and New England dinners would be enough of a drawing card. . . . I almost feel my 'hard shell' softening."²⁵

During the 1940s, Ethel did some of her most important community history work. She joined those who called for a gathering of old-timers and almost a hundred people turned out for the event on April 16, 1944. "So much enthusiasm was shown and so much valuable information obtained" that it was decided that "the time was ripe" to formally establish a group that would preserve the history of the area.

On May 20, 1945, the St. Anthony Park Area Historical Association (SAPAHA) was formed. Ethel was on the executive board and served as the group's official historian. Whatever joy she gained from being involved in the organizing of the SAPAHA must have been short lived, however, because a few months later her husband, Clarence, passed away on October 7, 1945 after a long illness.

The SAPAHA was active from the outset. For "Children's Week," in 1945, it arranged a display of old toys for the St. Anthony Park branch library. It included a miniature metal cook stove that Mrs. E. C. Hall had used as a child and by her children and grandchildren.²⁶ A year later the SAPAHA was able to get three early buildings in the area—including the Gibbs farmhouse—designated as "historic monuments." This initiative was said to be the first time a local historical group worked with the Minnesota



MRS. ALICE GIBBS NELSON AND GRANDMOTHER'S PIONEER MINNESOTA HOME
Gibbs house, built in 1867, incorporates earlier home built in 1854

PIONEER WOMAN HONORED

Jane Gibbs House To Become Museum

By ED CRANE

Minneapolis Tribune Staff Writer

Jane DeBow Gibbs was quite a woman—even in frontier Minnesota, when every woman had to be something of a heroine.

Even matched with those creatures of folklore—the child kidnaper and raised among Indians; the mother who took over and raised a family single-handed when her husband died; the woman whose courage and dead-ly she protected her family from Indians, blizzards and prairie fires.

Jane DeBow Gibbs did all these things—and she was no creature of fiction.

It was just 100 years ago this spring that she and her husband landed in St. Paul, from the same steamboat that brought the town news that Minnesota had been made a territory.

HOME TO BE MUSEUM

On Wednesday, her old home will be formally accepted by the St. Anthony Park Historical society and transformed into a museum.

The action will come just 13 days too late for Jane Gibbs' son, Frank, who died a week ago Thursday at the age of 86. But Jane Gibbs' grandchild, Mrs. Alice Gibbs Nelson, will be on hand.

The plain, frame house stands at the corner of Larpenteur and Cleveland avenues. Built in 1867, it incorporates a still earlier home, built in 1854.

In spring, when the snow melts, one can stand on the porch of the old farmhouse, and still see a shallow depression in the lawn. It is all that remains of the hut of logs and sod, half-buried in the ground, where Jane Gibbs and her husband spent that first winter of 1849.



Gibbs

UNWILLING IMMIGRANT

It was their first winter in Minnesota together—but it was far from Jane Gibbs' first experience with Minnesota winters.

She had come to Minnesota 3 years before, only 6 years old, a the victim of what is probably the strangest "kidnaping" in United States history.

The story began a year before in Batavia, N. Y.

The child's mother fell and fractured her skull. While her father went to seek help, he left Jim with a neighbor; but the 5-year old kept running away.

Then one day a missionary named Jedidiah Stevens arrived bound for the west with his wife and two sons. The Stevens' persuaded the neighbor to give up the child. When Peter DeBow came back he found the girl gone and took off in pursuit.

NEVER ENOUGH TO EAT

A few nights later a traveler going west stopped at an Ohio inn, fell into conversation with the man named Stevens and mentioned that he had that day passed on the trail a father in search of his daughter.

At that, the story goes, Stevens bundled his family into a covered wagon and, though it was 10 p.m. set off again westward.

Peter DeBow was forced to go.

Pioneer Women

Continued on Page Seven

This photo of Alice Gibbs Nelson standing in front of her grandmother's pioneer home accompanied a newspaper article announcing that the Ramsey County Historical Society has just purchased the farmhouse and about an acre of surrounding land. Photo from the Minneapolis Tribune, February 20, 1949. RCHS archives.

Historical Society, "to preserve early buildings in their community."²⁷ In the fall of 1948 Ethel Stewart shared "the fruits of her researches" on the career of Horace W.S. Cleveland, the architect who had laid out the first subdivision plan for St. Anthony Park in 1873 and later designed the Twin Cities park systems.

She had discovered that Cleveland had been buried in an unmarked grave at Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis. After she persuaded a local monument maker to donate a headstone for the pioneer architect, "Cleveland's hitherto forgotten and neglected grave" was dedicated

at a ceremony on October 17, 1948. At this ceremony, University of Minnesota historian Theodore Blegen gave the major address. Ethel then arranged for the publication of a booklet devoted to his talk and the dedication event. In it, Blegen said "Mrs. C. H. Stewart is primarily responsible for the awakened interest in the life and service of Cleveland."²⁸

The Fight to Preserve the Gibbs Farm

The successful fight to preserve the pioneer Gibbs Farm homestead that followed the dedication of the Cleveland



Lester LeVesconte, left, conveys the original Gibbs land grant to George Breck, president of RCHS. Others observing the presentation are, from left to right: Alice Gibbs Nelson, Ethel Stewart, and Dr. Harold Cater, director of the Minnesota Historical Society. Photo courtesy of RCHS.

headstone was probably the highpoint of Ethel's life. This story begins 1942. Shortly after Abbie J. Gibbs Fischer, a daughter of Jane and Heman Gibbs, died in November 1941, her husband, Rudolph G. Fischer, sold the farmhouse and surrounding land at Larpenteur and Cleveland Avenues in nearby Falcon Heights to the University of Minnesota. Because Ethel knew the Gibbs family from Church and was already familiar with the homestead and its history, she saw the sale as an opportunity to convert the old farmhouse into a museum and began working to interest people throughout the city in this project. As she would soon find, making the house into a museum would not happen quickly and it would prove to be a daunting task.

Ethel first tried to interest the Minnesota Historical Society into claiming the Gibbs house, but the Society pled lack of funds to take on the pioneer home. When that effort failed, she then persuaded an "old timers group" to send a resolution to the University Board of Trustees in April 1944 urging them "to set aside and preserve this residence as mark-

ing a historic point in the lives of the pioneers and to be used as a museum of pioneer home equipment." On behalf of the trustees, University President W. C. Coffey wrote to the group that the school "had no funds for the establishment or maintenance of such a museum," and if the house were to be saved it had to be moved. What followed was a lengthy struggle to save the historic landmark on its original site.

The impasse with the University lasted for a long time. Then on July 2, 1948, the SAPAHA received a disturbing notice from a University official. The letter said it had not heard from the group for four years and "no plan for the removal of the structure and its support as a museum has developed." Consequently the University "had come to decision to remove the structure" adding that "selling was not viewed with favor." Toward the end of this letter, the University official offered to make arrangements for the erection of a marker on the Gibbs site after the demolition of the house.

Ethel Stewart, however, had no interest in seeing a plaque at the edge of

a field. Her vision was to see the Gibbs home become a museum that would offer an authentic, hands-on interpretation of Minnesota history. Consequently the SAPAHA responded the next day by asking the University to delay any action on the house at least until October.²⁹

Then Lester B. LeVesconte, the son of Charles LeVesconte and Lillie Belle Gibbs LeVesconte, Jane and Heman's younger daughter, became involved in the negotiations. When he learned in September 1948 what the University was planning while on a visit to St. Paul, he began a media strategy to save the historic farm. "The fact remains that the university acquired about 12 acres on the pretense that the house would be preserved," he wrote in a letter to Ethel. "They would not have had any of that twelve acres on any other basis."³⁰ LeVesconte did not stop there, however, because he had already sent a telegram to a local attorney and the newspapers in which he stated that the University had interested Fischer in selling the Gibbs home and property "on representation that the house and surroundings would be preserved."³¹ Although Ethel Stewart mostly worked behind the scenes, she wrote and received letters from a variety of people whom she thought might be able to help save the farmhouse. She also met with Ramsey County officials and often called people with updates. "I keep thinking of all the work you put in on this," Lester wrote to her in November 1948, "and I sincerely hope that you do not let it wear you out or worry you."³²

Ethel and others then wrote a letter to the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners asking for financial support. It was, they stated, "urgent, lest it be too late," that this "emblematic agricultural landmark be now preserved." The situation was urgent because the University comptroller had set September 1 as the deadline "for [a] final decision."³³

About the same time, the leaders of the SAPAHA began looking at the cost of procuring a new location and moving the old Gibbs home, but Ethel still wanted the farmhouse to remain where it was. Along with others, she approached the Ramsey County Board for financial backing, but they were told they were not eligible for any monetary help be-



Ethel Stewart demonstrating how to churn butter at the opening of the Gibbs Farm Museum in 1954. Although she is wearing period dress that is appropriate to costumed interpretation, her modern wristwatch is also visible. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

cause the SAPAHA was not incorporated and it was not a countywide organization. SAPAHA leaders then sent a letter to members in which they stated that “in order to . . . receive financial aid from the county board, we should incorporate as a county organization immediately.” At special meeting on February 23, 1949, the members voted to incorporate and change their name to the Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS).³⁴

At the time, the University’s position on the fate of the Gibbs home seemed somewhat fluid and the quest to procure the farmhouse took a two-track approach. In October 1948, members of the Board of Regents were informed that negotiations were under way for an exchange of the Gibbs farmland for other property in that area. Less than six months later, however, the Regents passed a resolution that indicated a willingness to donate “the so-called Gibbs house . . . without cost,” if it was moved to a new site.³⁵

Based on the available records, Ethel Stewart may have been the first person who suggested to Lester LeVesconte that he could offer some of his own land to the University in a trade for the Gibbs property. Initially he assumed this meant a one-for-one exchange, but he later found

that the University wanted more than that. In September of 1949, Ethel wrote to another Gibbs descendant and told her that Lester was open-minded and “went so far as to authorize us to explore the *possibilities* [emphasis in the original] of exchanges with the University and the basis we are now suggesting of two acres.” Mrs. Stewart had talked to individual members of the Regents in “the last hope of saving the project” and in the fall of 1949 it looked like it was ready to happen.³⁶

LeVesconte, however, was unhappy with the plan to offer more land to the University. He wrote to Thomas Barnard, a leader of the historical society, “but since it seems to have broken the impasse, I am grateful.” He added: “If the regents do take favorable action, I could hardly stand in the way of progress.”³⁷

The tense negotiations continued and there was even an argument over who would pay for a fence. RCHS president C. P. Bull told LeVesconte that he was “not fully pleased with the attitude of the University authorities in this matter, but it is the best that can be done” and felt

they should close the deal on the “farm house shrine.”³⁸

Finally, on January 30, 1951, the University, Lester LeVesconte, and the leaders of the RCHS agreed on a three-way exchange and the parties signed a contract that spelled out the arrangements. RCHS bought around two acres of LeVesconte’s holdings and then deeded that land over to the University. The University then surrendered the Gibbs house and slightly over one acre of land to RCHS. As soon as that exchange was final, Lester then donated half of the sale price of the two acres that RCHS had just purchased from him back to RCHS. The University gained some land that it wanted; LeVesconte made sure the Gibbs farmhouse would be preserved by RCHS; and RCHS not only gained ownership of the house and slightly more than an acre of surrounding land, it also received some money that it could use for preservation work on the home.

Ethel’s work did not end with the acquisition of the Gibbs homestead. The farmhouse needed extensive repairs. Consequently she spent much of her time



In this photo from the opening of the Gibbs Farm Museum, Lester LeVesconte, left, and Alice Gibbs Nelson are seen looking at a book in the master bedroom of the Gibbs family’s farmhouse. Although the scene was probably posed by the photographer, it is doubly interesting because the charcoal drawings of Heman and Jane Gibbs that are originals can be seen hanging on the wall immediately behind the two costumed Gibbs descendants. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

at benefits and dinners to raise money and in asking churches for donations for preservation work. The Ramsey County Board was willing to help in these efforts, but there was a question about the legality of their contributing funds for the project. After some deliberation, the Minnesota Attorney General's office ruled that state law allowed a transfer of money up to \$5,000.

The RCHS request to the Board for aid came in just under that limit. RCHS received \$4,465 for rehabilitation of the farmhouse and \$480 for its operating expenses.³⁹ Ethel also began a drive to get authentic furnishings from the nineteenth century for the farmhouse. She wrote that "in the 'little house' will go only such things as are suitable to a simple dwelling of the period."⁴⁰ Two years later Ethel told a reporter: "We want . . . articles to go back as far as possible and we want all citizens interested in preserving the county's historic past to search their premises." Just before the official opening of the Gibbs Farm Museum, she was still looking for a small cook stove, rockers, kitchen utensils, and wooden wash-tub in addition to diaries, letters, records or other literature. She even let the newspaper include her home phone number.⁴¹

A Farmhouse Becomes a Museum

"Larpenteur Museum Opening a Success," read a headline in the *Rose Tribune* in October 1954. The article gave a short description of the event and estimated that on Sunday alone, 650 people had registered. The opening had been "under the capable direction of Mrs. C. H. Stewart," the newspaper reported. Initially the museum's hours were limited—Wednesday and Sunday from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. or by appointment. Interested individuals or groups could call Mrs. C. H. Stewart at Nestor 5669.⁴²

Ethel claimed to be a little nervous about the opening. In a Christmas card she sent to Lester LeVesconte's wife later that year, she admitted that "I've just shaken in my shoes all summer for fear we weren't headed right." Her concerns were allayed, however, when Theodore Blegen said that he had seen every county historical so-



Ethel Stewart, a conscientious and hard-working historian, was responsible for the organizing of the Ramsey County Historical Society and the establishment of the Gibbs Farm Museum. Photo courtesy of Lynn A. Kloek.

ciety in the state and Gibbs Farm "by all odds, is among the few best."⁴³

By the late 1950s, Ethel Stewart had accomplished a great deal. One of her admirers was Gareth Hiebert, a *St. Paul Dispatch* columnist. "Many times she and I would get into my car and go search out some little point of history," he wrote. "She and I retraced old St. Anthony Avenue, establishing it as the St. Paul end of the Red River ox cart trails." When Ethel was involved in any cause Hiebert said, she was "up to her elbows in its details. But in whatever she did, Mrs. Stewart walked 'as if with padded feet.' No fanfare, no applause, please."

The local journalist also wrote of her persistence, careful research, and use of the latest technologies far earlier than most historians. "As long ago as 1936, she began taking interview recordings from old county residents in order to get their stories before they died and the

facts went forever undocumented." He believed that "no single person in the county has more of its history in mind than Mrs. Stewart. What she hasn't committed to memory, is filed neatly—in tape recording and paper, in her home."⁴⁴

Being soft-spoken did not mean that Ethel Stewart was without passion. She expressed as much when admitting a fear of spring house-cleaning times, when so many old things were carelessly thrown out. "It is disturbing to realize what valuable documents are daily lost." She cast aside suggestions that groups should not try to keep too much, writing "It is safer to accept than regret."⁴⁵

Some were concerned that she pushed too hard and sometimes got upset when people did not care about saving the past. "But she usually won them over with her grasp of facts and pleasant manner. Always she had an infectious smile to win hearts, a body that possessed great endurance, a mind that was years ahead of us all," the minister of her church stated. "Here was determination and resourcefulness coupled with sound judgment. Her imprint is upon this church, this community, this city."⁴⁶

Ethel began having heart problems in the 1950s, but even as her health was failing, she remained dedicated to her mission. She had a major decline in the spring of 1959, but she recovered and then "made fine progress through the months following her illness" and "was again busy with her historical work."⁴⁷ In the fall of 1959, Ethel had another setback and was not able to attend the RCHS annual meeting. Still, she was elected an officer. The president of the group reported "I am very glad to report that our creator and historian, Mrs. C. H. Stewart, is improving in health. She sends her best to you all."⁴⁸

But Ethel passed away on October 7, 1959, at the age of 78. Her daughter Jean said, "Up until the very last week of her life," she was still "doing things for the Ramsey County Historical Society."⁴⁹ Seven days before she died, Ethel called Gareth Hiebert on the phone and suggested that he report on the progress made at the Gibbs Farm Museum and to help find a caretaker for the site. They were looking for somebody "who has a sensitive

feeling about . . . what the history of Ramsey County means to the people.”⁵⁰

There were many tributes to this hands-on historian. Russell Fridley, director of the Minnesota Historical Society, said that “among Mrs. Stewart’s beliefs was an abiding conviction that an appreciation of history was urgently important to one’s existence” and “even in ill health her interest retained a remarkable consistency and vitality at all times.”⁵¹ The minister of Ethel’s church summed up her accomplishments: “Few people ever became so enmeshed in the ramifications of their work as she did in her church’s history. . . . What she did for her church she also did in a larger way for the St. Anthony Park

Historical Association and later for the Ramsey County Historical Society.”⁵²

Today a simple headstone marks Ethel Hall Stewart’s grave in Roselawn Cemetery. She rests next to her husband and near other family members. Although Ethel Stewart may be gone, the Gibbs Farm Museum (renamed in 2001 the Gibbs Museum of Pioneer and Dakota Life) and the Ramsey County Historical Society, both of which she was instrumental in creating, carry on her legacy of community history. Before her death, she shared her goals and suggested operating guidelines for future generations. “To be of real value,” she wrote:

a county historical museum should not merely be a variation of many others . . . scattered

all across the country. Instead it should make some significant contribution to the understanding of the changes in life, habits and people within its own area. It is hoped that such will be the case in the unique presentation of the evolution of pioneer farm building in Ramsey County.⁵³

Steven C. Trimble is especially grateful to Lynn A. Kloek, Ethel Stewart’s granddaughter, for all her help in supplying information about and photographs of her grandmother. Steve is a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History and a member of the Society’s Editorial Board. His most recent article was in the Fall 2010 issue in which he wrote about three St. Paul neighborhoods that worked.

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Summer nights at Porky's were a University Avenue tradition for nearly six decades. Ray Truelson opened the restaurant in 1953, and his future bride, Nora, began working there a few years later. For anyone who loved cars, cruising the avenue, and stopping at Porky's was the perfect way to spend an evening. The Truelson family sold the property in 2011 to Episcopal Homes, which is planning an expansion of its senior housing campus. Photo courtesy of Nora Truelson. For a nostalgic look at University Avenue as the center of the universe for car buyers for fifty years, see Peter B. Myers's article on page 13.