

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Spring

1971

Volume 8

Number 1

Ramsey County History

Published by the RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

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ON THE COVER: The officers quarters at Fort Ripley had long since been deserted when Edward A. Bromley, the Minneapolis photographer and collector published this brooding picture of the old fort in 1906. He may have taken the picture himself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Unless otherwise indicated, pictures used in this issue are from the audiovisual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The editor is indebted to Eugene Becker and Dorothy Gimmestad, of the state historical society's audiovisual staff, for their help.



The style was fussy, the taste ornate, the work interminable in washing, ironing, dusting, scrubbing, and polishing the typical late nineteenth century home, as pictured here.

Wife, Mother—Doing the Work of Six 'For the Sake of Being Supported'

BY BONNIE ELLIS

THE phrase, "the good old days," may mean something different to each person who utters it, but chiefly it carries with it a nostalgic yearning for a simpler time.

What a pity, then, that those who actually lived those years, particularly the women, didn't know their's *were* the "good old days." Why would they? Anyone who looks back with any degree of honesty will think of wood-burning cook stoves on hot summer days, outdoor plumbing, no vacuum cleaners but brooms, instead, that stirred up more dust than they swept — as well as the smell of home-baked bread and the light of the kerosene lamp.

Survivors of an earlier era tend to remember, instead, how very hard they worked.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Bonnie Ellis is a former newspaper reporter and a graduate of the University of Minnesota where she majored in journalism and foods and nutrition. She was woman's editor of the former North Suburban Area newspaper, now part of Sun newspapers, and then became an information writer for the state department of agriculture.

In many essentials, life for women in the growing cities did not differ greatly from that of women on the farms or in the small towns.

"Wood or tin laundry tubs hung in the woodshed over the washbench," wrote a St. Paul woman, Polly Caroline Bullard, in her reminiscences. "In summer the washing was done there — in winter these utensils were brought into the kitchen.

"OUR KITCHEN and laundry soap came in large hard yellow cakes. Rose Queen is the name I remember on the wrappers. Soft soap came in wooden pails, and Mother made soap in summer from fat scraps saved over the winter and mixed with lye. It was certainly a strong cleaning agent for it nearly took the skin off one's hands."¹

When spring blossomed out on St. Paul's tranquil residential streets in the 1880's and 1890's, it meant the flies would be moving

in. Unscreened windows had to be draped with mosquito netting. Sometimes netting was draped about the beds instead.

While spring meant flowers and sunshine, it often meant mud, as well — tracked in from lanes, roads, even city streets and walks that often were still dirt-surfaced, or paved with brick or stone that sank into the muddy ground beneath.

It's not surprising, then, that one formidable spring chore was cleaning the carpet. It was swept with a straw broom, after wet newspapers or tea leaves had been put down carefully to soak up dust and lint. Then the carpet tacks were pulled out and the carpet hung outside for its yearly beating.

Polly Bullard later recalled the wonderful cool feeling of the bare floors, but she complained that her knees were sore from kneeling on the floor as she tacked the clean carpet back into place.² Straw matting then was spread over the carpet to protect it through the summer.

ANOTHER SPRING cleaning chore was dismantling the heating stove and storing it in the woodshed. The shed often was attached to the summer kitchen, a separate room, usually off the kitchen and containing ice box, cook stove and work table. Here most of the family cooking was done during the warm months of the year so that the main part of the house could be kept as cool as possible.

Sometimes the summer kitchen also became a kind of summer sitting room used only for "more elegant processes of cookery and housekeeping," according to Polly Bullard.³

Women usually had help, of course. There were the children who had assigned household chores; many homes sheltered at least one older, unattached "female relation," and hired girls, maids, or servants, as they were variously called (depending mainly upon one's social status, it seems) were not too difficult to find. But the "woman of the house" was in charge and that was a full-time job.

She did not lack for advice. The most genteel of such advice came from the many household writers of her time. One of them, Catharine Beecher, believed that women should be womanly and should know how to manage women's affairs. Her famous

book, *The American Woman's Home*, was written with her even more famous sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and it told women how to do practically everything about the house.⁴

ANOTHER BOOK of the day was called *The Buckeye Cookbook*, written by Estelle W. Wilcox and published by Webb Publishing Company of St. Paul. It was dedicated "to those plucky housewives who master their work instead of allowing it to master them."⁵

Whether "those plucky housewives" actually had time to read — to tap these founts of knowledge — is anyone's guess, considering what they had to accomplish in a day. Someone had to get a fire going in the furnace, or at least in the kitchen cookstove so the kitchen would be warm enough for dressing in the dark hours before dawn. That automatically eliminated sleeping late. Another deterrent was the fact that, once the bed was made and the elaborate, starched pillow shams carefully put in place, no one dared lie down on the bed.

Getting up early thus was considered essential. Coffee was not available until the cookstove was hot enough to boil the water to make it. Cold water usually was abundantly available from the cistern located under the kitchen floor or just outside the kitchen door, or from a pump either in the yard or attached to the kitchen sink.

WATER HAD to be heated either on top of the stove or in the reservoir attached to the kitchen stove. On wash day, more water had to be heated for the laundry. Soap often was home-made, although Ivory, Rose Queen and other commercial soaps were available for women who could afford them. As Polly Bullard has commented, these soaps did not exactly leave women with the skin-you-love-to-touch.

"Annie and I did our washing," she noted in her diary. "My hands are all eaten up. They look and feel dreadfully."⁶

Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe offered women the following plan for their week:

"Monday, with some of the best housekeepers, is devoted to preparing for the labors of the week. Any extra cooking, the purchasing of articles to be used during the week, the assorting of clothes for the



wash, and mending such as would otherwise be incurred — these, and similar items belong to this day. Tuesday is devoted to washing, Wednesday to ironing. On Thursday, the ironing is finished off, the clothes are folded and put away and all articles which need mending are put in the mending basket and attended to. Friday is devoted to sweeping and house-cleaning. On Saturday, and especially the last Saturday of every month, every department is put in order; the casters and table furniture regulated, the pantry and cellar inspected, the trunks, drawers and closets arranged, and every thing about the house put in order for Sunday.”⁷

Ironing was both an art and a day-long task. One Ramsey County woman vividly recalls her mother’s description of ironing the ruffles and flounces on starched petticoats and shirtwaists of the women in the family, as well as the tiny tucks and pleats of the men’s shirts.

BECAUSE THE kitchen stove had to provide a slow, steady heat for keeping the irons hot all day, many thrifty housewives put it to double use by baking such dishes as “Poor Man’s Rice Pudding.” Its recipe exhibits touching faith in the housewife’s culinary talent:

POOR MAN’S RICE PUDDING

“Take quart of milk, half cup rice, salt to taste, cup sugar and teaspoon lemon or

There must have been something amusing about housework, at least on the day sometime during the 1890’s when these smiling girls were photographed in the kitchen of a St. Paul home.

vanilla (some add tablespoon butter); place in oven at once, stirring occasionally while rice is swelling. Bake quite slowly two hours or more. It should be cream-like when done, and must be taken immediately from the oven. A good test is to tip dish; if rice and milk move together it is done; if not sufficiently cooked the milk will run; if neither move it is done too much.”⁸

Cleaning day was not without certain basic aids still used today in one form or another. Twenty Mule Team borax was available, and so was sal soda. With these, plus rags, a broom and a wet mop, a housewife attacked her house, perhaps carrying along in her apron pocket a notebook on how to deal with such problems as removing tar (rub thoroughly with clean lard and wash with soap and warm water) or black ink spots (use ripe tomatoes).

ONCE A WEEK there was the ritual of the bath. Vast amounts of water were heated to fill the cramped tin bathtub set down in the kitchen or bedroom. During the winter, bathing was a challenge because of lack of heat, little privacy, and family modesty. It was, however, such a highlight of the week that Polly Bullard rarely failed to note in her diary each Saturday: “Took my bath.”

Then there were the daily chores. Kerosene lamps had to be filled, their wicks trimmed and their chimneys washed. Wash-bowl pitchers had to be filled and slop pails and chamber pots emptied.

"The care of wash stands and their crockery was another tedious daily task," wrote Polly Bullard. "One carried two large pails from room to room. Into one was emptied the contents of the slop jar and pot. In the other was soapy water and cloths to wash them. Careful housewives aired these receptacles, too, in inconspicuous places.

"My mother, to her own amusement, found herself one day absent-mindedly placing the 'chamber,' as we called it, on the pantry window sill, and a freshly baked custard pie in the cubby hole of the wash stand!"⁹

Within the popular household books, women found advice on the Christian family, ventilation, home decoration, health, exercise, cleanliness, clothing, charity, child care, care of the sick and wounded, care of the aged, gardening, and the Christian neighborhood.

Water usually was hauled in from outside. This is a hydraulic ram used by a farm wife — whose household chores often were not much different from those of many city women.



PERHAPS SOME of the best advice, however, had to do with the art of cooking. Coal and wood stoves could be unpredictable where the degree of heat was concerned, but they were versatile. Some models allowed women to "keep seventeen gallons of water hot at all hours, bake pies and puddings . . . heat flat irons . . . boil a tea kettle and one pot . . . bake bread in the oven, and cook a turkey in the roaster!¹⁰" All at the same time.

With all this, she needed instructions and recipes, since she prepared what today seems to be an enormous amount of food.

Here is an example of the bill of fare a Ramsey County housewife might have prepared during one week in May:

MONDAY: Breakfast — Breakfast rolls, broiled porterhouse steak, hominy croquettes. Dinner — Chicken soup, chicken dressed with egg sauce, whole potatoes, spinach, young lettuce and onions, sweet pickles, orange float, caramel cake. Supper — Cold chicken and currant jelly, cold rolls, snow custard, cake.

TUESDAY: Breakfast — Fried frogs, fried potatoes, corn gems, scrambled eggs. Dinner — Beefsteak soup, beefsteak pudding steamed potatoes, mashed turnips, slaw, almond custard, jelly. Supper — Plain bread pates of cold chicken, hot shortcake and jam.

WEDNESDAY: Breakfast — Graham bread, veal cutlets, fricasseed potatoes. Dinner — Broiled ham with potatoes, canned-corn pudding, fried parsnips, pickles, hot pie of canned peaches, cake. Supper — Graham toast, cold sliced ham, hot rusk, stewed fruit.

THURSDAY: Breakfast — Sally Lunn, veal cutlets, potato cakes. Dinner — Baked stuffed heart, potatoes a la pancake, turnips, canned corn, pickled eggs, cup custard, cake. Supper — Light biscuit, cold sliced heart, bread fritters with sugar.

FRIDAY: Breakfast — French rolls, broiled fish if salt, fried if fresh, fried raw potatoes, tomato sauce. Dinner — Baked or broiled fresh fish, mashed potatoes, canned peas or beans, lettuce, onions, estelle pudding, jelly tarts. Supper — Cold rolls, bologna sausage sliced, steamed crackers, cake, preserved fruit.

SATURDAY: Breakfast — Batter cakes, broiled chops, scrambled eggs, potato risoles. Dinner — Saturday bean soup, broiled beefsteak, spinach, potato puffs, pickled beets,

half-hour pudding with sauce, oranges and cake. Supper — Toasted bread, cold tongue sliced, hot buns and marmalade.

SUNDAY: Breakfast — Baked beans and Boston brown bread, omelette with parsley. Dinner — Vermicelli soup, baked shad or croquettes of asparagus, spring cresses, dressed lettuce, grape jelly, custard pie, cake. Supper — Plain bread, canned salmon, cold buns, jelly, cream sandwiches.¹¹

Here is one old recipe for Vegetable Soup: "After boiling a soup bone or a piece of beef until done, add to the broth boiling water to make the amount of soup wanted and when boiling again add a large handful of cabbage cut fine as for slaw, a half pint of tomatoes, canned or fresh; peel and slice and add three large or four small onions, two or three potatoes and some use a half teacup of dried or half pint of green corn (if dried it should be soaked). Let boil from half to three-quarters of an hour; if thickening is wished, stir an egg or yolk with a large spoonful milk and teaspoon flour, and put in five or ten minutes before taking off; this makes it very rich. Serve with crackers."¹²

As if the days weren't busy enough, Beecher and Stowe wrote of a woman's role: "She has a husband, to whose particular tastes and habits she must accommodate herself; she has children whose health she must guard, whose physical constitutions she must study and develop, whose temper and habits she must regulate, whose principles she must form, whose pursuits she must guide. She has constantly changing domestics, with all varieties of temper and habits, whom she must govern, instruct and direct; she is required to regulate the finances of the domestic state, and constantly to adapt expenditures to the means and to the relative claims of each department. She has the direction of the kitchen, where ignorance, forgetfulness, and awkwardness are to be so regulated that the various operations shall each start at the right time and all be in completeness at the same given hour. She has the claims of society to meet, visits to receive and duties of hospitality to sustain. She has the poor to relieve; benevolent societies to aid; the schools of her children to inquire and decide about; the

care of the sick and the aged; the nursing of infancy; and the endless miscellany of odd items, constantly recurring in a large family."¹³

More advice was offered by Marion Harland in her *Common Sense in the Household. A Manual of Practical Housewifery*:

"Study method, and economy of time and strength, no less than of materials. I take it for granted that you are too intelligent to share in the vulgar prejudice against labor-saving machines. A raisin seeder costs a trifle in comparison with the time and patience required to stone fruit in the old way. A good egg beater is a treasure. So with farina kettles, syllabub churns, apple-corers, potato-peelers and slicers, clothes wringers and sprinklers and the like. Most of these are made of tin — and therefore cheap and easily cleaned."¹⁴

And lastly, there was Marion Harland's comment that it was "the mistake of Christian civilization to educate girls into a love of science and literature and then condemn them to the routine of a domestic drudge."¹⁵

And the tenth stanza of "The Housekeeper's Soliloquy:" "Wife, mother, nurse, seamstress, cook, housekeeper, chambermaid, laundress, dairy-woman, and scrub generally doing the work of six. For the sake of being supported."¹⁶

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THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.