

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Spring, 1991
Volume 26, Number 1



Frederick McGhee and his family on the porch of their home at 665 University Avenue, St. Paul, around 1918. He was among the African-American business and professional men and women who helped nurture, within a gracious community, several generations of achievers. See article beginning on page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Executive Director
Daniel J. Hoisington

Editor
Virginia Brainard Kunz

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Gregory K. Page
Chairman of the Board

William S. Fallon
President

Joanne Englund
First Vice President

Anne Cowie Wilson
Second Vice President

Robert O. Straughn
Secretary

James P. Wicker
Treasurer

Thomas Boyd, John Costello, Deborah Gelbach, Joan Grzywinski, Lorraine Hammerly, Liz Johnson, John M. Lindley, Frank Marzitelli, Dr. Thomas B. Mega, Laurie Murphy, Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Marvin Pertzik, Mark Stein, Laurie Zenner.

EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chairman; Thomas H. Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Charlton Dietz, Thomas J. Kelley, Arthur McWatt, Dr. Thomas B. Mega.

RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Hal Norgard, chairman
Commissioner Diane Ahrens
Commissioner John Finley
Commissioner Ruby Hunt
Commissioner Duane McCarty
Commissioner Don Salverda
Commissioner Warren Schaber

Terry Schutten, executive director, Ramsey County

Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 1991, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher.

On the Cover: The first black criminal lawyer west of the Mississippi, Frederick McGhee, shown with his home and family, was a prominent Democrat and Catholic in St. Paul in the early 1900s.

Acknowledgements: Photographs on pages 5, 7 (James K. Hilyard), 8 (J. Frank Wheaton), 10 (Owen Howell), 11 (W. T. Francis' house), 13 (the Vass house), and 14 (the Adams house) are reprinted from the September 12, 1910, Quarto-Centennial celebration edition of *The Appeal*. The photograph on page 17 is from A. A. Heckman's private files. The photograph on page 30 of the Bishop house as it appeared in 1980 is from the Ramsey County Historical Society collections. All other photographs are from the audio-visual collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 26, Number 1 Spring, 1991

CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 St. Paul's Resourceful African-American Community
Arthur C. McWatt
- 16 A National Tragedy—Homeless and Jobless in the 1930s
Virginia Brainard Kunz
- 24 A Minnesotan Abroad—Alexander Wilkin and the Queen
Ronald M. Hubbs
- 26 Books, Etc.
Daniel John Hoisington
- 27 A Matter of Time
- 30 What's Historic About This Site?
The Woodland Park Historic District
David V. Taylor

Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a grant from the Grotto Foundation and a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr.

A Message from the Editorial Board

Dan Hoisington, the Society's executive director, is fond of saying: "We're all historians." Nowhere is this more evident than when we go through family letters, diaries or old photos seeking to reconstruct some family history. The theme of the Society's current "Have Lunch With an Historian" weekly lecture series is "Memories, Diaries and Letters."

In conjunction with this, the Editorial Board of *Ramsey County History* invites readers who would like to share an especially meaningful letter, diary, photo or artifact dealing with the history of Ramsey County to contact our office at 222-0701. We'll help you determine what bit of history your letter or photo contains.

We're also interested in your comments on articles we've published in *Ramsey County History*. We're inviting you to bring a bag lunch and participate in a new discussion series based on these articles. The first is set for 12-1 p.m. April 20 in Courtroom 408, Landmark Center. We'll invite some of our writers to attend.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

A Matter of Time

1851 140 YEARS AGO

► St. Paul has had long experience with cultural diversity. In its earliest years, Yankees, French, Germans, Irish, Scandinavians and Native Americans all came together in the river-side village to begin to work—and celebrate—together. March 17, 1851, marked the first St. Patrick's Day in St. Paul. It was described in the March 20 edition of the *Minnesota Pioneer*:

"The Sons of the Emerald Isle, and our citizens generally, joined in an impromptu celebration of the anniversary of St. Patrick on Monday last . . . During the forenoon the Stars and Stripes were elevated to the peak of the liberty pole in front of the Central House; but, unfortunately, the wind being high, the tall mast was broken off some twenty feet from the ground. The flag was then raised upon the stump and a salute fired. Speeches were then made . . ."

"As late as one o'clock it was proposed that the celebration be continued by a supper at Barney Rogers. Notwithstanding the short notice, Barney was on hand and set to work with true Hibernian energy. At seven o'clock a large company had assembled and were invited to partake of a repast that would have done honor to Barney or anyone else with weeks of preparation. At the supper table, sentiments were offered and responses made . . . The toasts all being extempore, we of course have no copies for publication.

"After supper was over, a procession was formed, headed by a band of music and numbering some 300, which marched through the principal streets visiting the residences of many of our citizens. The procession returned to the scene of the evening's festivities about nine o'clock where numerous gentlemen . . . made addresses appropriate to the occasion. The company dispersed

at an early hour, highly pleased with the first celebration of St. Patrick's Day in Minnesota. May there be many such."

► Some ninety cabin passengers, most of them immigrants to Minnesota, had arrived in St. Paul on the *Nominee* by mid-May. "It is impossible," commented the *Pioneer*, "that some of them should not have been disappointed. One man refused to go ashore at all, saying that he could see enough from the boat to satisfy him that St. Paul was not even half as much a place as St. Louis."

1891 100 YEARS AGO

► The early 1890s were a period of economic euphoria. This was the boom that preceded the Depression of 1893—the most serious the nation had known before the Great Depression of the 1930s. "St. Paul was never more solidly prosperous than now," declared an editorial in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in April, 1891. Brimming with optimism, the editorial described the jobbing trade as "never so active or so large," with the spring trade showing a large increase in volume.

It then ticked off the growth in industry and manufacturing: the Bohn Manufacturing Company had added a box factory, a \$35,000 to \$50,000 investment; John Martin Lumber Company had hired ten more men and built a new building; St. Paul Foundry had three new buildings; St. Paul Bridge and Bolt Works had increased its foundry capacity by 30 percent, its work force by 25 percent; Kenny Brothers, another boiler manufacturer, had doubled its work force and capacity; St. Paul Wire Works had doubled its electric power; Lindeke, Warner and Schurmeier's sales were up 25 percent and so was its staff; Finch, Van Slyke and Company's manufacturing capacity was up one-third with fifty more machines.

Much of this industrial boom was

related to the surge of the railroads across the northern tier of the United States. The Northern Pacific had reached the West Coast in 1883 and the last spike would be driven in James J. Hill's Great Northern in 1893. With the railroads came farmers who needed machinery to break the northern prairie soil and merchants in raw new towns who would supply them and their families with food, tools, furniture and other necessities.

Some of those necessities might have included drugs and even cigars. Kuhles and Stock, cigar manufacturers in St. Paul, reported that with sales up 25 percent, it had increased its workers by twenty-five percent. In what is now Park Square Court in Lowertown, Noyes Bros. & Cutler, Drugs, doubled its manufacturing capabilities. The plat of Lake Elmo was published, and readers were urged to "Select a Choice Lot . . . while Prices are Low."

► Out in Pembina, North Dakota, one of the bloodiest tragedies of the region was enacted at Robert Irwin's house in nearby Bowesmont when Thomas McConnell was accused of seducing Fred Bartlett's sister under promise of marriage, then marrying another woman. Bartlett shot McConnell five times, mortally wounding him, then shot Irwin in the abdomen. An hour later, Irwin blew his brains out, according to newspaper accounts. All were well-to-do neighboring farmers and all, except for Bartlett, were married.

► There were lighter moments, if not for Henry Votel, then for readers of newspaper accounts of his activities. Votel was arrested for stealing a bay horse and a two-wheeled cart by the simple expedient of untying the horse from the post where its owner, Christian Miss, had tied it at Dr. Walther's office at Eighth and Sibley Streets. Experience seems to have been a poor teacher in Votel's case. This was his second offense. He'd been arrest-

ed on a similar charge six months earlier.

►The newspapers, that April of 1891, were full of ads for Hood's Sarsaparilla, a seemingly magic elixir that "overcomes that tired, dull feeling" and "made me a new man," an Iowa man proclaimed. For \$1, readers could buy 100 doses of this "spring medicine" that would purify the blood, invigorate the whole system, tone the stomach and create an appetite. Its ingredients? According to the fine print on the bottle, carbonated water, sweeteners, citric acid, vanilla, carmel and sarsaparilla flavoring and benzorate of soda.

►Professor John Fiske, philosopher, historian and "one of the foremost thinkers of the country" whose "patriotism is as keen as his intelligence" was to lecture at the high school building on the "Discovery of America by the Norsemen."

1916 75 YEARS AGO

►A far-off echo of 1991 events appeared in dispatches from El Paso, Texas, which painted a grim picture as the United States army prepared to launch the "Mexican incursion," the pursuit of Pancho Villa across the Mexican-American border. Reports described the punitive expedition's site for entrance into Mexico as a dreary desolate plain swept by sandstorms, with no vegetation except for cactus, and populated chiefly by coyotes, prairie dogs and "lonely half-civilized ranchmen."

The troops, according to the *St. Paul Dispatch*, would have to carry their own provisions, depend on their base camp for water, and cross the desert for thirty miles before reaching the lowest range of the Sierra Madre mountains. There were no roads; the only track through the desert was an ancient "smugglers' trail." The desert expedition had been set off by Villa's raid of Columbus, New Mexico. An American woman, Mrs. Maud Hawke Wright, had been captured by Villa in the raid and held prisoner for nine days.

►German threats to sink any ships entering the war zone of the eastern Atlantic and carrying arms to Germany's enemies, drew an indignant letter to the editor: "Reckless Americans will continue

to cross the ocean on ships of their own choosing, not the Kaiser's choosing. No one, least of all the Kaiser, proposes to dictate to Americans as to the kind of ships they travel on. No one except relatives and acquaintances of those who wish to travel would be much concerned whether they took passage on armed belligerent ships or not, so long as the parties traveling on belligerent ships did so at their own risk."

►The next day the *Patria*, a French steamer with twenty-nine Americans and an American consul on board, was attacked by a submarine off the Algerian coast. This torpedo missed, but a year earlier the British ship, *Lusitania*, had been torpedoed and sunk off the Irish coast with a loss of 1,198 lives.

►America was not yet at war in Europe, but St. Paul women were sewing for the wounded of the French army. Every Monday afternoon a group of women met at the home of Mrs. Charles W. Ames, 501 Grand Avenue. Mrs. Ames was

chairman of the St. Paul branch of the American Fund for the French Wounded and her home was stocked, according to the *St. Paul Dispatch*, with surgical supplies. Other women who were "opening their homes," as the popular phrase went, for French charity were Mrs. Robert B. Olds, 710 Linwood Avenue; Mrs. Roger B. Shepard, 496 Portland; Mrs. James H. Skinner, 385 Portland; Mrs. J. G. Pyle, 436 Holly; Mrs. S. S. Hesselgrove, 1009 Lincoln; Mrs. William M. Carson, 482 Holly; and Esther Tiffany, 890 Goodrich.

►Reflecting the martial spirit of those pre-war years in America, the Golden Rule's Seventh Street arcade exhibited manikins of European warriors. Sixty models, the store's ad proclaimed, "faithfully portray rulers, famous men and soldiers at war in Europe." No women. Otherwise, the store also offered spring suits for women and misses at \$25 and Milan Straw hats for little girls at \$2.95.

►Out in the Midway district, a "mystery



Lake Elmo, circa 1895, several years after its plat was published and readers were urged to "select a choice lot." Here, crews are preparing for a shell race.



Evacuation from a flooded house in St. Paul. High water repeatedly flooded low-lying areas along the Mississippi.

craft" was sighted by Hamline Avenue residents. Once more a flying "airship" has visited St. Paul, the *Dispatch* noted. This early version of a UFO crossed the Hamline district to the north of the city. It had, reports said, two lights, one red and one white. Residents watched the lights for more than an hour before they vanished to the northwest. There was speculation that it might have been a "revolving illuminated balloon."

1941 50 YEARS AGO

►Once again, America was not yet at war in Europe or the Pacific, but President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared in March that "business as usual must end," the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported. Calling for a "total effort" to place the "implements of warfare" in the hands of nations resisting aggression, he warned the country that sacrifice and inconvenience would be required for "total victory" over dictators. Americans, he said, must prepare for lower profits and longer hours of labor. In a speech "bristling with determination to eliminate Nazism as a world force," he hailed the passage by Congress of the Lend-lease bill that "ended any attempts at appeasement in our land."

►The St. Paul and Minneapolis newspapers were themselves bristling with war news as Britain, preparing for invasion by German forces, struck hard at "invasion bases" on the continent and girded for defense at home. British children evacuated to Scotland sent thank-you letters to St. Paul school children who had sent over packets of cocoa. And more than 100,000 men, the vanguard of 300,000 British imperial troops, landed in Greece to attack the Nazis—a campaign that would result in a crushing defeat for the British. Russia was described as unprepared for war.

►A full page of photos and articles was headlined, "All-Out Air Attacks Crackle Over Europe — Our Navy Holds the Trumps!" "Full steam ahead, the U. S. Navy races toward some unknown rendezvous with destiny," said a story datelined Washington and accompanied by a photograph of a formation of battleships. "Fire and death rain from the skies on British men-of-war; the waters washing England are churned by submarines and made perilous by torpedoes, mines and bombs; cannon echo across the Mediterranean, and war clouds glower over the Far Pacific. But the U. S. Navy sails swiftly on, guns ready but silent, a monster still at peace." Some of those battle-

ships would meet their "unknown destiny" eight months later at Pearl Harbor.

►In the meantime, eleven St. Paul Marine reservists who had been called into active service were among a force sent from San Diego to American Samoa. Their assignment: protect a major United States refueling and naval base there, "should Japan move south."

►War and threat of war, and the resulting close U. S.-Canadian collaboration spurred hopes for an international highway that would link the United States with Alaska. To the south, Panama Canal defenses were strengthened.

►All seemed calm in St. Paul. The society section of the *Pioneer Press* carried page after page of engagement and wedding announcements. St. Thomas and St. Catherine college students celebrated St. Patrick's Day. The three-story Grace building at Seventh and Wabasha Streets was under construction by the Catholic diocese of St. Paul.

►The National Youth Administration's aviation work experience school opened in the old O'Donnell Shoe Company building at Tenth and Sibley Streets. The six-month course was to train young men for work in airplane factories and on flying fields.

►The grand opening of the new \$250,000 Prom ballroom on March 26 featured two popular Midwest dance bands—Royce Stoenner's from Kansas City and Paul Moorhead's "slide" band from Omaha. And at the Hotel Lowry, Dick Shelton's orchestra included two young vocalists.

1966 25 YEARS AGO

►The Gemini 8 space craft was forced down by a bucking, pitching target rocket, but astronauts Neil Armstrong and David Scott made a near-perfect splash-down in the Pacific. They were fished from the sea by the destroyer *U.S.S. Leonard F. Mason*.

►The St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority approved working drawings and specifications for the final plant to locate in the upper levee renewal area.

A Matter of Time to page 31



Horse and buggy at the Minnesota State fairgrounds in 1903. Karal Ann Marling evokes once again the glories of the fair in her book, Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair, reviewed on page 26.

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

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

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul MN
Permit #3989