

# History

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*St. Paul in celebration, 1924. This photo from the Gibson-Wright collection shows St. Paul during the years of labor turmoil that followed World War I. The 1880s city hall-county courthouse is on the left, with the St. Paul Athletic Club beyond it in this view looking east down Fourth Street. See W. Thomas White's account, beginning on page 4, of the 1922 Shopmen's Strike in the Northwest.*



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## A Message from the Editorial Board

**T**he Spring issue of our magazine inaugurates a new feature that focuses on the personal experiences of individuals growing up in St. Paul or Ramsey County. Willard (Sandy) Boyd, who grew up in St. Anthony Park as the son of Dr. Willard Boyd, director of the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus, has written the first memoir that begins this new feature.

A graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School, Sandy Boyd was president of the University of Iowa from 1969 to 1981. He is now president of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

Boyd writes about his youth in Ramsey County during the Great Depression. We learn first hand, for example, what the great droughts of 1934 and 1936 meant to him and his friends. Editorial Board members hope that others will share their experiences with our readers.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board



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## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

# Years of Depression, Gangsters, Good Schools

### *Willard L. (Sandy) Boyd*

**B**orn in Midway Hospital in 1927, I grew up in the years between the two world wars, in that enclave between the two cities, St. Anthony Park. Those were years of depression, gangsters and good schools.

St. Anthony Park was a salaried neighborhood where people had to be close with their money, but they were not really poor. Maybe a few families were on the economic edges, but we were all alike. We were white European Americans, mostly Protestant, and we lived apart from the problems confronting St. Paul as a whole, as well as the nation.

My most vivid memories of the depression were the weather. It was providential that the weather should be so bad during the depression and that I grew up in the inferno of the great droughts of 1934 and 1936. The western dust blew and blew and blew, and it came into our houses in St. Anthony Park. We kept the windows closed, and we spent our time in the basement with electric fans gently oscillating over tubs of ice.

We slept outside in the backyard a lot those summers. Now I do not know how we dared, but it never occurred to us to be afraid. St. Paul was not all that safe, because John Dillinger was living there while the police looked the other way. Dillinger, however, was not interested in the slim pickings of our neighborhood. When another gang finally got the St. Anthony Park State Bank one day, it was the biggest thing that happened there in the years between the wars.

The winters were as bad as the summers in the 1930s. They would get down to 24 degrees below zero, and I am not talking

about the sissy wind chill factor, either. Each fall my mother would buy me corduroy knickers and boots that laced up to my knees. They had to be lubricated with Neets-foot oil. When I would start to school in those new knickers, there would be a "swish, swish, swish" every time I walked. By the end of the year you couldn't hear me coming anymore, the knickers were so thinly worn.

My grade school, Gutttersen, was three doors away from where I lived at 2227 Hillside Avenue (formerly Langford Avenue). It was heated by soft coal, and in the wintertime, you would have thought we were living in Pittsburgh. Soot was everywhere, but soot was everywhere, anyway.

I entered kindergarten in 1934 with a group of people who are still my friends. Our first public act was a kindergarten circus. I was an elephant. We elephants, with huge ears flopping, crawled in line holding each other's trunk behind us. We were featured prominently in the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*. Yellow as it is, I still have the clipping to prove it.

When I was in the third grade, my mother gave me a note to the teacher asking that I be called Sandy in school. I have been called Sandy ever since. I am Sandy, not because any part of my name is Alexander but because of the student who looked after me in my infancy. She would prop me against the back of the bed in the front bedroom, let the sun shine on my reddish hair, and strum on her ukulele while she sang about the baboon combing his auburn hair by the light of the moon. One day she called me Sandy. Nowadays, anyone meeting me for the first time is surprised to find that Sandy is a man, since most of the Sandys today are women.

Throughout grade school, we had good



*Sandy Boyd as Murray High School graduate.*

teachers, strong disciplinarians, who drilled us in reading, writing, arithmetic, geography and other basics. We were self-sufficient in our schools with little outside "enrichment." I do remember the WPA orchestra coming to Gutttersen and playing in the basement. They played "Country Gardens" by Percy Grainger. The WPA also did a lot to refurbish the decrepit Gutttersen school yard. The school itself was physically beyond redemption so we called it "Gutterdump."

We lived near the train tracks. The Minnesota Transfer was a huge sea of railroad tracks where vast numbers of box cars were loaded and unloaded. Hoboes rode boxcars in the depression. Many would find their way up from the Minnesota Transfer to the streets of St. Anthony Park, and they would politely knock on our back doors and ask for food. If they were



given food, they would put a mark on the curb in front of the house, so that other hoboes would know where good Samaritans lived.

The modern age came upon me while I was in Gutteresen school. Streamliners were invented. Every noon, we would run down from school to the Minnesota Transfer to see the Burlington Zephyr or the Milwaukee Hiawatha rumble through the yards between Minneapolis and St. Paul. What a thrill! The word "streamlined" remains in my vocabulary when I want to talk about something so sleek as to be both elegant and effective.

I spent a lot of time around the "Farm Campus," now called the St. Paul Campus of the University of Minnesota. My father was a professor of veterinary medicine there from 1911-1952. I used to walk up and meet him and walk him home. He always walked to work in the morning, walked home for lunch, walked back to work, walked back at the end of the day. It was 9/10ths of a mile each way. Often I would meet him at noon at Kustermann's Drug Store for lunch in the Gray Room where I would have a peanut butter sandwich and mashed potatoes.

Because of the depression, we stayed close to home on weekends and in the summer. The Farm Campus was a great place to hang around. There were domesticated animals of all sorts, including world champion Percheron and Belgian horses and a cow with a window in its side where my father and the great abdominal surgeon, Owen Wangenstein, could observe gastric activities. Of course, in the late summer we would spend every waking moment at the Minnesota State Fair wandering from Machinery Hill to the Midway, where we were titillated by the recurring rumor that the authorities were about to close a risqué side show. When the fair was not in session, we would often walk through the grounds on our way to the Midtown theater for movies. Those were the days of Saturday afternoon westerns.

After school we would "hang out" at Millers' Pharmacy or Langford and Partridge Parks; get sheared at Percy Ross' barber shop and be rewarded with an all-day sucker for sitting still; peddle advertising handbills house to house on Thursdays for the Como Food Market or Blomberg's



*Neighborhood gang. Sandy Boyd's sisters, Betty (Biorn) and Ellen Jane (Serrill Mann), are the two little girls in the wagon. Their father, Dr. Willard Boyd, is standing behind them. The boys are Marvin (Sonny) and Robert McClure and Douglas Young.*

Food and Mullarky's Meat Market; go with our fathers to "fill up" the car at Hopkins' 66, Roy's Standard, or pick up Ed Wynn firechief hats at Texaco Pete's.

Once in awhile, our conscience drove us to the St. Anthony Park Branch of the St. Paul Public Library, where Bessie Mead presided with a pencil scepter with a date stamp attached to the point. We preferred building, or trying to build, in my case, model airplanes around Mrs. Wulfing's kitchen table.

Except for Cubs' or Scouts' night, we were home every evening by 5:15 p.m., listening on the radio to Tom Mix and the Old Wrangler, Little Orphan Annie and her dog, Sandy, and Jack Armstrong, the All American Boy. We kept the post office busy sending in our box tops for secret decoding rings. My home mail was especially busy when my friend Bill Tynan would visit relatives in Toronto, because the radio offers were never good in Canada.

Halloween was a big evening in St. Anthony Park. Those who were more venturesome would grease the tracks so the streetcar could not get up the Como Avenue hill; some would even pull the trolley so the streetcar would lose all power. The American Legion and the VFW were active in those years between the wars, so there were always Memorial Day parades. Theophilus Hecker, one of the great dairy pioneers of the College of Agriculture, would lead the parade down Como Ave-

nue. He had been a drummer boy in the Civil War.

I always envied my sisters and the McClure boys next door because they once had a shack behind the McClures' called the "Gangle Shangle Club." Betty (Biorn) and Ellen Jane (Serrill Mann) were the only girls admitted to that club. My gang was all guys. My generation needed a "Gangle Shangle Club." We had no money for wood, but the McClures had a tent. The tent was old, it was gray and it was patched with tar. It leaked like a sieve when it rained, but it could accommodate eleven army cots used in the First World War. We alternated the tent site each year because no family could stand it more than once. Each family would put up with it for a year because we guys had nothing else to do, no place else to go.

Wednesday night was the biggest night in the tent because we listened to "Gangbusters." At the end of "Gangbusters," the announcer would put out an "all points bulletin" for gangsters in the United States. If any of those gangsters were within four states of us, terror struck the tent. The faint-hearted went home, the others cowered together, but never once were we abducted like the scions of the great beer families of St. Paul.

Sometimes we strayed to downtown St. Paul; it was always an adventure. There were summer rides on the Capitol steamer by the noxious stockyards of South St. Paul and winter vigils in the cold at Rice



Park waiting for the Winter Carnival parade. Never will I forget going to downtown St. Paul on the afternoon of the great Armistice Day blizzard. We were stranded on a streetcar near the Workhouse in Como Park until someone came and rescued us in the Ford V8.

We all went to church in St. Anthony Park. I went to what was then the Congregational Church (later the United Church of Christ) presided over by the Reverend Arthur Gilmore. My father called him the "Parson." His sermons were book reviews. Every Sunday we were given rigorous examples of how the ethics of our religion should be applied. Mr. Gilmore used the Golden Rule as grist for his sermons. "Love thy neighbor" has stuck with me always.

My mother was active in the church, but never religious in the church. She was their chief fundraiser. She even did some shady fundraising. She would have bridge tournaments to raise money. She and the mother of Margery Everts were good for each other. They were the leaders of the Women's Union. Mrs. Evert prayed, Mrs. Boyd paid. Little did I think that I would devote most of my life trying to raise money for things in which I believe.

I also had the good fortune of knowing Lloyd and Mary Rising. Reverend Rising was the pastor of the St. Anthony Park Methodist Church and his nephew, Lyle Wharton, was my oldest friend. The Risings had come to St. Anthony Park as a young couple and Mrs. Rising was one of the most beautiful and accomplished human beings my mother had ever met. Later she was stricken with polio, completely immobilized and rendered blind. So when I knew Mrs. Rising, she could not see me and she could not move out of a wheelchair. But her concern for others was unbounded. The Risings spent every summer at nearby Lake Johanna. Lyle and I would bike out there through the wooded areas which are now suburban St. Paul. When we reached the Risings', we pitched our tent and ate our meals with them. In return for their hospitality, we walked around the lake each evening after dinner and returned to tell Mrs. Rising all the wonderful things we had seen.

Very early I became interested in politics. Although I did not grasp the issues, I



*Sonny McClure, Betty Boyd (Bjorn), Jamie Paist and an unidentified youngster (left) about 1922.*

was pleased when Mark Gehan was elected mayor of St. Paul. At the State Fair I would gravitate to the booths of the Republicans, Democrats, Farmer/Laborites, Socialists and you name it. I would pick up every button imaginable. I still have Landon/Knox sunflower buttons of 1936. I had seen President Roosevelt a few years earlier when he dedicated the harbor in Lake City, Minnesota, where my mother was born and raised.

In the fall of 1940 I took the Como/Harriet streetcar down to the State Capitol and heard Wendell Willkie campaign in a broken voice caused by too much barnstorming. Eight years later I followed Harry Truman through the streets of downtown to hear him speak in the Auditorium Theater where he was relegated because everyone knew he would lose the election.

A year after his campaign appearance, President Truman returned to St. Paul at the invitation of Republican Governor Luther Youngdahl. The president was to give a nonpartisan address marking the 100th anniversary of the creation of Minnesota Territory. However, Harry Truman was constitutionally unable to give a nonpartisan speech. Soon after he began his speech, he launched into an attack on contemporary reactionaries who had the same lack of vision as the reactionaries who opposed the Louisiana Purchase, which made Minnesota possible.

I was in Murray High School when the United States entered the Second World War. Since St. Paul felt threatened by the prospect of enemy bombing, there were attempts at air raid drills. It would be announced in the *Pioneer Press* that a drill would take place at 7 p.m. that evening.

The older men, like my father, would don their white helmets and take up their observation posts. His was at the top of the fire escape of Gutteresen School from which he could only see tree tops. Those vigils were often long, because the city had no London air raid siren system, so if the wind were blowing the wrong way, it was impossible to make out the faint whistle which declared the all-clear.

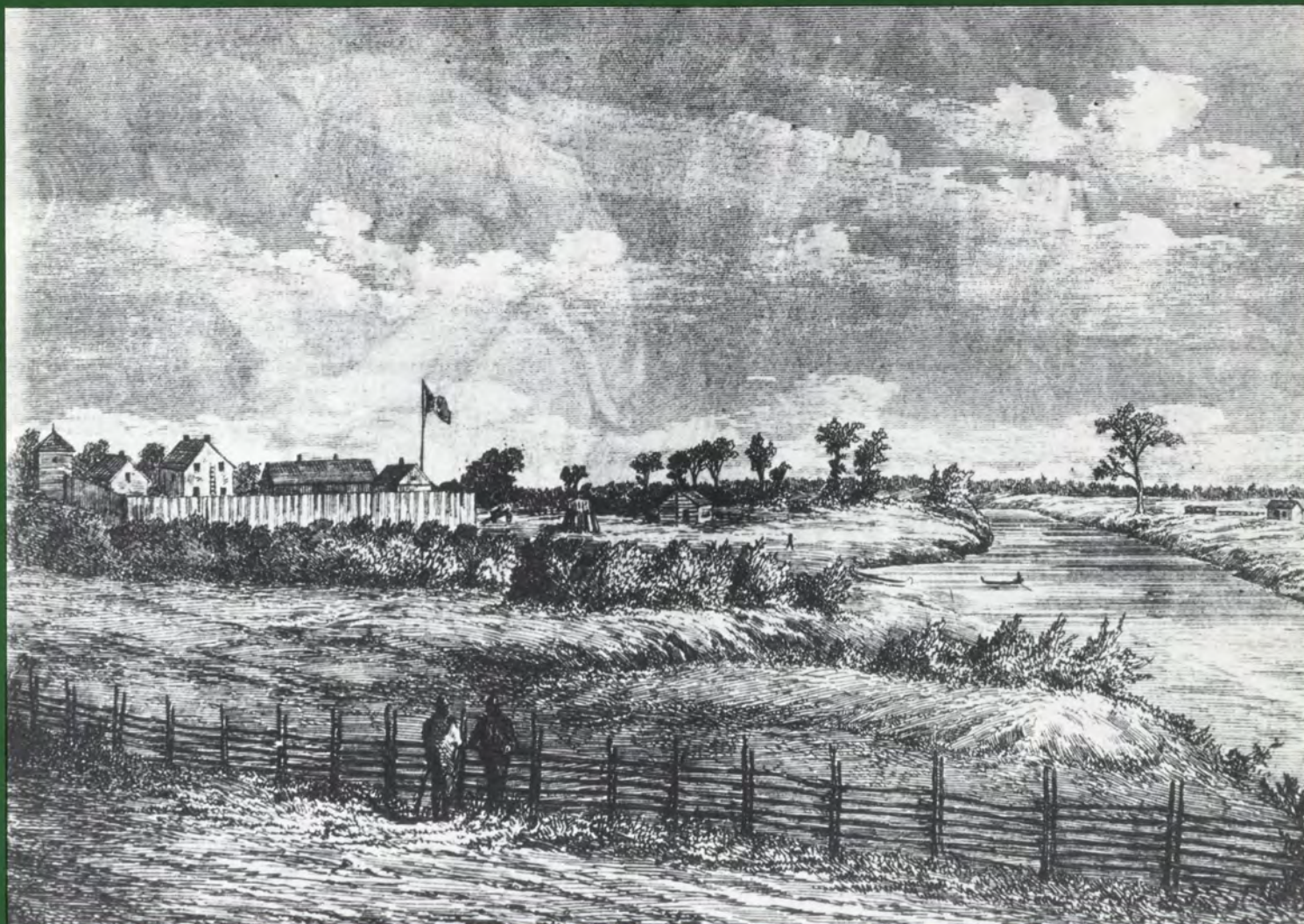
Murray High was my first real experience with people from outside St. Anthony Park. We were joined by wonderful new friends from Como Park and South St. Anthony Park. Murray offered vocational-technical and college preparatory programs.

College preparation at Murray was simple — arts, math, sciences, foreign language, history, geography, civics, and English grammar, spelling and literature. The courses were well taught and I learned much.

But the most indelible mind-stretching occurred in eleventh grade American History. Our teacher, Ruth Eddy, added to her rigorous course on our country's past a two-month unit on our country's future. "Post War World Eddy," as we called our teacher, felt we should all be prepared for the bright new world which our leaders promised would follow the war. We studied all of the varied peace plans that were being advanced. We were encouraged to attend an evening lecture series on the post-World War II world at nearby Macalaster College. The lecture series was organized and moderated by a young instructor, Hubert Humphrey, who was the speaker when our class graduated in 1944.

St. Paul was a great place to grow up, and those years continue to have a profound effect on me. I came away from my high school years with a commitment to internationalism and human rights that has been central to my professional and personal life. In one sense, St. Anthony Park was unreal because it was so homogeneous. Its values, however, were universal and demanded respect for all others. In St. Anthony Park and St. Paul I began to realize that democracy is about cultural understanding and mutual respect among very different people who seek common bonds. I am grateful and proud to have been a St. Paulite.





*The Hudson's Bay Company Fort at Pembina, now in North Dakota, from the Canadian Illustrated News, 1871. See the article on the Selkirk Colony, beginning on page 23.*

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

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