

# 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

# Rediscovering St. Paul's Fish Hatchery — A 'Pretty Little Valley' with Idyllic Charm

*Robert J. Stumm*

Today most of St. Paul's people aren't aware of its existence, but back at the beginning of the century, the St. Paul Fish Hatchery was one of the city's most popular tourist attractions. Part of what the state's Department of Natural Resources now refers to as the Southern Regional Service Center, the hatchery is located just off Warner Road near where it intersects with Highway 61.

There is a general consensus among experts in this field that the first scientific breeding of fish occurred in China sometime around 2,000 B. C. However, most of the propagation techniques employed in hatcheries today were developed by French scientists in the mid-nineteenth century. Making use of this research, the French government built the first public owned hatchery at Huningue in 1852.

Spurred on by its success, private and public hatcheries sprang up all over Europe, and then, in 1864, the first American hatchery was built at Mainford, New York, by Seth Green. The first state owned hatchery became a reality soon afterward, and within a decade of Green's initiative, more than a dozen East Coast states had hatcheries.

Responding to developments in other states, Minnesota's State Fish Commission asked the legislature in 1875 to authorize funding for a hatchery. Their initial request was denied, but the measure was enacted the following session. After considering a number of options, the commission decided to locate the hatchery on the outer fringes of St. Paul below the south end of Dayton's Bluff. Flowing out of the bluff was a small stream called Willow Creek whose waters could easily be diverted into ponds. Of equal importance, the hatchery was positioned near the tracks of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad line from which fish could be shipped



*St. Paul's Fish Hatchery from the south end of Dayton's Bluff. This photograph, and those on the following page, are from a series of picture postcards of St. Paul taken ca. 1900.*

in rail cars to points hundreds of miles away.

Given the designation of Willow Brook, the new hatchery began the task of propagating fish in 1878. The original facility consisted of a hatchery house, three ponds and a cottage, which was the residence of Superintendent S. S. Watkins. Watkins, a highly respected member of the fish breeding profession, presided over the hatchery until his death in 1895.

Throughout its initial decade of operation, two principle species of fish were hatched and distributed from Willow Brook: brook trout and walleyed pike. Trout, with their relatively large eggs, were hatched in compartmentalized troughs. Pike eggs, because they are almost microscopic, had to be cultivated in specially built glass jars. The equipment and techniques, although primitive by today's standards, produced some impressive results. In 1894, Watkins reported hatching and distributing 1,212,000 brook trout and 31,600,000 walleyed pike.

Despite its novelty, the hatchery was

generally ignored by the public until the City of St. Paul developed Indian Mounds Park in the late 1890s. Almost from its very establishment, the park, situated atop Dayton's Bluff overlooking the hatchery, was teeming with sightseers. The park had a double-barreled appeal with its ancient Indian mounds and the spectacular view it afforded of the Mississippi River valley, plus the park could be reached from downtown by streetcar in around fifteen minutes. The hatchery began trading on the park's popularity after the two were connected by a primitive and very steep trail.

The St. Paul Fish Hatchery, in the first decade of the twentieth century, had as much to offer as any attraction in the Twin Cities. In addition to its ponds and hatching houses, the hatchery had a museum containing a display of mounted animals that had been exhibited by the state at the 1893 Columbia Exposition in Chicago.

The hatchery was landscaped to resemble a park, with sodded grass, a network of walking paths and, for an ever so brief

period, an enclosed menagerie of ten deer and one moose. Minnesotans of any era always have to fish, and what really drew people here was the opportunity to see one of the hatchery's staff reach into one of the ponds with a net and scoop up a shimmering brook trout.

One of the best firsthand accounts of the hatchery is the following descriptive narrative from a pamphlet published by the St. Paul Association of Commerce:

"Below the mounds, reached by a rugged pathway down the side of the bluff, through rough gulches and vine-clad ravines, lies the Willow Brook State Fish Hatchery. In the ponds at the bottom of the ravine dwell thousands of trout and other game fish of all sizes and varieties, while in the buildings and hatching rooms may be seen spawn and fry in all stages of development.

"Millions upon millions of young fish are sent from this hatchery to restock the famous trout streams of the northern part of the state, for Minnesota believes in keeping up the fish supply in her streams and rivers and lakes. In one of the buildings there is exhibited a large and interesting collection of Minnesota game birds, one of the most complete collections of its kind in the country.

"There is no more beautiful spot around Saint Paul on a summer's day than this pretty little valley, far from the sounds of the great city—the wooded hills carpeted with emerald grass dotted over with hundreds of varieties of wild flowers, the many-colored trout jumping in the little ponds, and the great river sliding lazily in the sunlight."

Despite such eloquent endorsements, the hatchery's popularity began to erode, and by 1930 most St. Paul residents didn't even know their city had a fish hatchery. This reversal of fortune is primarily attributable to the decline in popularity of Mounds Park. The park took on the role of a neighborhood park because it lacked the necessary recreational options to compete with the bigger parks, such as Como and Phalen.

Another factor contributing to the waning interest in the St. Paul Fish Hatchery was the fact that hatcheries had become fairly commonplace. In the years between 1906 and 1916, the state had put into ser-



"Raceways" on the right, the superintendent's house on the left.



Scooping fish out of hatchery ponds, an activity that was a favorite with visitors.

vice hatcheries at Glenwood, Deerwood, Detroit Lakes and Granite Falls. Also, there was less to see at the hatchery after St. Paul ran a sewer line through the grounds in the early 1920s, thereby eliminating a number of ponds.

Over the last six decades, the St. Paul Fish Hatchery has been transfigured beyond recognition. The grounds have been chopped in two by Warner Road, the vestiges from the past are three ponds, and only one of these has any fish. Operations at the hatchery are confined to the basement of an administrative building where

fish are propagated in temperature controlled tanks. While it is a state-of-the-art facility, one can't help but yearn for the days when crowds flocked here to soak in the hatchery's idyllic charm.

*Robert J. Stumm graduated from the University of Minnesota with a bachelor's degree in history in 1970. He is a freelance writer whose history travel guide on the Mississippi is scheduled to be published in 1992.*



*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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