

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Romance, Melodrama,  
Mayhem in Not-So-  
Fictional St. Paul

Page 10

Spring, 1993

Volume 28, Number 1

. . . *'And A Sprinkling of Jews'*

Work, Faith and the Jewish Merchants *Page 4*



The Swadelsky family in the 1890s, Zlotah Rivkah Swadelsky (second from left) settled with her husband and family on the West Side after emigrating from Russia. She was one of those unsung women of history. Pious herself, she led religious services for the women of B'nai Abraham Synagogue on State Street. She ran a Shelter House for strangers passing through the Jewish community, and organized a Women's Free Loan Society that provided loans without interest to immigrant women to help them buy furniture for their new homes. Photo from the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest. See article beginning on page 4.



## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by gifts from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr.; by a contribution from Reuel D. Harmon, and by grants from The Saint Paul Foundation and the F. R. Bigelow Foundation.

Special contributions have been received from the following supporters who are hereby named honorary editors of the Winter and Spring, 1993, issues of *Ramsey County History*:

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The Ramsey County Historical Society and the members of *Ramsey County History's* Editorial Board wish to express their deep appreciation to these contributors for their support.



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## Growing Up in St. Paul

# Looking Back at the Black Community – Part II

David V. Taylor

*Editor's Note: This is the second in a two-part series of articles on growing up in St. Paul's African American community. The first article, written by Eula T. Murphy with her son, David V. Taylor, appeared in the Winter, 1993, issue of Ramsey County History, and traced the years from 1920 to the late 1950s. Here David Taylor writes of his own childhood. He has used interchangeably the terms "Negro," "colored" and "black," as they have been used historically. He also has used the terms as a stylistic device to indicate transitions between the active and descriptive voice of the child and the reflective and judgmental voice of the adult.*

I was born on Friday, July 13, 1945, several weeks after Germany's surrender but before the destruction of Hiroshima. There was nothing auspicious about my birth to differentiate me from the thousands of other war babies born that year. Nothing unusual about that particular day, either. My birth certificate recorded the delivery of a "normal negro male."

I was born into a family of Negroes in a community of Negroes living in the "colored" section of St. Paul. Our "green acres" encompassed an area of less than a square mile. Within this community, I was reared, educated, confirmed in faith, taught discipline and respect for community values. As a child, I would be subtly prepared by older members of the community for a world they perceived to be hostile, with themselves only shadows passing through, but in which we children might come to be regarded as persons of substance.

In retrospect, this community was perhaps unlike other Negro communities in northern cities. It was relatively small in size, demographically stable, socially cohesive. Its leaders, able men and women, were advocates of integration, civil rights,



David Taylor, right, with his older brother, Clarence. Photographs with this article are from the author.

and expanded educational and employment opportunities for Negroes. It was also a remarkably literate community of wage earners and professionals, who took pride in their civility and cultural refinement. Characteristics of this refinement were an intolerance for the misuse of the English language and perceived lower class "mannerisms."

It was disconcerting as a child to be corrected grammatically by any passing adult, or chastised for not walking erect. However, as one of my maternal aunts was fond of telling us, "Son, there are two types of people in this world . . . those with class and those without, spelt 'ass.' Do not make the mistake of confusing the two, or sounding like the latter." Those of us who were raised in this community during the postwar years had our characters indelibly stamped by the nurturing of persons like

my aunt and others in the expectations they set for us, and the standards they held us to.

I was named David Vassar Taylor. At first it was decided that I was to be named Benjamin Reuben after a very close cousin of my mother. Timely intervention by a compassionate aunt prevented that. David was suggested as a name more in keeping with my angelic disposition. It was also inferred that the biblical connection might better serve me. The implication for a black male child was obvious.

Vassar, my mother's maiden name, was given as my Christian middle name. The Vassars were an old and established family in St. Paul. Some of my family had migrated to Minnesota as early as 1888. Although they had no resources to speak of, they were proud people and well respected in the black community. Respectability was important. In a community that could not boast of social Brahmins, nor where any family was more than three generations removed from slavery, a family name and longevity of residence in the community meant more than wealth.

It was the worst of times to embark upon my life's journey. World War II was winding to its inevitable conclusion. At home and abroad, millions of people were awaiting the return of peace and prosperity. My father, a soldier serving in the South Pacific, had been drafted in the closing months of the war in Europe. Mother supported the war effort at home by making whatever sacrifices the government requested. Negroes then believed that their sacrifices would earn for their race the rights and privileges accorded all citizens. In the years following the war, rising expectations for social change by Negroes would encounter resistance by whites to any change in the racial status quo.

Race relations, generally bad even in good times, were at a national low at the close of the war. Although more opportu-



nities were open to Negroes as a result of the war economy, discrimination was a national policy and pervaded every aspect of American life. Life expectancy for the average Negro child who survived childhood was not long, and shorter for males than for females. A "normal negro male" born in 1945 had nothing positive to look forward to.

At war's end, my parents were reunited long enough to discover their incompatibilities. They were divorced in 1949. My father, a skillful tap-dancer I was later told, danced his way out of our lives. We, my older brother Clarence, Mother, and I, were well on our way to becoming a sociological statistic captured by Gunner Myrdal in his book, *The American Dilemma*. As a child, I could not have realized that as a black male I had lost the American dream before I had discovered it. This revelation came to me years later in a sociology class at the University of Minnesota.

If there was one word that characterized my childhood years in St. Paul, it was "change." Mother would marry twice within four years of divorcing Father. In 1950, our family was expanded with the birth of my younger brother, Vant. During that period, we moved five times. In looking back upon the entirety of my pre-adolescent years, I find that many of my earliest images of community life were linked to specific residences.

### **Lower St. Anthony**

My earliest recollection of family life begins in the years before my parents' separation, probably my third year of life, 1948. Although I was too young to understand the dynamics of a failed marriage, genteel poverty, and betrayed dreams, my world was nonetheless exciting. Our living room window was my connection to the external world, especially during the winter. Through it I watched the comings and goings of people, children, dogs, and cats all moving with a degree of certainty and purposefulness that was lacking in our household.

Our family occupied the lower level of a converted duplex near the corner of St. Anthony Avenue and Kent Street. At one time, St. Anthony was one of the loveliest avenues in St. Paul, and certainly the pride

of the black community. During the 1940s, the avenue began to deteriorate after years of neglect brought on by absentee ownership and shortages of money and building materials during the war years.

Like other houses in our block, the duplex was in a state of disrepair. The kitchen floor had long since separated from the back wall of the house by as much as three inches. The floor was pitched at such an angle as to make it difficult to keep dishes on the kitchen table that Mother had covered with an oilskin cloth. In spite of the fact that the door to the kitchen was kept closed in the winter to conserve heat and to keep out rodents, the house always had an uncomfortable chill to it. What warmth we enjoyed came from a coal-burning stove in the living room.

As middle class blacks began to leave lower St. Anthony Avenue for homes farther west, the dividing line between the emerging social classes in the community was clearly drawn on Dale Street, a thoroughfare that ran north and south through the city. The residential area west of Dale was called "Oatmeal Hill." Areas east of Dale were referred to as "Cornmeal Valley." Whatever the origins of the terms, suffice it to say that my family were "valley" residents, as our duplex was one block east of Dale and one block north of Rondo.

On the southwest corner of our intersection sat Jim's Bar, a colored eating and drinking establishment. On the southeast corner, immediately adjacent to our house, was Walker Williams' pool hall. Across the street on the northeast corner of the intersection, behind White Front Meat Market and Dick Smith's Barber Shop and directly across from our duplex, was a depressed vacant sandlot called the "Old Hollow" playground. It was the only outdoor recreational space provided by the city for its colored population. Baseball and football were played there. During the winter months, the city installed a portable warming house and flooded the lot with water, creating an ice rink. Often during summer evenings, the Elk Lodge drum and bugle corps practiced their drumming techniques and marching steps on the playground. Our family was often drawn to the front porch by the decidedly African rhythmic drum beats and African-inspired

dance steps of the young majorettes.

For me, this intersection was an exciting and constantly changing world. People were on the move: beautiful women dressed in high fashion, men cruising by in big cars, and hordes of children. It was a cacophony of life forces in motion. As Mother looked out over the intersection, she saw a different reality, one that summed up all of life's tragedies—and compromises. Her concern was expressed in a simple admonishment daily to my older brother, then eight, to stay away from the intersection and not to stray from the yard. Later, he was not even allowed to go to the playground. She would insist on taking us three blocks to the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, on Kent Street and Aurora Avenue, for supervised recreation.

Our living conditions were not the primary source of marital conflict between my parents. However, having come from better circumstances, Mother viewed this experience as being the nadir of her life, and simply resolved that she could do better alone. Early in 1949, she filed for legal separation and was granted a divorce shortly thereafter. It took two marriages for our family to eventually move back to "Oatmeal Hill." Mother's subsequent marriages took us to live on the north side of Minneapolis, and then back to St. Paul. I thought of our residences on Carroll, Central, and Dayton Avenues in St. Paul as idyllic because of the number of children to play with and the large back yards in which to play.

### **The Community**

My recollection of the black community of my youth is of a self-contained, tightly knit, and socially stratified neighborhood of families, close friends of our family, fictive relatives,\* and others. Everyone seemed to belong to one of several churches, attended three of five schools, and participated in programs at the Hallie Q. Brown center. The adults belonged to a panoply of social and fraternal organiza-

\*The concept of fictive relatives was used in the black community to incorporate very close friends into an extended family network. Adults were called uncle, aunt, or cousin, even though they weren't blood relatives. Children used these terms as titles of respect.



tions. As children, we seldom traveled beyond the parameters of the community (Western, Lexington, Selby and University Avenues) except perhaps to visit relatives living in Minneapolis or to shop downtown.\* Several weeks during the summer were spent either at Big Round Lake near Amery, Wisconsin, or at Lake Adney near Brainerd, Minnesota, where two of Mother's sisters owned property. At that time, a number of black families owned lake cabins. From a child's perspective, all of our needs were met within the community. Our parents left only for the purposes of employment or to purchase groceries, clothing, and an occasional White Castle hamburger or Dairy Queen.

The black community in St. Paul was highly structured. It was differentiated by perception in social status, not so much based on income, but on social connections, family names, longevity in the community, and one's color. Education, cultural refinement, and employment status also seemed important. In retrospect, our community did not know wealth. Very few families or individuals were affluent. Professionals and the working class were tied to the same geographic area through bonds of kinship, friendship, and shared experiences.

There was a clear sense of moral and ethical values that permeated community life, even if adults experienced difficulties in adhering to the standards that they set. (As a child, my favorite pastime was listening to adults gossip.) As can be imagined, gossip—good and bad—traveled quickly. The community's collective memory, as it related to personal behavior, was long and unyielding. Youthful indiscretions, known acts of infidelity, moral turpitude, and other sins not specifically covered by the Ten Commandments were enough to label one for life. Once branded, always stigmatized. Perceived sins of the parents were often and indiscriminately attached to their children. Family name and moral standing before the community were important elements that could open

\* By the early 1960s, middle class blacks had purchased homes in Maplewood and in the Wheelock Parkway area. At that time, those areas were considered almost as distant from the heart of St. Paul as was Minneapolis.



*Children's party at the Sterling Club, a black men's social club in St. Paul, around 1947. David Taylor is the little boy in short pants second from the left in the front row. Redeemer Lutheran Church looms in the background at Dale and Carrol Streets.*

doors of social opportunities.

Perhaps this self-regulative aspect of community life was important because the stakes were so high. The lives of my parents' generation were compromised by external forces: discrimination in housing, employment, educational opportunities; lack of access to quality health facilities; and denial of insurance, bank loans, etc. Everything seemed to work against the economic stability of black family life. It is remarkable to observe that in the face of such external aggression the community did not turn upon itself out of frustration. Although sporting life did flourish, criminal activity was relatively low and black-on-black crime was negligible. On the surface, at least, black families and the community appeared remarkably stable.

As children, our activities were highly regulated. There was an unwritten but well-understood primer for raising children. Mother, like others of her generation, fundamentally disagreed with Dr. Spock's child rearing practices. Although she never applied the lash after I was eight, her sharp tongue, penetrating eyes, and general ability to intimidate (although she stood only 5'3") generally kept us in line.

Children were never allowed to visit households whose parents were unknown to our parents. We were seldom allowed to visit households whose parents' life styles were not approved of. We were never allowed to play out in the street after the

eight o'clock curfew. We were not permitted to spend the night at the homes of anyone other than our immediate relatives. All social events were properly chaperoned. Under these circumstances, it was very difficult to sustain mischievous behavior because most of the adults in the community knew who you were. Misbehavior—whether in school, at church, in the community center, or on the streets—would be communicated to your parents. There was an unwritten but well-understood code of behaviour that was strictly enforced. Any adult was authorized to reprimand within reason. Authority figures were to be respected, even if you disagreed with their actions.

Most of us, whether "hill" or "valley" residents, at one time or another attended programs at the Hallie Q. Brown center and the Ober Boys' Club. Both organizations sponsored successful summer camp programs for which we were regularly enrolled. Scouting was popular. Hallie sponsored a Camp Fire Girls group. I was a member of a black Cub Scout pack organized at Maxfield School and a Boy Scout troop sponsored by the St. James AME Church.

### **Our Education**

There were three elementary schools that served the black community: William McKinley, Maxfield, and St. Peter Claver, a private Catholic school for



grades 1-9. I began my formal education at the "old" Maxfield Elementary School on the corner of St. Anthony Avenue and St. Albans Street. The building, a dark red brick gothic structure, resembled a fire station. It was two stories tall, with great windows and a romanesque arched brick front entrance. It was rumored among the children that the building was a converted fire station that at one time housed horses and horse-drawn equipment. The first floor was cavernous, with all of the classrooms arranged around the exterior walls, leaving a vast open space in the center of the building on both floors. Every morning, regardless of the weather, children were assembled on the playground, organized into lines by gender, and marched into the building through separate doors at the north entrance on St. Anthony.

Maxfield was governed by Principal Leona Winter, a tall, puritan-looking woman with white hair. Her mere name was equated with discipline, and her influence was felt far beyond the school building. Mrs. Winter was known to cruise the neighborhood on her way to work each morning, checking on the patrol lines and observing any breakdown of discipline on corners serviced by student patrol officers. She was reputed to have single-handedly broken up several extortion rings in the school by subjecting the school bullies to public ridicule. The sight of her 1949 green Buick Special struck fear into the hearts of even the most obedient.

I attended the "old" Maxfield through fourth grade. In 1955, a new facility was built on the corner of St. Anthony and Victoria Street. The new Maxfield Elementary School was the product of intense lobbying by the black community. There was considerable pressure by whites to locate the new school outside the boundaries of the black community. The older structure had been cited as a fire hazard and ought to have been condemned. More important, it lay in the path of a proposed freeway that would link St. Paul and Minneapolis.

I completed secondary education (1957-1963) by attending John Marshall Junior High and Central High School. These schools were more integrated than Maxfield, drawing students from a larger district; accordingly, racial tensions were always a problem, particularly at Mar-

shall. In addition to racially motivated fights, black students from differing social strata often found reason to quarrel among themselves. Much of this could be attributed simply to problems of growing up. However, the Twin Cities news media in a series of articles made it appear that these fights were gang-related activity, and even went so far as to label one alley where fights regularly occurred "Blood Alley."

Although we were aware of whites, as children at Maxfield, we engaged only those white children in school whose parents could not flee or perhaps refused to sell their homes in the face of transitions that were occurring in the neighborhood. The only white adults we regularly encountered were the female teachers in the elementary schools. As children, we were isolated from the negative effects of race relations. It was not until junior high school that I witnessed my first act of discrimination. It was directed at a Jewish girl in a speech class. At that point I knew very little about Jewish people, had seen Asians only in the Chinese restaurants downtown, and could not have picked out a Hispanic person in a crowd if I had been required to do so.

At Marshall, I had my first (and only) regular black teacher, Arthur Mc Watt, who taught mathematics. Although he was an excellent role model, his influence was limited to the students he came in contact with through instruction. Mrs. Dobbins, a substitute teacher, and Earl McGhee were the only black teachers at Central High School. I was unaware, then, of discriminatory policies that limited the employment opportunities for black teachers in the St. Paul school district.

More problematic was the apparent decline in achievement scores of black students throughout these years. The curriculum at Maxfield was neither challenging nor innovative. Students with differing academic abilities were undifferentiated in the classroom, nor were they encouraged to compete or excel. Pedagogical approaches to learning changed frequently. One year we were taught to read phonically. The next year we were taught to spell by sight. Old math was out and new math was in. During the years following the launching of the Soviet satellite, Sputnik, all junior high students in the St. Paul

school system were tested and placed in differentiated academic tracks. An experimental program in math and sciences was created. To my knowledge, only four black students in my class were placed in such programs. None remained in the experimental track beyond the tenth grade. None were encouraged to do so.

Observing the disparity in achievement levels, the St. Paul Urban League initiated a program called "Tomorrow's Scientists and Technicians." They asked teachers, parents, and community leaders to identify black students with academic potential. With approximately twelve students, the Urban League initiated a career exploration program that exposed young people to career opportunities and mentors as early as the ninth grade. Nearly all of the students in the program, which lasted the greater part of an academic year, attended college or pursued specialized training. Some went to historically black colleges and universities. Others, unable to afford that experience, attended the University of Minnesota. Most, if not all, were told by their high school counselors that their academic preparation would make it difficult for them to succeed. Coincidentally, these same students were also members of the St. Paul Youth Branch of the NAACP and were actively involved in their respective church youth groups.

### Our Churches

Although my mother was raised a Presbyterian, my stepfather professed to no faith whatsoever. At an early age, I recall the family attending Camphor Memorial Methodist Church, then located on Fuller Avenue between Dale and Kent Streets in a structure vacated by Episcopalians. However, by 1952, all of my mother's sisters in St. Paul had become members of St. Philip's, a black Episcopal congregation located on the corner of Aurora Avenue and Mackubin Street. The church building was a factory converted into a church by another congregation and later sold to St. Philip's parish. As a child, I remember having to climb steep stairs to a dark sanctuary whose walls were held in place by guy wires for stability. Under the leadership of the Reverend Denzil Carty, a new edifice was constructed in 1955.

The congregation, small but fairly



progressive for its time, consisted of very highly educated parishioners. Its Sunday School and youth programs attracted young people from other denominations, as well. The congregation was reputed to have some of the most socially prominent members of the community in attendance. As children, we were expected to attend services and church school every Sunday, and we did. We were expected to take leadership roles in our youth organization, and we did. We were also expected to achieve in school, and we did, to the best of our abilities. Because of the number of professionals and other people of excellent moral character, we never lacked for role models. Most of the children in our congregation enrolled in colleges. Many became college graduates. This fact contradicted what I was later taught at the University: that black families were primarily dysfunctional, and that black communities lacked viable infrastructures.

### About Other Things

What I remember most about my formative years was the insularity we experienced as children. The natural and human tragedies that befell other communities across the nation never seemed to occur in St. Paul. Although many black families were poor by most standards, they were not spiritually impoverished. Instances of child molestation or abuse were seldom heard of. If such things occurred, and there probably were known cases, somehow the community handled them. Instances of violence against property or people were negligible. Alcohol abuse probably occurred, drug abuse did not. In many respects, this community allowed children to be children much longer than was possible elsewhere.

In this environment, we were sheltered from the harsher realities of a society that would judge us "solely by the color of our skin and not the content of our character." Character development and accountability were lessons that we were taught early and often. We learned to accept responsibility for our actions, individually and collectively. Although our parents were protective, they were not enablers. Lying, cheating, and theft—cardinal sins all—were appropriately punished. It did not matter how



*The family. Clarence in back, Vant on left, and David with their mother.*

small the transgression or whether it was committed individually or by group consensus; the resulting punishment was consistent and swiftly administered.

Law enforcement officers knew the community, its leadership, and its concerns. Although police officers and leaders in the community did not always agree on major issues, all were in accord in their resolve to strengthen community cohesion by creating a safe environment for carrying out the normal functions of life. Curfews for adolescents were enforced, and parents were notified if their children were found in violation.

This insularity made us remarkably self-confident, if not arrogantly so. We had been convinced that we could and would succeed in any endeavors, if we simply applied ourselves. Consequently, when we left the community and were being confronted with discriminatory behavior, it took awhile for many of us to develop appropriate and effective coping strategies. We never, however, doubted ourselves.

Realistically, the small size of the black community and its insularity were also reasons why many of my childhood friends left St. Paul after high school. Those who went away to college outside of the state tended to stay in those communities, especially if they were located in larger metropolitan areas. The anonymity associated with life in a larger city, the possibility of an enhanced social life, and great-

er employment opportunities were attractive incentives for leaving St. Paul. Ironically, those features of community life (community size and insularity), which were viewed by many as compromising freedom of choice and action, were probably responsible for the development of personal qualities that brought about professional success later in life.

In my youth, I also was very eager to leave St. Paul. In coming of age, I found it difficult to become a man in my father's house (which, in this case, was the entire city). It was not until I left for graduate school that I began to experience the type of freedom that my friends had experienced and often wrote to me about. However, after having traveled extensively as an adult, and after having compared my socialization with that of others not so fortunate to have been raised in blessed insularity, I now realize that something special had occurred here. For starters, I was afforded a longer childhood and did not seem to suffer any ill consequences. Second, by adult mentors I was taught respect for human rights and cultural differences, and third, I developed respect for the power of education.

I have read and reread *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins*. In it, Wilkins describes the nurturing, education, and support that he experienced while coming of age in the St. Paul black community. Ostensibly, these experiences had helped to shape his character and, in part, temperamentally prepared him for his life's work with the NAACP. Although our experiences with the same community were almost a generation apart, it was reassuring to observe that the same values were operative in the community years after his departure.

*David V. Taylor is dean of the General College at the University of Minnesota. He graduated from the University in 1967 with a bachelor of arts degree in German and Russian history; he received his master's degree in twentieth century American history and English constitutional history from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and his doctorate in the history of the African people from the University of Minnesota.*





*Murder most foul! Colonel Hankins draws on local lore, circa 1868, for his colorfully imaginative "history" of St. Paul's early years. See the article on novelists and not-so-fictional St. Paul beginning on page 10.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society  
323 Landmark Center  
75 West Fifth Street  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

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