

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

The Great Railroad  
Excursion  
of 1854  
—Page 14

Spring, 1995

Volume 30, Number 1

*From Iceboxes to Freezers:*  
The Seeger Refrigerator Company—Page 4



A view of the Seeger Company's Arcade Street factory, ca. 1930. The last building remaining at the company's site was razed in April, 1995. See article beginning on page 4. Minnesota Historical Society photo.



## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

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in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen  
in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr.

## A Message from the Editorial Board

**T**his Spring issue of *Ramsey County History* offers two stories about grow-  
ing up in St. Paul. The first is an institutional and corporate history of the  
Seeger Refrigeration Company written by James B. Bell. The other is a per-  
sonal and individual account written by Frieda Claussen of her coming to adult-  
hood and launching her career as a medical technologist at Miller Hospital.  
While the Seeger Company was located on the East Side of St. Paul from 1902  
to 1984, Frieda Claussen's professional life spanned forty-two years in the de-  
velopment of modern medical practice. Unlike the Seeger Company, which has  
passed from the local scene, Frieda Claussen and her sister, Clara, have made  
sure their experiences will enrich others in their willingness to value local history  
and to tell their story in our magazine. For this, we thank them.

*John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board*



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## *From Iceboxes to Freezers:*

# The Story of the Seeger Refrigerator

*James B. Bell*

Today it is common to meet men and women on the East Side of St. Paul who quickly tell us that either their father or grandfather, or another relative, worked on the assembly line of the Seeger Refrigerator Company. Sometimes they remark that they earned a portion of their college tuition during summer employment at the Arcade Street plant. Frequently their comments touch on the annual company picnic for families at either the Wildwood or Excelsior amusement parks and the silver dollars that were distributed to those who attended. For many current family members, a proud possession is the retirement pin that was awarded to employees after thirty years of service. The memento has become a collectable cherished for their children and grandchildren.

For more than 100 years in St. Paul, the name Seeger was synonymous with cabinet-making, and icebox and refrigerator manufacturing. The company's origins in 1902 were modest, its future uncertain, yet the purposeful vision of its founder, John Augustus Seeger, guided the fledgling enterprise with a steady hand from its establishment until his death in 1938. His grandson and a later president of the firm, John S. Holl, remembered him as "the King," the man in charge.

Setting an example for all of his employees, John A. Seeger was at his office every morning before eight o'clock. His first task of the day was to walk through the plant and say his "good mornings" to the workers, many of whom he knew by their first names. The tour also gave him an opportunity to note any problems that might be emerging on the assembly line or in any of the other departments. The company became a vital economic force in St. Paul and the nation, and the family members who directed the destiny of the firm played significant roles in local civic affairs. The Seeger story is the stuff of which the American experience has been fashioned. It is the story of the son of German immigrants and his persistent pursuit of accomplishment.

Born in Covington, Kentucky, in 1853, John A. Seeger arrived with his family in Minnesota on October 1, 1856, settling first near St. Peter, in the Minnesota River Valley. John's father, William Seeger, helped to locate a colony of German settlers at New Ulm in that year. He established a brewery soon after his arrival and later engaged in the mercantile business for five years in Le Sueur. These were years of unrest for the Dakota people along the Minnesota River frontier, and the Seeger family probably experienced first-hand, as did their neighbors in the area, the uncertainties of the 1862 conflict.

The family moved to St. Paul in 1868 and William Seeger became deputy treasurer of the state of Minnesota. His appointment to the office was perhaps partly based on his service recruiting Germans for settlement in Minnesota, or possibly as a consequence of his Civil War experience as a sergeant in Company "D" of the Ninth Regiment, Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, or most likely because his daughter Bertha had married the state treasurer, Emil Munch, Jr. of Stillwater in 1865. Seeger served in the post until 1872 when he briefly succeeded his son-in-law as state treasurer and was caught in the deadly cross-fire of



*John A. Seeger, founder and chairman of the Refrigerator Company at the entrance of the Arcade Street factory, ca. 1935. Photo from the author.*

bitterly partisan politics in the legislature.<sup>1</sup>

Thirteen years old when he moved to St. Paul with his family, John A. Seeger went to work for Charles Leonard, a Massachusetts native and a cabinetmaker and carpenter who had arrived in the town in 1858, serving as an apprentice. Within a few years he became a member of the firm known as Leonard & Seeger Company, contractors and builders, with a shop at 145 Jackson Street. One of Seeger's early projects was participating in the construction in 1873 of the twin-towered modified Romanesque-styled Assumption Church on Ninth Street. It was then, as it is today, a landmark on the skyline of St. Paul.

The association with Leonard proved to be an unhappy one for Seeger and his



# Company

bride, Elvina Seitzinger Yoerg. When they returned from their wedding trip in 1877, they found that Leonard had abruptly left the firm and drained it of its cash. Desperate for operating funds to survive, Seeger turned to his new father-in-law, Anthony Yoerg, for assistance.

The founder of the first brewery in Minnesota in 1848, Yoerg was riding a crest of business prosperity. In 1871 his firm had moved from its original location at Eagle and Washington Streets (today the site of the Civic Center parking ramp) to the southwest corner of Ethel and Ohio Streets, across the Mississippi River from the Upper Landing and next to the West Side's legendary bluffs and caves. As the

two families lived near each other on Isabel Avenue near Ohio Street in West St. Paul, they doubtless discussed Seeger's circumstances. Yoerg loaned his son-in-law the funds to maintain the company for the next eight years. The 1880-1881 *St. Paul City Directory* listed John A. Seeger's business interests as "Lumber and Contractor and Builder, yard corner of St. Peter and Sixth, shop, corner of Eagle and Washington." Besides the financial assistance from his father-in-law, Seeger was using the site of the first Yoerg's brewery for his cabinet-making work.

Seeger joined the Bohn Manufacturing Company (a builder of sash, doors, and blinds) as secretary in 1885, becoming a vice-president of the firm ten years later and its president in 1897. His association with the Bohn Manufacturing Company proved to be difficult, discordant, and litigious. As early as 1896 the company experienced financial difficulties, a pattern that would recur with increasing

complexity during the next eight years. In late December, 1899, James J. Hill loaned the business and its officers, Gebhard Bohn, George W. Bohn, and John A. Seeger, \$22,000, to meet a financial crisis.<sup>2</sup> Various banks in St. Paul and nearby country towns attempted to aid the company with loans on a short-term basis, but the transfusions proved useless.

During this period, Bohn Manufacturing Company received a subcontract from the Butler Brothers Construction Company, the general contractors for the building of the new state Capitol designed by Cass Gilbert, to provide the interior woodwork. While the project was underway, the Bohn Manufacturing Company endured intense financial pressures and had to assign to the National German American Bank its entire claim for payment of materials to be furnished for the new Capitol, valued at \$65,842. A few months later the firm collapsed in bankruptcy and its operations closed.<sup>3</sup>

As early as 1897 the Bohn Company



The earliest known photograph of the Seeger Syphon Refrigerator factory, 339-341-343 East Seventh at Pine Street, in 1904 or 1905. The two men above were the firm's first employees and both had worked with John A. Seeger as carpenters at the Bohn Manufacturing Company. Gustaf F. Steen, 715 East Jessamine, is at left, with John G. Fischer, 1033 Sims. Photograph from Mrs. Robert M. Reay.





*The first factory of the Seeger Refrigerator Company, 1902–1910, at 339, 341, and 343 East Seventh and Pine Streets. The original buildings have been destroyed and today the site is occupied by a gas station. Whirlpool Corporation photo.*

had begun to build iceboxes as a side line to its regular business, with Seeger in charge of the factory operations. For two years the company manufactured the iceboxes, whereupon Gebhard Bohn, the president of the firm, and his son Gebhard C. Bohn, severed connections with the business and established the White Enamel Refrigerator Company. The new firm bought the refrigerator stock and manufacturing equipment from the Bohn Manufacturing Company. Interestingly, in 1899 Adolph G. Gallasch joined the White Company as a one-third partner but left after little more than a year as the firm was suffering substantial losses.

In 1902, while serving as president of the Bohn Company, Seeger formed a partnership with Gallasch known as the Seeger-Gallasch Company. The firm, located at 339–341–343 East Seventh at Pine Street, made cabinets as well as iceboxes and ice cream cabinets. By 1905 the firm was known as the Seeger Siphon Refrigerator Company. Three years later the corporation was renamed the Seeger Refrigerator Company, and two of John A. Seeger's sons, Walter G. and Gustave R., joined him in operating the company. The Schuneman & Evans Department Store sold the young firm's products in St. Paul, as did the Boutell Brothers Furniture Store in Minneapolis.

By 1906 Gebhard Bohn's firm, the White Enamel Refrigerator Company, had become the American Car and Foundry Company. The firm was manufacturing refrigerator cars for railroads and refrigeration units for dining cars based on the siphon system, as was Seeger-Gallasch. The interests of Bohn and Seeger were on a collision course, since both firms claimed to be manufacturing refrigerators using the same cooling process. In 1906 Seeger-Gallasch initiated legal action against the American Car & Foundry Company to clarify its right to use the Quinn siphon cooling patent and process on its products.<sup>4</sup>

A series of events stretching over nearly a decade describes the dispute. Quinn assigned the use of his patent on August 27, 1897, to Gebhard Bohn, George W. Bohn, John A. Seeger, and John H. Ames, the officers of the Bohn Manufacturing Company. In May, 1898,



for reasons that are not clear (quite possibly certain fees had not been paid to him), Quinn assigned to Fred H. Johnson of Portland, Maine, all rights to the siphon system patent. The next year Johnson transferred the rights to a new entity, the Quinn Refrigerator Company. In 1905 the Quinn Company transferred the well-traveled patent to Adolph G. Galasch, including "its entire right, title and interest in and to said Letter, Patent and to the invention or improvements shown and described therein and secured thereby." On September 29, 1906, Galasch assigned to John A. Seeger all rights, title and interest in the patent.

The Seeger-Gallasch application of the Quinn patent involved insertion of an open inverted "V" partition between the ice and storage chambers, thereby allowing for easy, or siphoned, passage of cool or "refrigerated" air around perishable produce. It was this series of open spaces resembling siphons placed between the ice and refrigerated bunkers that distinguished Quinn's patent from earlier patents. Quinn's achievement was to introduce into refrigerators a new method of promoting the circulation of a confined body of air by the use of the open air spaces in a partition.

The legal case brought by Seeger-Gallasch against the White Enamel Refrigerator Company achieved celebrated status in the annals of Minnesota corporate law. It dragged on for twelve years, and cost thousands of dollars. The Bohn defense enlisted the services of law firms on its behalf in St. Paul, Minneapolis, New York, Boston, Baltimore and St. Louis.

In St. Paul Bohn was represented by the firm of Davis, Kellogg and Severance (now Briggs and Morgan), while Seeger-Gallasch was represented by Butler, Mitchell and Doherty, a predecessor of Doherty, Rumble and Butler. The case was heard in the United States District Court between July 22 and August 5, 1918. The court decided in favor of the Seeger Refrigerator Company, giving the firm a strong marketing impetus in an emerging household and commercial market.

From 1888 until its 1904 liquidation, the Bohn Manufacturing Company's plant was located at the southeast corner

Physicians praise our Refrigerators because they are constructed on sanitary lines and are the *Best Made*.



No. 30—Style W.

Style W, panel door..... \$40.00  
Style G, glass door..... 43.00

DIMENSIONS IN INCHES.

	Width	Depth	Height
Outside.....	41½	22	50
Provision chamber.....	18	16	37
Ice chamber.....	12½	15	31
Capacity of ice chamber.....	120 lbs.		
Shipping weight.....	315 lbs.		



No. 38—Style W. W.

Style W. W., two panel doors..... \$55.00  
Style U.G., upper door glass, lower door panel..... 57.00  
Style G. G., two glass doors..... 60.00

DIMENSIONS IN INCHES.

	Width	Depth	Height
Outside.....	41½	22¾	66
Provision chamber.....	18	16	53
Ice chamber.....	12½	16	47
Capacity of ice chamber.....	160 lbs.		
Shipping weight.....	400 lbs.		

Glass or panel doors as desired.

## Important Points Necessary in Refrigeration

*The Seeger Dry Air Siphon Enamel Lined Refrigerator provides for all of these:—*

Fresh, pure and dry atmosphere;  
Continuous circulation, which  
Carries off and destroys all odors;  
Absence of moisture and mold;

Sanitary and perfect drainage;  
White enamel baked-on lining;  
Low and uniform temperature;  
Saving in consumption of ice.

## Guarantee

Every *Seeger Siphon Refrigerator* is guaranteed as represented by us. If after a week's trial the refrigerator does not do what we claim for it, write us and if we cannot in every particular satisfy you we will take the refrigerator back, pay freight both ways, and refund your money. We ask you, isn't that fair? Write us.

A 1905 catalog of the refrigerators manufactured by the Seeger-Gallasch Company. The refrigerators could be purchased directly from the company, from the Schuneman & Evans Department Store in St. Paul, or from Boutell Brothers Furniture Store in Minneapolis. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

of Arcade Avenue and Wells Street. Ironically, and undoubtedly with a desire to rekindle and recover his nearly twenty-year association with the failed firm, John A. Seeger, during the difficult liti-

gation against Gebhard Bohn and the American Car and Foundry Company, purchased the old Bohn facilities in 1910 from the St. Paul Title and Insurance Company. Out of the production and



warehouse facilities of the old Bohn factory Seeger would build his enterprise. A small wood-working department occupied the ground floor, with the cabinet makers and assemblers on the second floor. The finishing and crating tasks were handled on the top floor. The Seeger Refrigerator Company plant had a long life, serving as a manufacturing facility until it was closed on December 28, 1984.<sup>5</sup> Today a few remnants of its extensive assembly lines and warehouses remain adjacent to the buildings of Seeger Square and reaching from Arcade on the west to Forest on the east of the site.

The company grew in a steady manner under John A. Seeger's leadership, especially after he had traveled to Chicago, Philadelphia and New York seeking orders for the firm. He was concerned about the seasonal nature of a business that experienced a heavy demand for its products during the spring, summer, and fall months, but saw a decline in orders during the winter. To keep his carpenters busy year-round, Seeger sought long-term orders from key department stores in the East and Middle West. In Philadelphia he secured a commitment from the John Wanamaker Department Store to manufacture its iceboxes, while soon afterwards Marshall Field in Chicago followed suit. Not much later the company supplied Seeger iceboxes to Sears, Roebuck and Company and Montgomery Ward for their customers.

By 1920 the firm was building 2,600 iceboxes a year. The wooden icebox was the staple of the company until about 1927. For many antique hunters today who are searching for an oak icebox for their collections, a Seeger piece is recognized as a prized object. But times were quickly changing, particularly with the spread of electricity for home and commercial use.

Early in the 1920s the appearance of the electric refrigerator changed the icebox industry. The public demand for the new product was immediately positive and strong. A number of firms doing business on a large scale were caught unprepared for the technological and electrical advances in the industry. With foresight, imagination, good business sense and two uncontrollable factors, excellent



*A 1920 oak icebox built by the Seeger firm. The company produced 2,600 units that year. Whirlpool Corporation photo.*



*The celebrated 1935 "Coldspot Super 6" designed by Raymond Loewy. Whirlpool Corporation photo.*

timing and good fortune, the Seeger Company rolled up its sleeves and went into action immediately.

The firm had set up one of the first porcelain enameling plants in the nation in 1919 and was strategically positioned for the new changes in the field. This enabled the company to manufacture boxes for electric refrigerators for such well-known home appliance manufacturers as General Electric, Kelvinator, Norge,

Westinghouse, Copeland, Fairbanks Morse, and Amana.

John A. Seeger established the production norms to fill the contract for the first electric boxes produced by General Electric, and this box became the standard for the industry. When the leaders of the home appliance industry started manufacturing their own refrigerator cabinets, the Seeger Company secured large orders for its cabinets from Sears, Roebuck and Company, Montgomery Ward and others. Nowadays, complex and signed contracts are the normal practice among corporations, government agencies, and individuals; the Seeger experience and association with Sears was different. The symbols of the working ties between John A. and Walter G. Seeger with General Robert E. Wood, chairman of Sears, Roebuck and Company, were merely their word and a handshake. That simple, trusting, and honorable manner of doing business has passed from the scene with the icebox.

The association with Sears was remarkable for its ethical base and its duration, and remains so today. Possibly it is the longest standing relationship between a merchandiser and its supplier in the history of American business. It is a tie which is interesting on another basis, too. In 1934 General Wood, seeking to streamline the style of the Coldspot refrigerators marketed by Sears for an ever expanding consumer population, retained the flamboyant designer Raymond Loewy to redesign the appliance. The introduction of the 1935 refrigerator, called "Coldspot Super 6," greatly influenced the appearance of kitchen appliances.

Loewy made the refrigerator into a rectangular component entirely usable for storage and gave detailed consideration to all hardware as a part of the total design. His efforts were brilliantly successful. Loewy's design won first prize at the Paris International Exposition of 1937. Later Loewy recalled in his autobiography that the Sears, Roebuck success was the turning point in his career. He was launched on his professional path as one of the foremost industrial designers of the twentieth century. The redesigned refrigerator gave Sears and Seeger, the manufacturer, a resounding commercial





Walter G. Seeger, in his pine paneled office, June, 1945. Photograph from Mrs. Robert M. Reay.



John Seeger Holl, Walter G. Seeger's successor as president of the family firm, June, 1945. Photograph from Mrs. Robert M. Reay.



Gustave R. Seeger, vice president of manufacturing operations, at his office in late 1944. Photograph from Mrs. Robert M. Reay.

triumph in 1935. Sales increased to 275,000 units per year against 65,000 for the previous model. In 1937 Seeger shipped 308,551 refrigerators from its Arcade Street plant.<sup>6</sup>

The years 1924 and 1925 witnessed

substantial changes and expansion of the Arcade Street plant. A large steel warehouse was erected for the storage of finished goods; a new assembly and wood-mill building was added; a modern porcelain shop, equipped with the newest equipment was constructed; and a small neighboring manufacturing plant was purchased. The factory become more mechanized and electrically driven conveyors were installed. Production reached sixty cabinets a day, an accomplishment which amazed John A. Seeger, who by now was placing more and more responsibility for plant operations and management in the hands of his two sons.

Following the introduction and the enormous success of the "Coldspot Super 6" in 1935, the firm was forced to expand its facilities again to serve the manufacturing needs of a plant employing 2,000 workers and operating with three shifts twenty-four hours a day. In 1936 a three story building was erected as an addition to the original Bohn plant. This new space was used to increase the floor and operating needs of the metal shop. Across Arcade Street a large one story fireproof building was erected for the warehousing of finished appliances.

During the 1920s the company established sales offices in several strategic cities across the country. From its headquarters in St. Paul, branch operations were set up in Boston, New York and Atlanta on the East Coast; in Chicago in the heartland; and in Los Angeles and Seattle on the West Coast. Seeger refrigerators, ice machines, and other appliances soon appeared in private homes, restaurants, hotels, hospitals, clubs, schools and colleges at every point on the compass, from Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, to the St. Paul Athletic Club, to the castle of newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst at San Simeon in California.

The company did not have a role in World War I, but World War II, twenty-five years later, presented a much different situation. By 1941 thirty-nine years after its founding, the Seeger Refrigerator Company, employer of more than 2,500 people, manufactured more than 300,000 household cabinets yearly, plus a line of commercial reach-in refrigerators and display cases for restaurants, grocery stores, meat markets, and clubs. The firm's plant on Arcade occupied 643,000 square feet on fourteen-and-a-half acres.

In early 1942 the company dedicated its facilities completely to the production of military products. Seeger assembly lines began to manufacture stainless steel "ammunition chutes," a mechanism that connected the ammunition supply box to the gun, and parachute flares to illuminate targets for bomber crews on night combat flights during the months before the invention of radar. Assembly line workers built lockers to keep shells dry on the decks of ships; they manufactured drop fuel tanks for the wing tips of combat airplanes and bomb racks for B-29 airplanes. As the war was coming to a close in Europe and the Pacific, the company received approval to produce 90-millimeter shells; however, the war ended before full-scale manufacturing began. For its efficiency of production the company was twice awarded (in October, 1944, and April, 1945) the coveted Army-Navy "E" award for its manufacture of war equipment.<sup>7</sup>

In 1945, after a forty-one month period of wartime production, the company





*The company was awarded the coveted War Department's "E" flag twice for efficiency in production of war materials. At the October, 1944 ceremonies at the Seeger factory are U.S. Navy Commander George F. Jacobs, left; Walter G. Seeger accepting the award, and U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Bailey A. Wright. Photograph from Mrs. Robert M. Reay.*

returned to manufacturing domestic and commercial refrigerators and freezers. A strong public demand for household appliances arose after the war years when they had not been manufactured. The building boom that gripped the United States during the late 1940s and 1950s in cities and towns across the country also fueled the need for home refrigerators and freezers. Again events, timing, good fortune and keen business leadership were significant ingredients in Seeger's success. In 1950 ice-machines were introduced to the company's product line, followed the next year by vacuum cleaners manufactured at a Cottage Grove plant.<sup>8</sup>

As the introduction of electricity in homes and businesses changed living and working patterns for people in the 1920s, new economic circumstances after the close of World War II prompted corporations like Seeger to seek new ways to produce its goods and survive in an ex-

panding and increasingly more competitive marketplace. As a step in this direction, the company merged with the Sunbeam Electric Manufacturing Company of Evansville, Indiana, on March 31, 1945, a step taken to insure high quality electrical components for its products.

The Seeger company's work force swelled to more than 5,000 employees. For little more than a year the name of the corporation was Seeger-Sunbeam. In late 1946 the firm's name reverted to Seeger Refrigerator Company, as it had been known for more than four decades. Two years later the company manufactured refrigerator products not only for Sears, Roebuck and Company, but also for Montgomery Ward and the Fridgidare Division of General Motors. The firm now manufactured at its plants in St. Paul and Evansville more than 10 percent of the nation's refrigerators.<sup>9</sup>

The company was a privately held corporation for more than fifty years,

controlled by Seeger family members, the descendants of John A. Seeger, who died on August 28, 1938, and his wife Elvina Yoerg Seeger, who passed away on May 19, 1940. If John A. Seeger was "the King" of the business operations and of the closely knit family, it must be fairly noted that he was supported by a team of other family members, including sons, sons-in-law, a daughter-in-law, grandsons, grandsons-in-law, and officers who were not relatives. Among the family members who advanced the company's interests were Walter G. Seeger, Gustave R. Seeger, Martha K. Seeger, Charles A. Muessel, Robert S. Ahrens, John S. Holl, John W. Seeger, Robert M. Reay, and John M. Wooldridge, Jr. The team of non-family members who helped in the development of the company included Neil H. Griebenow, John J. Leonard and Clarence W. Moberg.

To meet the need for more money to support the firm's expanding opportunities, the stock of the company was registered on the New York Stock Exchange in September, 1955, and the shares were offered to the public. Another company milestone was reached a few months later with the merger of the Seeger Refrigerator Company, the Appliance Division of the Radio Corporation of America, and the Whirlpool Company (three key suppliers to Sears, Roebuck and Company). It was a move that immediately created a powerful participant in the national home appliance market.

For the next two years the company was known as the Whirlpool-Seeger Corporation, with Walter G. Seeger, the son of the founder, serving as chairman. In 1957, as a step toward establishing easier name recognition for its products, the company again changed its name to the Whirlpool Corporation. Whirlpool already had brand name recognition while Seeger was a maker and supplier to companies such as Sears and Wards which re-marketed Seeger's merchandise under their own names. Walter G. Seeger served as a director of the corporation until six months before his death in January, 1969.<sup>10</sup> After Walter's death, John Seeger Holl served as an executive vice-president and director of the company until 1978, thus maintaining the continuity of



the family link to the new corporation.

After 1956 the Seeger plants on Arcade Street and in Cottage Grove continued to operate as a division of the Whirlpool Corporation. Since 1910 the factory at Arcade and Wells Streets had employed thousands of East Side men and women. The company was a trailblazer in the employment of African Americans, setting a high standard of corporate social responsibility. Also, each summer a steady stream of students from Mechanic Arts High School, of which Walter and Gustave Seeger were alumni, found vacation jobs there.

Not only was the neighborhood a place to work but the Seeger family ties were firmly on the East Side of St. Paul. As early as 1888-89 John A. Seeger and his family resided at 652 East Fifth Street, moving by 1902 across the avenue to a handsome brick house that still stands. Here, at 657 East Fifth Street, Seeger and his wife would live the re-

mainder of their lives. Both Walter G. and Gustave R. began their married lives in the same area, as did other family members.

The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were growth years in the appliance industry and Whirlpool expanded steadily. The recession of the early 1980s, however, changed the economic landscape and raised business issues that the company had considered at regular intervals earlier. The decline in vacuum cleaner sales in 1983 prompted the closing of the Cottage Grove plant and the transfer of its production operations to the corporation's Danville, Kentucky, facility at the end of the year.<sup>11</sup> Both George Latimer, mayor of St. Paul, and Rudy Perpich, governor of Minnesota, met with Whirlpool executives in hopes of halting the closure. Their efforts proved futile. Employees, union leaders, and civic officials feared that the refrigerator plant was to be next on the list.

On April 19, 1984, the Whirlpool Corporation announced it was considering closing the Arcade Street factory and that it would undertake a study during the following two months to examine the prospect of consolidating refrigerator and freezer production at other company plants.<sup>12</sup> Surprisingly, one week later on April 26, 1984, the company announced that the Arcade Street factory, identified with the Seeger family and their refrigerator company since 1910, would close at the end of the year.<sup>13</sup> Despite the intervention of elected officials and union leaders, the decision stood. The conveyor belt ran for its last day on Friday, December 28, 1984; every twenty-two to thirty-three seconds a finished freezer rolled off the assembly line.<sup>14</sup>

On that last day of production, about 625 workers operated the company's production line. Their average age was forty-seven years and they had worked for Whirlpool and Seeger for an average



A stock certificate for the company during the brief period in 1945 and 1946 when it was known as the Seeger-Sunbeam Corporation. Whirlpool Corporation photo.



of twenty-two years.<sup>15</sup> The workers were understandably angry, disappointed and sad at the plant's closing. The factory had been a strong social and economic presence on the East Side and in St. Paul for more than seven decades.

One observer noted that "Like Seeger before it, Whirlpool was considered a source of secure employment and decent wages on the East Side. It has been around for eighty years. If you didn't finish high school or didn't go off to college you worked at Whirlpool. Some families are on the third generation there."<sup>16</sup> Employee Kathy Youngquist said, "If there is one thing the workers at Whirlpool will want to remember, it's the way they worked together, everybody is like a brother and sister, or mother and father to each other."<sup>17</sup> Another worker, Kathy Ziemann, said that "Whirlpool was a good place to work for a lot of years."<sup>18</sup> Jim Shaw worked at the Arcade Street plant for thirty-seven years, beginning right after high school. At a five-year reunion picnic on July 22, 1989, for former employees of the company at Battle Creek Park, Shaw said "You miss them a whole lot. No job will ever be quite the same."<sup>19</sup>

Today the Whirlpool Corporation is the leading manufacturer of major home appliances in the world.<sup>20</sup> The company manufactures in eleven countries and markets products under ten major brand names in more than 120 countries. It is a global corporation poised to serve an ever expanding market in the twenty-first century. Its shadow in St. Paul, however, grows dimmer with each passing year; yet the legacy of John A. Seeger, Walter G. Seeger, Gustave R. Seeger, and John S. Holl, is as vital and vigorous today as it was in 1910, 1920, 1950 or 1970. The bold initiatives of John A. Seeger, the son of German immigrants and former apprentice cabinet-maker who intrepidly moved from working as a builder and contractor to manufacturing iceboxes, created a vital business organization for St. Paul and Ramsey County. His farsighted adaptation of the electric refrigerator, and the vision of his sons and grandson that positioned the corporation as a powerful participant in an emerging world of global interdependence, helped

make the Whirlpool Corporation one of the nation's largest companies.

The legacy of Seeger family members' contributions to the life of the St. Paul and Ramsey County community has been no less valuable than the strength and productivity of their company. The Seeger Refrigerator Company employed thousands of persons through the years, and tens of thousands of home appliances rolled off the assembly lines for households and commercial establishments near and far.

While the Seegers all lived and worked in the city, they also contributed to the fabric of the community. John A. Seeger served for several years in the late 1920s and early 1930s as chairman of the United Improvement Council, a group of citizens concerned even then about revitalizing downtown St. Paul; as a member of the St. Paul Library Board; and as a member of the commission for the construction of the Civic Auditorium. Following in his father's footsteps, Walter G. Seeger served as president of the St. Paul Association of Commerce; president of the St. Paul Baseball Club, the original "Saints"; as a member of the board of directors of several St. Paul and Minneapolis corporations; and as a trustee of the Shriners Hospitals for Crippled Children.

John Seeger Holl, the last family member to serve as president of Seeger Refrigerator Company and who for more than twenty years was an officer of the Whirlpool Corporation, continued the family's tradition of community service. Macalester College, Concordia College, the Children's Hospital and United Hospitals all have benefited from his commitment of time, leadership and generosity. At the urging of his friend, the distinguished lawyer Wilfred E. Rumble, he was a founder and trustee of The Saint Paul Foundation, and lent his leadership to the Foundation's early years—contributions that continue to leave their stamp on the community and will do so for generations to come.

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*merous books and articles, including the sixth edition of the best-selling guidebook, Searching for Your Ancestors (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1992). Bell is completing an account of the Seeger family and he would like to hear from former Seeger Refrigerator Company employees about their recollections of working at the firm. Several persons have helped in the preparation of this article, providing numerous oral interviews and sharing company and family memorabilia. The author is particularly indebted to Miriam Seeger Bell, Mrs. Robert M. Reay (Miriam I. Seeger), John Seeger Holl, Mrs. John D. Tearse (Dorthea L. Seeger), and Jack C. Foote for much first hand information. At the Whirlpool Corporation's headquarters in Benton Harbor, Michigan, the chairman, David Whitwam, extended the extraordinary resources of the company's history. David Krieger, supervisor of the corporation's records, made the task of research easy through the mails and during a visit to Benton Harbor. He readily provided the author with many details regarding the firm's story and searched the corporate archives for details and photographs of Seeger Refrigerator Company products which illuminate this account.*

## ENDNOTES

1. For an extensive discussion of the controversy surrounding William Seeger during his brief months of service as treasurer of the state of Minnesota, see Frank R. Holmes, *Minnesota in Three Centuries* (St. Paul, 1908), IV, 54-56; also, William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (St. Paul, 1926), III, 357-62. I am grateful to Scott Seeger Bell for suggesting that these works should be read along with Theodore Dreiser's fascinating novel, *The Financier*, which chronicles the financial practices of city and state government officials after the Civil War. As much new information is now available regarding partisan political financial interests and conflicts in state legislatures of the period, the Seeger incident in Minnesota should be revisited for a more complete assessment.

2. For details regarding James J. Hill's loan to the Bohn Manufacturing Company and its chief officers and his subsequent legal action to recover monies owed him, see the records of the St. Paul law firm of Davis, Kellogg and Sever-





Seeger employees assembling freezer cabinets ca. 1948. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

ance, Minnesota Historical Society, File Number 2302.

3. For details regarding the Bohn Manufacturing Company's proposal to provide the interior woodwork for the state Capitol, signed by John A. Seeger as president, see the State Capitol Board of Commissioner Records, Minnesota Historical Society, Box Number 3; State Capitol Board of Commissioners Minute Book, 315, 325; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 4, 1902. Also the Cass Gilbert Collection, Drawings for the Minnesota State Capitol, Minnesota Historical Society, Plans 281-87, 290-91. For correspondence between Bohn Manufacturing Company and Butler Brothers Construction Company, see the Davis, Kellogg and Severance Records, Minnesota Historical Society, File Number 2355. I am grateful to Carolyn Kompelien, manager of the Capitol site, for sharing with me her knowledge of the building's original interior woodwork and for providing me with an extensive tour of the Capitol to view first-hand the work of John A. Seeger's firm. For details relating to the legal proceedings surrounding

the liquidation of the Bohn Manufacturing Company, see the Davis, Kellogg and Severance Records, File Numbers 2302, 2355, and 2380.

4. See the Davis, Kellogg and Severance Records, File Numbers 3047, 3048, and 3049 for extensive details regarding the law suit.

5. The acquisition of the former Bohn Manufacturing Company property on Arcade by the Seeger Refrigerator Company is recounted in the Ramsey County Register of Deeds Records, May 11, 1910, Record numbers 405178, 405179. *Seeger News*. X. June, 1946. 4.

6. *New York Times*, April 15, 1994. A-29; Raymond Loewy, *Never Leave Well Enough Alone* (New York, 1951), 125-130. *The Designs of Raymond Loewy* (Washington, D.C., 1975), 37. Angela Schonberger editor, *Raymond Loewy: Pioneer of American Industrial Design* (Munich, 1990), 80-81, 146, 232.

7. *Seeger News*. VIII. December, 1944. 2. *Ibid.*, IX. June, 1945. 4.

8. *Northern States Power Magazine*. March, 1955. 3-5.

9. Walter G. Seeger. Address to the members of the Board of Directors of the Northwest Bancorporation on the history of the Seeger Refrigerator Company, April 23, 1948.

10. *Investor's Reader*. 28. No. 5. March 6, 1957. 13-15. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, August 21, 1968, 17.

11. *Ibid.*, July 16, 1983, Section A, 1.

12. *Ibid.*, April 20, 1984, Section B, 16.

13. *Ibid.*, April 27, 1984, Section A, 1, 4.

14. *Ibid.*, December 23, 1984, Section A, 1; December 28, 1984, Section C, 3; December 29, 1984, Section A, 1.

15. *Ibid.*, December 23, 1984, Section A, 1.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, December 28, 1984, Section C, 1.

18. *Ibid.*, December 29, 1984, Section A, 1.

19. *Ibid.*, July 23, 1989, Section B, 1.

20. *Ibid.*, November 26, 1993, Section E, 1; *Wall Street Journal*, January 27, 1994, Section B, 4; *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 1994, Section A, 10. *Barron's*, September 26, 1994, 17-18.





*St. Paul around 1869 was still a rather rude frontier town and not exactly the "second city of magnificent distances" described by the Eastern press who descended on the village in 1854. This view of a muddy Jackson Street looks north from Third Street. The St. Paul Hotel, right, was built in 1846-1847 and developed into the Merchants Hotel. See article about the Great Railroad Excursion of 1854, beginning on page 14. McLeish & Pasel photo, Minnesota Historical Society.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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