

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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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.

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in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr.

A Message from the Editorial Board

This 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

Who was Millard Fillmore? And What was He Doing in St. Paul?

Millard Fillmore was the thirteenth president of the United States and perhaps "the least impressive of all American presidents," according to one rather morose historian. Indeed, he has tended to come down in history as "the forgotten man of the presidency," despite the fact that a number of events with long-term national and international consequences took place during his three years in office.

Fillmore was the country's second accidental president. He was Zachary Taylor's vice president and succeeded him when Taylor died in July, 1850, less than eighteen months into his first term. Taylor also had a Minnesota connection. He was commandant at Fort Snelling between 1828 and 1829. He didn't like Minnesota. Too cold, he complained.

Taylor and Fillmore didn't exactly function in tandem. They had never met before their election and once in office, Taylor largely ignored his vice president. A founder of the Whig party, Fillmore supported the Compromise of 1850. Taylor did not. The measure, which dealt with slavery issues, passed after Taylor's death. Although it left both sides less than happy, it had far reaching effects in that it may have put off the Civil War for a decade.

Fillmore also was the president who sent Commodore Matthew Perry to Japan, opening the country's ports to American ships. Another event with unforeseen consequences.

Millard Fillmore was born in a log cabin in New York state in 1800. His schooling was sketchy, but he read law and was admitted to the bar in 1823. He was an experienced politician by the time he was elected vice president. He had served one term as a New York state assemblyman and several terms as a representative to Congress.

Fillmore loved books and amassed a personal library of 4,000 volumes. He encouraged the establishment of the first permanent White House library, but he



Millard Fillmore

is perhaps better known as the centerpiece of an apocryphal story concerning the first White House bathtub.

The story of Millard Fillmore and the bathtub was concocted by H. L. Mencken, journalist, essayist and "the Sage of Baltimore," after the outbreak of World War I. Mencken was an ardent supporter of his beloved Germany and he championed Kaiser Wilhelm. Mencken's political views didn't sit well with his newspaper editors. Not to put too fine a point on it, he found his efforts boycotted after the United States entered the war.

Mencken then invented a history of the bathtub that was filled with whimsical, totally false details, including the "fact" that in 1851 President Millard Fillmore bravely ordered a bathtub for the White House at a time, Mencken gravely wrote, when bathtubs were declared to be dangerous. The story was so widely published that Mencken finally was forced to retract it—twice. Even so, it gained such credence that President Truman used to repeat it for White House visitors, and it surfaced again as fact in a 1992 article in a Washington newspaper.

After Fillmore was denied renomination for the presidency in 1853, he embarked on a tour of the South and Northwest. The tour brought him to St. Paul on the Great Railroad Excursion of 1854.

Fillmore had a personal connection to St. Paul. His younger brother, Charles DeWitt Fillmore, had come to Minnesota Territory in 1852, perhaps as one of the thousands of pioneers who were pouring into the newly opened territory.

Charles Fillmore and C. H. Parker opened a land office in Parker's banking office near Seven Corners "for the prosecution of all business in any manner growing out of transactions in real estate in the Territory of Minnesota." In other words, they were real estate speculators at a time when the territory was in the grip of the great real estate boom of the 1850s.

Among the properties Fillmore & Parker listed was a house and lot on Walnut Street in "Irvine's and Rice's addition" in the Irvine Park neighborhood; a lot on Cedar and Bench streets in St. Paul "proper" (downtown); and "a new brick dwelling house and grounds on Trout Brook." In short, they were dealing all over town.

Charles Fillmore didn't remain long in St. Paul. He died an untimely death from an unknown cause on November 22, 1854, at the age of thirty-two. A doleful story about his funeral has survived him. According to T. M. Newson's history, the hearse bearing Fillmore's remains was climbing a slight rise on Fort Road when the doors on the back of the hearse fell open and the casket slithered onto the road.

Millard Fillmore made what seems to have been a half-hearted run for the presidency in 1855 as the Know-Nothing party's nominee. Traveling in Europe, he mailed in his acceptance. He polled 21 percent of the vote and lost.

Fillmore died in Buffalo, New York, on March 8, 1874, from the effects of a stroke. He was seventy-four years old. It is interesting to note that his body lay in state in St. Paul's Cathedral in Buffalo.

V.B.K.



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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