

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

Executive Director
Priscilla Farnham
Editor
Virginia Brainard Kunz

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Joanne A. Englund
Chairman of the Board

John M. Lindley
President

Laurie Zenner
First Vice President

Judge Margaret M. Marrinan
Second Vice President

Richard A. Wilhoit
Secretary

James Russell
Treasurer

Arthur Baumeister, Jr., Alexandra Bjorklund,
Andrew Boss, Thomas Boyd, Mark Eisen-
schenk, John Harens, Marshall Hatfield, Liz
Johnson, Richard Long, Laurie Murphy,
Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Thomond O'Brien,
Robert Olsen, Vicenta Scarlett, Evangeline
Schroeder, Jane Thiele, Anne Cowie Wilson.

EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chairman; Thomas H.
Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Laurie M.
Murphy, Dr. Thomas B. Mega.

HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

Elmer L. Andersen, Coleman Bloomfield,
Olivia I. Dodge, Charlton Dietz, William
Finney, Clarence Frame, Otis Godfrey, Jr.,
Ronald Hachey, Reuel D. Harmon, Robert S.
Hess, Ronald M. Hubbs, Fred T. Lanners, Jr.,
Don Larson, George Latimer, Lewis Lehr,
David Marsden, Robert B. Mirick, Samuel
H. Morgan, Marvin J. Pertzik, J. Jerome
Plunkett, Peter S. Popovich, James Reagan,
Rosalie E. Wahl, Donald D. Wozniak.

RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Hal Norgard, chairman
Commissioner Susan Haigh
Commissioner John Finley
Commissioner Rafael Ortega
Commissioner Warren Schaber
Commissioner Brenda Thomas
Commissioner Richard Wedell

Terry Schutten, manager, Ramsey County

Ramsey County History is published quar-
terly by the Ramsey County Historical Soci-
ety, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth
Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102. Printed in
U.S.A. Copyright, 1995, Ramsey County
Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-
9758. All rights reserved. No part of this pub-
lication may be reprinted or otherwise repro-
duced without written permission from the
publisher. The Society assumes no responsi-
bility for statements made by contributors.

RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 30, Number 1

Spring, 1995

CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 From Iceboxes to Refrigerators
The Story of the Seeger Refrigerator Company
James B. Bell
- 14 The Great Railway Excursion of 1854
'The Most Notable Event of the Year'
Virginia Brainard Kunz
- 17 Who Was Millard Fillmore?
And What Was He Doing in St. Paul?
- 19 Growing Up in St. Paul
Gas Stoves, Gas Jets, Gas Lights And
Coal Through an Open Chute to the Cellar
Frieda Claussen
- 25 What's Historic About This Site?
The Benjamin Brunson House
And the East Side's Railroad Island
- 27 Contributors

Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported
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

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

The Great Railway Excursion of 1854— 'The Most Notable Event of that Year'

Virginia Brainard Kunz

St. Paul was little more than a settlement of some 6,000 souls, separated from the "great outside world" by thousands of miles and a mighty river, when the "most magnificent excursion, in every respect, which has ever taken place in America" docked at the Lower Landing at the foot on Jackson Street on June 8, 1854.

The Great Railroad Excursion of 1854 was the most notable event of that year—and for a good many succeeding years, for that matter—for St. Paul and for Minnesota. The excursion was organized to celebrate the completion of the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad, the first railroad to reach the Mississippi. To commemorate this signal achievement of those pre-Civil War years, Messrs. Sheffield & Farnham, the contractors who built the line, invited nearly 1,000 guests, including thirty-eight editors of Eastern newspapers, to be their guests on their "monster excursion." No one had to tell Sheffield & Farnham about promotion.

Their excursionists rendezvoused at Chicago on June 3, 1854, traveled west over the newly-laid rails to Rock Island, Illinois, then boarded five large steamers (historians still debate exactly how many boats were chartered), which conveyed them up the Mississippi to St. Paul. There they spent the day visiting the Falls of St. Anthony and Minnehaha Falls before repairing to the state Capitol, then a smallish Greek temple at—roughly—what is now Tenth and Wabasha Streets, for an evening of entertainment. The hall of the House of Representatives was used as a supper room and the Supreme Court chamber was appropriated as a ballroom. People knew how to party when they lived on the frontier.

Both before and after the Civil War, excursions were neither new nor unusual for Minnesota and other United States



St. Paul in 1851, three years before more than 1,000 visitors on a "monster excursion" descended upon the town. The city's residences, even three years later, weren't exactly "surrounded by beautiful and highly cultivated grounds and embowered in lovely groves of native forest trees." The traveling press was kind. Here, First Baptist Church (upper left) stands on Baptist Hill, the approximate site today of Mears Park. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

territories. As a matter of fact, they were standard in showing off, hyping and otherwise marketing a new territory just ripe for settlement. The possibility of making a fortune on cheap land and other pioneer opportunities, combined with development of the railroads, lured would-be settlers and made such excursions not only possible but downright exciting.

After Minnesota became a territory in 1849, immigration boomed. It wasn't unusual to find newspaper accounts of other smaller excursions to the region. St. Paul, St. Anthony, Minneapolis and other Minnesota river communities often entertained guests. Tourists were drawn to the newness and novelty of the region, and travel writers described the beauty of the Mississippi, the Falls of St. Anthony and

Minnehaha Falls for their readers back home. It was all part of the exuberant optimism that accompanied each successive wave in the opening of the West.

The 1854 excursion, however, was one of the greatest and most anticipated excursions of its day. William J. Petersen described the excitement it engendered in a 1930s article in *Minnesota History*. Apparently Messrs. Sheffield & Farnham had invited the *country* to join their excursion.

Requests for passes were so numerous, Petersen wrote, that the Minnesota Packet Company, which was providing the steamboats, had to increase the number from one to five. So lavish were the preparations that an Eastern newspaper said the affair "could not be rivaled by the mightiest among the potentates of Eu-



St. Paul from Capitol hill, looking toward the river about 1866-1867. The rounded dome in the left center of this photograph crowns the Capitol where excursionists dined in the hall of the House of Representatives, listened to speeches in the Senate chamber and danced in the Supreme Court chamber. Whitney's Gallery photo, Minnesota Historical Society.

rope." Besides, it was all free. No wonder so many flocked to climb aboard.

Stories from all those thirty-eight editors from the Eastern press dwelt to a great extent on the glories, as well as the enthusiastic chaos, of the excursion itself. As was customary among newsmen, even then, some of these accounts were reprinted in the St. Paul newspapers.

"... guests have been brought hither free of charge from different places, distant thousands of miles, invited by hosts to them unknown, simple contractors and directors of railroads and steamboats." And the Rock Island's bondholders and stockholders, of course.

Among the distinguished guests was Millard Fillmore, who might have been the first American president to visit Minnesota were it not for a slight glitch. His single term of office had ended in 1853. He was accompanied by his daughter, Mary Abigail Fillmore. Other notables along for the ride included Samuel J. Tilden, who would be an unsuccessful presidential candidate in 1876; Ninian Edwards, former Illinois governor; Elbridge Gerry; Francis P. Blair, Sr., and Jr.; the famous historian George Bancroft; and Catherine M. Sedgwick, "one

of the more notable women to make the trip." (She was a writer.)

The excursionists left the Rock Island station in Chicago early in the morning of June 5 in two trains of nine coaches, each gaily decorated with flowers, flags and streamers. "Speeches, military parades and the industrious discharge of cannon greeted [them] on every hand," the press reported.

They arrived at Rock Island at 4 p.m. the same day. The five boats were quickly jammed and two more were chartered and they still were not enough. Besides that, the newspapers reported, "state-rooms had been allotted at Chicago... but many of the tickets had been lost, and very many persons had none at all."

Many of the young men found they would have to sleep on the floor. Fully one-third of the guests renounced the trip altogether and returned to Chicago. But 1,200 remained aboard and were entertained with "a sumptuous feast," speeches and a "brilliant display of fireworks from Fort Armstrong." Bows of the boats were wreathed with prairie flowers and evergreens.

They sailed from Davenport at 10 p.m. "with music on their decks...

1854 Excursion Revisited (Without Millard Fillmore)

The St. Paul Riverfront Corporation hopes to stage a second grand excursion for the year 2004, 150th anniversary of the first. In the meantime, ex-President Fillmore's brief appearance in St. Paul in 1854 has so intrigued riverfront planners that a move is afoot to create a Millard Fillmore Society as a way of focusing attention on the river.

lighted by the moon and saluted by [the] fireworks..." There were frequent landings at scattered settlements along the river for the steamboats to "wood up." Festivities on board included dancing, promenades on deck, speeches by ex-president Fillmore and other noted guests, toasts, even a mock trial.

James F. Babcock of the *New Haven Palladium* wrote that: "We have had oysters and lobsters daily, though two thousand miles from the sea. These, of course, were brought in sealed cans. Hens, turkeys and ducks have given their last squeal every morning. Two cows on the lower deck furnish us with fresh milk



St. Paul's City Hall, built in 1857 on the site today of Landmark Center. Immigrants were still pouring into Minnesota Territory, but the boom ended suddenly that year, snuffed out by the Panic of 1857. Minnesota Historical Society

twice a day . . . dessert consists of all kinds of fruits, nuts, cakes, confections [and] ices . . .”

Historian William Watts Folwell, wrote that “On reaching Lake Pepin, the steamers were lashed abeam, after which they swept on through the lake while the people passed sociably from boat to boat.”

Much of the newspaper coverage included fulsome praise for the scenery and for St. Paul and its environs. Excerpts from a long *Chicago Democrat* article were reprinted in the *St. Paul Daily Pioneer* on June 10, 1854:

“The view of the city, approaching from the river, is certainly very imposing and could be made, as no doubt it will be, very beautiful. The city stands on two ledges or bluffs, the lowest of which is sixty-five feet above the high water mark. There is ample space between the bases of these cliffs and the water, for an admirable levee for reception and discharge of river freight. There are several warehouses for storage and commission upon

the levee, although the principal business of the place appears to be done in the centre of the city.

“ . . . We saw exclusive hardware, queensware, dry goods, hat and cap, boot and shoe stores . . . Property in the city is held at a pretty high figure, and farming land near the city is valued at prices which would alarm even a Chicago Real Estate Dealer. . . .

“ . . . St. Paul covers an immense space of ground and may, in its present condition, be termed a second city of magnificent distances. The upper and lower towns together must extend some three miles from the steamboat landing up the river, and some half a mile back. . . . The private residences of the citizens are, in the great majority of instances, very neat and tasteful edifices, surrounded by beautiful and highly cultivated grounds and embowered in lovely groves of native forest trees.

“ . . . Its site is magnificent and we have never seen a spot better adapted by Nature for a showy and delightful display

of architecture and gardening than the natural terrace of hills upon which it stands. . . . It is, commercially speaking, the key to all the vast regions north of it, and, by the Minnesota River, to the immense valley drained by that important tributary of the Mississippi.”

Some newspapers—not all—referred tactfully to a slight hitch in the arrangements for greeting the visitors in St. Paul. The Committee of Arrangements for the reception of the railroad’s guests included some of St. Paul’s leading citizens. M. S. Wilkinson, George L. Becker, Charles W. Borup, William H. Randall and William R. Marshall were assigned to “attend the guests from the boats to the Capitol.”

Due to some still unaccountable mishap—certainly, one would hope, not the fault of the distinguished committee members—the excursionists arrived in St. Paul a day early, on June 8, 1854. The result was chaos. T. M. Newson, St. Paul historian and newspaper editor, described what happened next:

“Of course there was no telegraph in those days and the first intimation that people had of their coming—they had come! And such a scene! They rushed up Third Street, pitched headlong into the old American House, the starting point of the stages, climbed up on to the coaches; hired every hack and every carriage and cart they could find, at enormous figures, in order to reach St. Anthony and see the Falls before the boat made its return trip.

“The citizens were paralyzed. They put every vehicle they could find at the command of the visitors, but the crowd was so great and the rush so ill-timed and so inconsiderate, and so unexpected, that it was a mixed and hodge-podge affair, and as a consequence created considerable ill feeling.

“However,” Newson continued, “on their return from St. Anthony they were received at the Capitol and entertained as hospitably as the circumstances of the case would permit, but many of them went away mad—and among them were several reporters for the New York papers. . . .”

The *Chicago Journal*’s reporter seems

Excursion to page 18

not to have been along on the same excursion. Either that or he was gripped by an excess of tact. He wrote:

"On our arrival we found all the people of the place lining the landing to receive us, and every horse and wheel vehicle in readiness to convey the guests to the Falls of St. Anthony."

Nevertheless, Newson apparently had put his finger on the reason for the following jaundiced report in the June 17, 1854, *New York Times*:

"... every place we touched during our more than Argonautic expedition, the people received us gladly. With firing of canon they received us, but they fired no cannon at St. Paul's. With garlands of evergreen, and flaunting of banners, they received us—but there were no garlands or banners at St. Paul's. With vehicles, free of charge, to take us into the interior, they received us, giving us champagne into the bargain—but at St. Paul's there was no champagne (which was a slight fault)."

Vehicles, he complained, cost \$10 for a trip to St. Anthony Falls; a stage for eight, same distance, \$25. Chewing tobacco cost 25 cents.

"Those charges were a great sin," he proclaimed. "... a drinking friend, requiring some brandy (to counteract the effects of the Mississippi water), having a half-dollar in his pocket, placed it innocently on the bar-counter and beheld it swallowed up by the till..."

Warming to his theme, he declared that "St. Paul's... stands alone, unrivalled, unapproached, as the greediest place on all this Western Continent... The same system of extortion pervades every business proceeding. The land is fertile but very far behind the Illinois prairie land, which you can buy—the best of it—for \$10 an acre. Within three miles of St. Paul, inferior land is valued at from \$75 to \$100 an acre. Close to the city it is \$50. The fact is, it is in the hands of vulture speculators."

Local editors responded with a blast of scorn, sarcasm and vituperation. The *St. Paul Daily News* pointed out that "preparations had been made by the citizens to pay all the livery bills but the hur-

ried manner in which the guests came upon us prevented any sort of arrangement or system which had been laid out by the committee."

The visitors spent just a day in St. Paul. After supper in the hall of the House of Representatives, a large crowd assembled in the Senate chamber to hear speeches by ex-president Fillmore, historian George Bancroft and territorial governor Willis A. Gorman. Music and dancing in the Supreme Court chamber lasted until near midnight when the steamers departed for Rock Island, their happy celebrants on board.

"The ball was a regular squeeze," a report published in the *New York Evening Mirror* and reprinted in the *St. Paul Daily Pioneer* for July 1, 1854, declared. "And as we had all been warned to be on board at 11 p.m., the dancing was about as hurried and satisfactory as a running dinner at a railroad station." Everyone, the report added, "is delighted with the appearance and the location of the town; and there is no risk to capitalists who base their land operations in this vicinity on the calculation that St. Paul is destined to become the great metropolis of the North-West."

In typical nineteenth century fashion, the Reverend Edward Duffield Neill, the pioneer clergyman, couldn't resist putting his own spin on the event. In a sermon titled "Railroads in the higher and religious aspect," preached the Sunday after the visitors had departed, he offered his opinion that "railroads would prove an antidote to bigotry, which prevailed in remote and sparse settlements.

"Transported by railroads," he continued, "an eloquent preacher might discourse on a certain Sunday in an Atlantic city, on the next in the Mississippi Valley, on the third on the mountain tops of Oregon, and on the fourth on the Pacific Coast. A Pacific Railroad would be a voice in the wilderness, saying 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord!'... My hearers! some of you have tickets that will lead you to hell. The car of death is hastening on... we urge you to change that ticket. Christ is always in his office... Hasten before it is too late."

The excursion was marred by reports of an outbreak of cholera, (a common but

terrifying disease in those days) during the return trip down the river. Millard Fillmore's daughter, Mary Abigail, died suddenly at the age of twenty-two from cholera, perhaps contracted during the excursion.

Even so, the excursion was pronounced a success, and its salutary effect on Minnesota's trade and travel did not long go unnoticed. Railroad service to Rock Island increased steamboat trade on the upper Mississippi to the point where one of the lines added three new first class packets in 1854 alone.

"The tide of immigration is now pouring into Minnesota in greater numbers than at any other period," the *Daily Minnesotian* reported on October 4, 1854. As the immigration boom continued, the *Daily Pioneer* announced on May 5, 1855, that "The hotels are crowded to overflowing and every house in the city has its full quantum."

More than that, for Minnesotans the excursion meant that they "were part of the great outside world," in Folwell's words. "It meant, in the warm season, the daily mail, Chicago within thirty hours, and the national capital in four days and nights. It meant also a shorter and an easier journey for the thousands of people who had despaired of ever reaching the beautiful territory in the Northwest."

Looking back years later, Captain Russell Blakely, owner of a steamboat line, said: "The success of this visit and the character of the people, especially the editors of the daily press of the country, did more than the best laid plan for advertising the country that has been made since. It cost nothing, but the great papers of the day and the magazines of the country were full of the most laudatory literature in relation to the country... Good results came back to us in a thousand ways and for many years, as immigration commenced to turn its attention to Minnesota."

Virginia Brainard Kunz is editor of Ramsey County History. She wishes to thank Jane McClure for her research into the 1850s newspapers for accounts of the Great Railroad Excursion of 1854, and for the story of Charles Fillmore's brief sojourn in St. Paul.



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.
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul, MN
Permit #3989