

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Digging Into the Past—
The Gibbs
Claim Shanty

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Spring, 1996

Volume 31, Number 1

Childhood Among the Dakota

Jane Gibbs: 'Little Bird That Was Caught'

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Jane DeBow Gibbs (Zitkadan Usawin), an undated portrait by C. A. DeLong, Sunbeam Gallery, St. Anthony, Minnesota, dating from the 1880s. Ramsey County Historical Society archives. See article beginning on page 4.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue of *Ramsey County History* features the remarkable story of Jane DeBow Gibbs and her family on the Minnesota frontier. Deanne Weber's research on Jane Gibbs and her struggle to make a life for her family, along with Thomond O'Brien's report on the archeological dig for the Gibbs's sod shanty that the Ramsey County Historical Society undertook at the Gibbs Farm Museum last summer, have awakened new interest in Jane Gibbs, an otherwise ordinary woman of her times who displayed extraordinary strength of character in the face of substantial hardships. For the Society, this new research has prompted a total re-examination and reinterpretation of the Gibbs Farm Museum. For members of the Society and friends of Ramsey County history, we hope this issue of our magazine will be the beginning of their own reassessment of what life was like for Minnesotans in the middle of the nineteenth century.

John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

Sam's Cash-and-Carry, the Tiger Store— Payne Avenue and the 1930s Depression

Ray Barton

I spent my early childhood from 1930 to 1940 on the East Side of St. Paul, and lived most of that time with my parents and seven brothers and sisters in a lower duplex at 718 Sims Street, a large, old brick house that sat about ten feet above the street on a hill. I was the youngest in our family of eight children.

It was commonplace for families like ourselves who didn't own their homes to move frequently. The Depression of the 1930s made social changes that went far beyond the simple fact that millions of Americans went broke. A man might lose his job and be evicted from his home because he owed back rent. Or he might find a better job and move his family to a better house. Or he might move simply because the cost of transportation to and from work was greater than moving to a place where he could walk to his job.

During the 1930s St. Paul's ethnic groups tended to band together. Germans and Poles lived in the Rice Street neighborhood; African Americans in a narrow belt along Rondo Avenue; Mexican, Syrian, Lebanese, and Jewish families on the West Side river flats; Italian Americans along the upper levee of the Mississippi river as well as the area surrounding lower Payne Avenue. Our family, with an Irish-English background, fit into neither of the Italian or Scandinavian ethnic categories in the Payne Avenue neighborhood, but nevertheless we assimilated nicely into this mix.

My dad was a college graduate during the days when most people never went beyond grade school. He owned his own cream station in a small town, was a barber, and a salesman for the *St. Paul Dispatch-Pioneer Press* until the Depression shut down the country. It must have been a heavy blow for him to believe that in spite of all he had achieved in the first forty years of his life, he was suddenly a failure.



Ray Barton when he was about six years old. Photo from the author.

Late in life he worried about the fact that he had no legacy for us. No home, no money. But the happy memories Mom and Pop left us were worth much, much more than mere dollars.

Out-of-work men would sometimes come to our back door asking for food. It was not unusual for me to come home for lunch (we called it dinner) to find a stranger sitting on the back steps, eating a sandwich, thanks to my mother's compassion for those less fortunate than we were.

Two blocks up the hill from where we lived was Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran Church, and down the hill was Payne Avenue, a typical "streetcar" shopping

area, so-called because businesses tended to cluster where the trolleys ran. Every few blocks or so, people could disembark from the streetcar and find just about anything they wanted. Although it was only about a mile from Maryland Avenue to East Seventh street, there was an incredible number and variety of business establishments to choose from. Nearly every block had a meat market, grocery store, druggist, hardware store, restaurant, doctor, dentist, and barber shop, not to mention the dozen or so bars that dotted the avenue.

There were two funeral homes: Johnson & Sons on Sims and Payne, and Carlson Funeral Home near Rose Avenue. You could shop for your new or used car at your choice of three dealers. Fix-it shops, dry cleaners, a movie theater, several churches, even a blacksmith shop were available. And many of the shops that were there in the thirties are still in the same location today, second and third generations of family owned businesses.

On Saturday morning, Pop would pull the red coaster wagon down the hill to Martin's Bakery on Sims, just below Payne, and buy a huge cardboard barrel of day-old (or week-old) bakery goods for a dollar. We would put the barrel in the middle of the kitchen floor, and he would go through it carefully, saving the good stuff and relegating the rest to the garbage can while we children would munch on bismarks and doughnuts.

Payne Avenue was a town in itself, much like the big shopping centers of today only more interesting and diverse. For one thing, many of the shopkeepers lived in the neighborhood, and they knew most of their customers. There was also a broader mix of shops—all, as I recall, operated by hard-working people who reminded you of an aunt or uncle.

The corner of Payne and Case was

Payne Avenue's busiest intersection, anchored by the First State Bank of St. Paul. Drs. Ostergren and Youngren (our family doctor), and several other tenants shared the upstairs office space. Those were the days when doctors made house calls, and I remember Dr. Youngren's middle-of-the-night call when he diagnosed my sickness as scarlet fever.

On the other corners of Case and Payne were Swenson's Furniture, where you could buy everything from dufolds to dining room tables; Woolworth's dime store; and Carl Borgstrom's drug store, one of the few air-conditioned businesses on the avenue. Drug stores had their own distinctive smell, a combination of soap and perfume, and nearly every one had a soda fountain. Cokes at Borgstrom's were a nickel, and malts were fifteen cents. If you caught Mr. Borgstrom in a good mood, he would give you a glass of free ice water on a hot summer afternoon.

Next to Woolworth's was Gambles (the Tiger Store) where they sold hardware, auto supplies, and appliances. A couple of stores away was Samuel Brodinski's grocery store at 951 Payne, better known as Sam's Cash & Carry. I would accompany my mother and older brother Don to Sam's with the red coaster wagon in hand, and Don and I would take turns pulling the grocery-laden wagon back up the hill.

Even though the name implied that Sam's offered no credit, there was a pile of little note pads under the counter, each with a different customer's name. When you made a purchase, the bill was written in duplicate, and the customer kept a carbon copy. At the end of the month you settled up. The store had a high tin ceiling with big Casablanca-type fans to keep the air moving. There were open barrels of crackers, pickles, peanuts, and other bulk foods. Along the perimeter walls of the store were shelves from floor to ceiling, and ladders that ran on rollers to assist the clerks in reaching items on the higher shelves.

There was an aroma of spices you could smell two stores away...not an unpleasant smell, just a good old-fashioned grocery store aroma. Usually there was a big, fluffy cat roaming around the store to ward off any mice that might

dare to venture among the groceries.

Customers waited their turn until Sam or another clerk took their order. An order usually went something like this: a box of Wheaties, 2 large Fels Naptha, a loaf of whole wheat, a box of macaroni, 2 cans of tomatoes, and so on.

Close to Sam's was Woolworth's where you could buy everything imaginable, and down the block at 915 Payne was Olson's Meat Market. Like Sam's, Olson's also had its own aroma, but it was distinctly meat market, and very fishy. Every meat market had sawdust on the floor, and a big chopping block and cleaver for cutting meat while you waited. Occasionally Mom would send me down to Olson's for free neck bones for the dog. Never mind that we had no dog; the neck bones made great soup, and I can taste that homemade soup until this day.

Across Payne Avenue was a little restaurant, tucked between the dry cleaners and the jewelry store. Klein's Super Market was on the corner of Payne and Sims, and down the way was Churchill's, one of the avenue's more popular barber shops. On the corner of Magnolia and Payne was the Capitol theatre and a small White Castle hamburger shop, one of the first in the Twin Cities.

On the corner of York and Payne was Nelson's drug store, just up the hill was a printing company that gave me stacks of scrap paper for drawing, and across the street near the railroad bridge was Hartman's department store, the largest retail business on Payne Avenue. All were accommodating, friendly folks (although people older than I might dispute that).

The alley off Payne between Case and Jenks dead-ended when it reached a steep hill toward Greenbrier Avenue. That was the favorite hill for sledding during the winter, and though it was a bit treacherous for small kids, I don't recall any serious injuries. Some of the more adventurous of us would slide down the hill on refrigerator doors that we acquired from the scrap heap at Seeger's Refrigeration on Arcade Street.

Every autumn the merchants sponsored the Payne Avenue Harvest Festival, complete with a parade, popcorn wagons, a carnival at the Edgerton playground, bingo upstairs at the Odd Fel-

lows hall, and music by the Salvation Army band. I remember the parades that featured an old-time police paddy wagon that would pick up unsuspecting male spectators and release them at the end of the parade route near Hamm's Brewery. East Side neighbors, kids and adults alike, joined the parade in costumes and competed for prizes.

I attended Ericsson grade school on Case and Edgerton, a large forboding building that gave no outward signs of welcome to the pupils. The inside of the school smelled of varnish, and the floors and stairways creaked under the feet of the kids as they passed from room to room between classes. We walked to school, of course, and were protected at busy intersections by a school patrol officer. It was an honor to be chosen as a "police boy" and I recall the thrill when I was issued a Sam Brown belt, complete with a St. Paul school police badge and a yellow metal stop sign, which allowed me to direct traffic.

On Saturday afternoon my friends and I would walk down to the Arcade theatre, on Arcade Street between Sims and Case, where there was always a double feature. We favored the Arcade over the Capitol on Payne Avenue because kids' admission to the Arcade was just 5 cents and the Capitol was a dime. Besides, the Capitol showed only one movie. Sometimes even a nickel was hard to come by, however, so those of us without money would stand outside the theater until everyone was in and seated. At times the manager would come out and let us in free after he was sure we weren't going to buy a ticket.

For a short time before we moved up the hill to Sims, we lived in another upstairs duplex near the corner of Edgerton and Payne. I can still taste the fresh tar from the street when they constructed "New Payne Avenue," a short cutoff from Minnehaha to Beaumont Street. Along the stretch of Payne from Minnehaha was an assortment of shops, stores, and restaurants that catered to the people of Italian descent who lived in the area. Some of the merchants like Morelli, Lombardi, and Yarusso were household names. Carlotta's on Payne and Minnehaha and Damiani's on Payne and Sev-

enth sold authentic Italian groceries and meats; Gentile's restaurant was a favorite eating spot; and St. Ambrose Catholic Church served the neighborhood's spiritual needs.

But my personal memories of lower Payne Avenue center mostly around Swede Hollow, a big valley that separates the East Side from Dayton's Bluff. It stretched from Hamm's Brewery to East Seventh Street, about a half mile wide and a mile long. In St. Paul's early days, squatters, mostly of Scandinavian descent, settled there and built houses. The land was tax free because there weren't any public services, so it wasn't too unusual for a shack to burn to the ground while the firemen watched helplessly from the rim of the hollow.

A shallow creek ran along the Hollow floor, part of the drainage system that extended from Lake Phalen to the Mississippi river. The creek appeared above ground in Swede Hollow and it was used mainly by the residents as a place to dump their sewage since there was no indoor plumbing available.

Theodore Hamm built his brewery on the north bluff and his mansion atop the east bluff. On the west side of the Hollow were sandstone caves that were originally used for storing beer. One of my very earliest memories was of seeing beer trucks with solid rubber tires delivering cases and barrels of beer to the caves.

We lived about a block away from the northwest rim of Swede Hollow, and my mother took me for walks down the hill and along the paths that wandered through the underbrush. It was always "Sweet Hollow" to me, partly because I didn't understand the words, but mostly because of the sweet smell that I later learned was honeysuckle.

Years later the Swede Hollow caves became one of my favorite places to play during those long, hot summer afternoons. We had moved up the street by then, so it was a fair walk to the caves—about a half mile or so, I suppose. I was about eight or nine years old, and some of us would spend the afternoons exploring the caves, which Hamm's had abandoned by then in favor of a warehouse next to the brewery.

The shortest route to Swede Hollow was down Greenbrier Avenue to where it ended at Wells Street. At the edge of the street was an iron railing and a fifteen-foot stone wall that dropped to the street below. I remember being warned by one of my older friends to be careful climbing down the wall because he had heard of a youngster who had fallen and "cracked his head open."

Once down the wall we cut through a couple of vacant lots, across the railroad yards and past Hamm's warehouse, malt-



*Gustavus Adolphus Church, about 1920.
Minnesota Historical Society photograph.*

ing house, and main brewery buildings, then down the side of the hill to the Hollow floor, where we picked our way through cans and debris to the main cave entrance. There is nothing as black as the inside of a cave, and nothing that smells quite the same as cool, damp cave air, and nothing that feels as good as moist cave sand on bare feet.

There was a small tunnel above the main cave that you entered by climbing part way up the side of the bluff. It was barely big enough to crawl through, and it ended as a hole in the ceiling of the cave. The trick was to crawl to the end of the tunnel without falling through the hole. The main cave below had a wide horseshoe-shaped passageway that went

far back into the hill, with several intersecting tunnels. My mother warned me never to play in the caves, but all the same, I suspect she knew.

Today Swede Hollow is a city park. The shacks are gone, of course, and Theodore Hamm's mansion burned down long ago. His brewery changed hands several times, and his beer caves have long been sealed with bricks to protect kids like me from fun and adventure on a lazy summer afternoon.

One day, many years after our family had moved away, I found myself back on Payne Avenue. I looked for Olson's, Sam's, White Castle, and the Tiger Store, but they were gone. I stopped at Borgstrom's for a coke and ended up at the Goodwill Store to see if I could resurrect the past. But try as I might, I couldn't relive those sweet memories of me as a kid growing up, and I thought of a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson that I remembered from long ago:

As from the house your mother sees
you playing round the garden trees,
so you may see, if you but look
through the windows of this book,
another child, far, far away,
and in another garden, play.
But do you think you can at all
by knocking on the window, call
that child to hear you? He intent,
is still on his play - business bent.
He does not hear, he will not look,
nor yet be lured out of this book.
For long ago the truth to say,
he has grown up and gone away;
and it is but a child of air
that lingers in the garden there.

*Ray Barton is a freelance writer and artist. He attended the School of Associated Arts and has been an art director and teacher, most recently, until his retirement, at the Hennepin Technical College. This article is based on a portion of a book, *Recollections*, which he published for his six children in 1988.*



Payne Avenue, as it looked in 1931. This view looks south on Payne from its intersection with Jessamine. See "Growing Up in St. Paul" on page 21. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

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

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Permit #3989