

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

Volume 31, Number 1

Spring, 1996

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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*

# Digging into the Past: The Excavating of The Claim Shanty of Heman and Jane Gibbs

*Thomond R. O'Brien*

In the spring of 1849, Heman Rice Gibbs and Jane DeBow Gibbs, married about six months, moved to a newly acquired claim on the northern outskirts of St. Paul. At this location, Heman erected a small, temporary shelter. Before winter came, he built a partially underground sod-roofed claim shanty.

This dugout shanty was the focus of an archeological dig by the Ramsey County Historical Society in the summer of 1995. The dig provided some of the answers concerning the shanty, and has stimulated further study of the early years of the Gibbs family and the remarkable life of Jane Gibbs.

The excavation was conducted by the Program for Interdisciplinary Archaeological Studies (IAS) and the Wilford Archaeological Laboratory (WAL) of the University of Minnesota. Project director was Dr. Carl E. Blair; Drew M. Forsburg, M. S., was site supervisor.<sup>1</sup>

Heman Gibbs was thirty-four years old when he arrived in Minnesota Territory. In the preceding article beginning on page 4, Deanne Weber describes what is known of his early life. Born in Vermont, he attended a "common school and a few terms of academy," then moved on to northern Indiana where he worked as a schoolteacher and farmer.<sup>2</sup> After some six years in Indiana, he went west to take part in the lead-mining boom in southwestern Wisconsin.<sup>3</sup>

In November, 1848, he married Jane DeBow (Stevens) and as soon as the ice was out of the Mississippi, they came up the river from Galena, Illinois, to St. Paul. Jane Gibbs was twenty. She had not wanted her new husband to chase after the elusive gold of the California Gold Rush, the news of which was then sweeping the country, and persuaded him instead to seek their fortune in Minnesota. Family tradition holds that Heman had to



*The "sod house" Heman Gibbs constructed in 1849 on the land he acquired through purchase of a Mexican War veteran's land warrant. Many years later, Lillie Gibbs sketched the house from her mother's description. Ramsey County Historical Society archives.*

borrow the money to make the trip.

Arriving in St. Paul in April, 1849, with \$15 in cash, they found lodgings at a hotel run by the Lachiappet family.\* Jane worked at the hotel while Heman "was able to get up a claim shanty."<sup>4</sup> Gibbs had acquired land in Rose Township through the purchase of a land warrant from a Henry Cosmitz, who had been a volunteer in the Mexican War of 1846.<sup>5</sup>

The site Gibbs chose was about six miles from the bustling village of St. Paul and three miles from St. Anthony, now East Minneapolis.<sup>6</sup> The middle of their claim was crossed, south to north by a much-used Indian trail which ran from the small lakes north and west of Fort Snelling to the rice lakes north and east of St. Paul. There were no near neighbors for at least two years.<sup>7</sup>

But, though distant from these two

*\*According to most sources, they stayed at "Moffet's Castle," a hotel run by Lot Moffet, a friend from Wisconsin. An early St. Paul settler, Moffet is mentioned frequently in J. Fletcher Williams's history of St. Paul, but there is no mention of a Lachlappet family.*

settlements, the claim had abundant natural resources. The westerly one-half and the southeasterly corner were heavily forested in oaks, hardwoods, tamarack, and other water tolerant species. The northeastern part of the claim was grassland. Soil conditions were favorable for farming. The forested areas were "deep silty or loam, well drained, light colored soils . . . relatively fertile and . . . well suited to crops, hay, and pasture . . . The fertility of [the eastern margin of the Gibbs tract] was well-drained soil somewhat lower than that of neighboring soils; while it is well suited to pasture and hay, it is only fairly suited to crops."<sup>8</sup> A short distance from the claim shanty was a small fresh water pond.<sup>9</sup>

When Heman was ready to move to the claim, he and Jane were transported from downtown St. Paul to their claim by their friend, Lorenzo Hoyt, who also had filed a claim for land in 1849 and moved to a claim about a mile away some three years later.<sup>10</sup>

Heman erected a small shelter on his land. This initial structure was not more



The Gibbs dugout, after it was abandoned when the family moved to their larger farm house some thirty feet to the west. Photograph from Karen Bluhm.

than a lean-to. It probably had flimsy walls and a lightly covered roof. The shanty was described in a newspaper article published in 1897, nearly fifty years after it was built:

[Jane Gibbs's] first home was a claim shanty or roof supported by four poles and, here, with a camp stove, some rudely constructed stools, a table and couch, with plenty of food, good health and a stout heart, she began housekeeping . . . Before winter set in, Mr. Gibbs had dug a cellar and this, roofed over and with a barrel chimney, was their home for three years.<sup>11</sup>

A cellar Heman Gibbs dug that fall of 1849 strengthened the shanty. The cellar was four feet deep and we now know, from the archeological dig, that he reached a sandy subsoil at this level which provided excellent drainage for the floor.<sup>12</sup> He constructed a sod roof; enclosed the sides with logs, necessitating the barrel chimney; put in a door and perhaps a window or two. In this work, he may have been helped by Jane. And most likely, it was at this time that he installed a wood floor. It was the remains of this flooring that authenticated the site of the sod shanty.

The wood floor is the defining statement by Heman Gibbs that this was where he was going to settle and live his

life. He probably used hand tools he had carried to the site and materials he found there to erect the first shelter, the lean-to. But the floor, as the archeologists discovered, was "made of sawn, dimensional lumber and therefore must have been obtained by Gibbs from one of the local saw mills, perhaps at St. Anthony, or even Stillwater.<sup>13</sup> Their friend with the wagon may have helped transport the lumber and supplies to the site.

Roger Welsch, a Nebraska historian who has studied extensively the sod houses of that state, writes that a typical Nebraska sod house, about 10 x 12 feet, with sod walls and roof, took about a week to build. He reports the costs of one sod house, built in 1872, as follows:<sup>14</sup>

One window (8 x 10) . . . . .	\$1.25
18 feet of lumber for front door . . . . .	.54
Latch and hanging (no lock) . . . . .	.50
Length of pipe to go through roof . . . . .	.50
3 lbs. nails to make door, etc . . . . .	.19½

The Gibbs shanty would have required about 260 feet of planking lumber, four floor beams, and perhaps 10 pounds of nails, so the materials may have cost around \$12. Heman Gibbs most likely had to pay cash for these materials, but he may have had some money from his initial bankroll, he may have borrowed from

his friends, Jane's earnings at the hotel may have helped to pay for these materials, or some combination of the above.

In 1946 Frank Gibbs, Jane and Heman's son, was interviewed and the following exchange was reported:

Q. Tell us about the sod house. Was it made of logs?

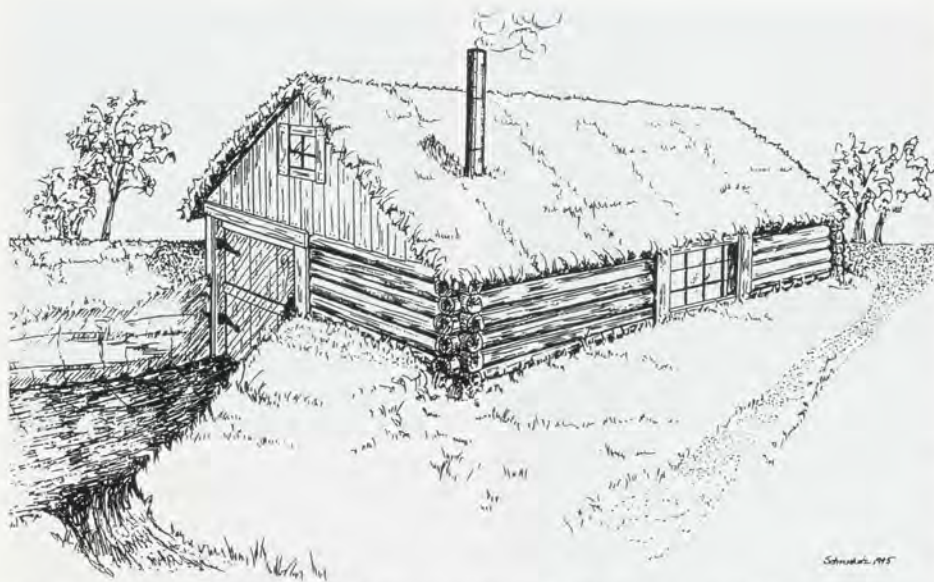
A. The sod house was part log and part sod because there was no lumber to be had at the time. The logs were not very large, and the shack was about 8 x 12 feet.<sup>15</sup>

Frank Gibbs, relating family history nearly a century after the shanty was built, was not cognizant of the type of flooring in the dugout. He erred slightly in the overall dimensions, as well. The four main flooring beams, 4" x 4", were spaced about two-and-a-half feet apart. According to Roger Welsch, such beams were laid in a north-south direction, the walls having been aligned with the north star on a clear night.<sup>16</sup>

Gibbs's dugout was about 10 feet wide. The ends of these beams were tight against the inside walls, and were about 12'4" long. Sawn dimensional floor boards approximately 1" x 6", were placed across the beams at a right angle. All the boards were made of pine. The archeologists found very few items in the dirt area under the floor boards, which indicates that the boards were closely fitted together. The floor boards were nailed into the underlying floor beams.

Unfortunately, except for a few pieces of the floor beams and floor boards, no other building materials were found in the excavated dugout which could be correlated with the one-room log house Gibbs built in 1854 just west of the dugout. It is surmised that upon abandoning the shanty, Heman Gibbs systematically removed all useful building materials and put them to other uses around the farm. The floor boards, five years old by then and probably rotten, were left behind. Thus there is no indication of how the sides of the shanty or the roof overhead were constructed.

According to Frank Gibbs, and a drawing by Lillie Gibbs LeVesconte that was based on Jane's description, the sides of the shanty were cut logs. Gibbs had a wide choice of material from the trees on



Artist's reconstruction of the Gibbs Farm dugout, based on the archeological excavation conducted during the summer of 1995 by Dr. Carl E. Blair, project director, and Drew M. Forsburg, site supervisor. Ramsey County Historical Society archives.

his land. Limited by his tools, he probably chose small, non-hardwood trees for the sides. Pine and tamarack were available, and it appears from Lillie's drawing that he built in the traditional one-log-on-top-of-the-other fashion, having first skinned the bark off the logs.

The sides needed to be only three or four feet high, because of the four-foot-deep cellar. The archeologists found that the soil had been raised around the dugout, indicating that dirt from the initial digging was placed around the outside of the walls both for insulation and to help drain rainwater away from the shanty.<sup>17</sup> With the cracks between the logs daubed with clay found on the site, the walls would have been fairly tight.

It is likely that Heman Gibbs would have taken the same care with his roof as he did with his floor. Since he had laid a pine floor, it is likely that he built a sawn pine plank roofing on which to place the sod. Welsch reports the laments of Nebraskan sod house owners when heavy rains came: "In the Spring when we had the big rains our roof did its share of leaking and even after the rain was over it seemed like our roof leaked for another day. Mother often wished that it was reversed—the boards on the roof instead of on the floor."<sup>18</sup>

Even a simple roof rested on an elabo-

rate superstructure. The ridge pole, which formed the peak of the roof, had to be supported at each end by the end wall or a supporting post. Horizontal logs were placed on top of the side walls and 1" x 6" plank sheathing was laid vertically from the ridge pole to the wide wall logs. A sod roof was heavy, and these planks would have been nailed into the rafters and the side planking.

We know that Gibbs used nails in the construction of the shanty as the floor members were nailed together and a large number of nails were found on the site. When no tar paper was available, strips of lath were laid over the joints and the carefully cut pieces of sod placed on top.<sup>19</sup>

Heman Gibbs probably put a sod roof on the shanty because sod roofs were easy to build and maintain, provided good insulation summer and winter, and, of course, were inexpensive. At the Gibbs' claim, the roots of the grass were not too deep. He may have had a hand cutter, or he could have used his shovel. The sod would have been cut some three inches thick, one to one-and-a-half feet wide and about two feet long. He would have cut only what he could use that day, for dried-out sod would crack apart and was poor building material.

If the grass was too long, he would have cut it first to about three or four

inches, then laid the pieces with the grass side up so it could continue to grow and re-establish roots. The pitch of the roof was important. If it was too shallow, too much rain could accumulate, and if too steep, the sod was likely to slide off, although pegs or edging could be placed at the eaves to control this. If Gibbs worried about the rain, as he probably did, he might have put two or three layers of sod on the roof.<sup>20</sup> Then he inserted the barrel chimney through the roof.

As he was erecting the log side, he would have made openings for a doorway and window(s). Gibbs probably made the door and its framing himself at the site, but he would have had to purchase the window glass, and most likely the window framing as well. The location of a door and a window or two in the shanty was not determined. No door frames, post holes, or other structural materials were discovered. A small number of glass shards were found along the interior south end of the west wall, but the pieces were too small to be absolutely identified with the old shanty. Unfortunately, the integrity of the area along the west wall of the shanty was destroyed by construction around the farm house years after the shanty was abandoned.

The archeological dig was unable to answer one important question: How did the Gibbs family get into and out of the shanty? In Welsch's study of 736 Nebraska sod houses, seventy-one had doors in the middle of an end wall; fifty-eight had doors on one side of the end wall; 389 had doors in the center of the side eave wall; and ninety-one were to one side of the eave wall. The remaining had more than one door.<sup>21</sup> Of course, the Gibbs shanty had log walls, so there may have been less concern, structurally, over where to place a doorway.

As there were no signs of a doorway on either the east or the south side of the dugout, and the west side had been destroyed by construction, attention was drawn to the north side of the dugout. At that end, a peculiar structural element was discovered. It was determined that at the northeast end of the north wall an opening four meters in length to the north and about two meters in width had been dug. Its base was the same level as the

shanty floor. There was no indication of a ramp leading out of it. Puzzled by this, the archeologists speculated that this may have been the probable location of the actual door leading to the dugout from a root cellar which had a stairway built into it.<sup>22</sup> They assigned the name Entrance Way to this gap.

While physical traces of a door were not recovered, some metal fittings possibly relating to a hinge were found in the fill nearby. Why, however, was the Entrance Way so large and how did the Gibbs family enter this four-foot-deep complex? Although it cannot be proved, the extra space provided by the Entrance Way's great length may have provided them with a welcome additional storage area.

To get in and out of the Entrance Way/dugout with ease, some type of temporary wooden ramp or stairs may have been used. No trace of such a stair has survived, leaving the Entrance Way a largely unexplained phenomenon. On the other hand, a doorway might have been constructed on the west side of the shanty, but no trace of this was found, either.

A small number of tacks was found at the floor board level. It is thought that these tacks were used to hang oil cloth up to the lowest level of the log walls for protection against the interior dirt sides. There were no indications that the dirt sides had been lined with wood or logging. No cinders were found at the floor level, again indicating a tightly constructed floor, and, perhaps as well, meticulous housekeeping.

In 1854 Heman Gibbs constructed their second home, an above-ground log house about thirty feet from the shanty. The shanty, according to family members, was used as a shed for awhile. Then, it seems, it was stripped of all usable materials and soon afterwards the hole was filled in with materials from the nearby construction.<sup>23</sup> The diagonal layering of these materials indicates they were dumped into the hole by wheelbarrow.

At various levels the archeologists found three coins,<sup>24</sup> 726 small shards of window glass, more than 200 nails, small bits of chinaware and bottles, broken household items such as combs, mirrors, buttons, part of a watch, chalkboard slate,



*Remnants of an international trade. The archeological dig turned up reminders that St. Paul, even in 1849, was at the crossroads of an international trade system. There were bits of china that had been imported from England; coins, mirrors, buttons, combs, pieces of leather, parts of a watch and an ox shoe, all of which had originated farther east. Some of the "finds" documented by the archeologists are pictured here. Ramsey County Historical Society archives.*

and pieces of discarded shoes, as well as small pieces of broken farm equipment, a piece of an ox shoe, some leather straps, and hundreds of small chalk mortar stones.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the Gibbs family threw away very little that still was useful.

The small shanty had done its job. The picture that emerges is that the Gibbs shanty, with a good roof, tight log walls, a well-made floor, some windows, a sturdy door, dry interior walls, and a good stove might have been a rather cozy place to live. We know that the barrel chimney caught fire and Heman Gibbs had to kick it off the roof. Then he walked to Stillwater, a one-way distance of nearly twenty miles, to get a length-and-a-half of stove pipe to replace the chimney. But other than that small disaster, no other stories were told of any difficulties with the structure. It had provided shelter for Heman and Jane Gibbs for more than four years. When they were done with it, they filled in the hole, put its memory behind them, and moved on to prosper on their claim.

One hundred and forty-two years after the Gibbs family abandoned their small shanty, the Ramsey County Historical Society conducted its archeological dig. It took sixteen days. Each stage of the excavation was carefully recorded. Hundreds of photographs were taken, and both WCCO-TV (Channel 4) and KSTP-TV (Channel 5) broadcast portions of the excavation. There were numerous articles

in local newspapers about the dig. It received national attention in *USA Today*. More than two dozen volunteers helped at the site, while additional volunteers helped in the interpretation of the articles and materials back in the laboratory.

At the conclusion, the dugout was filled back in over a blue tarp carefully placed within the dig so that any future work can commence within a clearly defined boundary. The Ramsey County Historical Society will one day reconstruct the shanty and provide the public with a carefully prepared interpretation of the site.

## End Notes

1. Carl E. Blair. "Excavations at the Gibbs Farm Dugout," University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, January, 1996.
2. See Deanne Weber's article beginning on page 4, this issue.
3. Mrs. Ethel Stewart. Interview with Frank Gibbs, May 23, 1946, Ramsey County Historical Society archives. Working conditions in the Wisconsin lead mines were difficult. The workers were described by a contemporary as "the roughest set of men I ever beheld", according to Karel D. Bicha in "From Where Come the Badgers?" State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1993, p. 129.
4. Stewart. *Ibid.*
5. See Weber. Also, William L. Cavert,

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gambling dens, prohibition speakeasies, brothels, Murder, Inc., assassination sites, and Dillinger gang safe houses . . .”

This tour takes the reader to familiar places: Summit and Grand Avenues, University and Cleveland, Lincoln and Lexington; to the Hotel St. Paul, the Lowry and Commodore; to White Bear Lake, Bald Eagle, and on to Wisconsin and Minneapolis. There are detailed maps, a chronology, and a glossary to assist the reader on the tour.

Maccabee's research broke new ground for historians of this period. He gained access to nearly 100,000 pages of FBI files (after filing more than 200 FOIA requests), conducted more than 250 interviews of detectives, gangsters' family members, FBI agents, prosecutors, judges, and gangster girlfriends, as well as using other published works. All this research has produced an easy-flowing compilation of sixty-seven vignettes organized into eleven chapters that are more or less in chronological order. Each vignette is focused on a geographic location, so this book can be picked up and laid aside without losing any of the central theme—crooks and corruption.

For anyone who is familiar with St. Paul, or has knowledge of the era, there are nostalgic nuggets to connect with the past. For example, your reviewer discovered that he lived just a few doors away from the hideout of the Barker-Karpis gang at 2061 Marshall Avenue and has driven countless times through the intersection of Lincoln and Lexington Avenues where Dillinger, the FBI, and Homer Van Meter had a shoot-out at the Lincoln Court Apartments.

There are other connections to be made: your reviewer, at one time, worked in the shadow of John L. Connolly (father of Ramsey County Judge John S. Connolly), St. Paul corporations counsel in the reform administration of Mayor Mark Gehan (grandfather of St. Paul attorney Mark Gehan, Jr.) Connolly engrossed his colleagues with his experiences in transcribing pamograph records of wire taps of the St. Paul police department that produced the real evidence of corruption within

the police force. Maccabee's account gives new meaning to those personal recollections. Many readers will be able to make similar connections.

Familiar names include William Hamm, Jr., then president of Hamm Brewing Company, who was kidnapped at Minnehaha and Greenbrier and held for \$100,000 ransom. The price went up to \$200,000 in the abduction of Edward Bremer at the corner of Lexington and Goodrich as he was driving to work at the Commercial State Bank. These events led to a defining moment in national law enforcement. It was during this period that J. Edgar Hoover demonstrated the viability of the FBI and projected the image as the nation's number one G-man.

Maccabee's research reveals that the St. Paul underworld and the underworld were far more intertwined than has been previously acknowledged. The evidence suggests that the local banking, brewery, city government, and restaurant industries had found common ground with organized crime through the "O'Connor Agreement" which provided that criminals had a safe harbor in St. Paul if they committed no crimes in the city limits and paid off police.

Why is this historical record worth reading? "Because the story of . . . St. Paul, like that of any city, is a mingling of glory and infamy, of people with high integrity and others with low morals. St. Paul was built as much on a legacy of gamblers, scoundrels, and sinners as on a tradition of philanthropists, statesmen and business barons . . . St. Paul's experiment in accommodating the underworld also provides a lesson in the consequences of government forging a partnership with criminals."

Get the book. It is enjoyable reading any time. It is a valuable history in any library.

*Charlton Dietz is the retired senior vice president, 3M Legal Affairs and a member of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Development Committee.*

### *Claim Shanty from page 20*

"Story of a Pioneer Farmer," *Ramsey County History*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 3.

6. Stewart. *op.cit.*

7. Stewart. *op.cit.*

8. Blair, p. 14

9. *Ibid.* p. 13

10. Stewart. Interview with Frank Gibbs, late 1940s. Ramsey County Historical Society archives. Hoyt Avenue is named for Lorenzo Hoyt, whose land at one point included the Minnesota State Fairgrounds and extended to Como Lake.

11. Charlotte Whitcomb, "A Pioneer Woman," *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 26, 1897. Ramsey County Historical Society archives. The last sentence was later corrected to read "for nearly five years."

12. Blair, p. 30.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 31

14. Welsch, Roger. *Sod Walls, The Story of The Nebraska Sod House*, J & Lee Co., Lincoln, NE, 1991, p. 98

15. Stewart. *op.cit.*

16. Welsch, p. 34

17. Blair, p. 28.

18. Welsch, p. 50.

19. Welsch, pp. 54-88. On page 71 he notes that where planks were not available, a thatching layer of grass and clay was laid over supporting poles and brush.

20. Welsch. p. 68-73.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 85

22. Blair, p. 34.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

24. An 1831 half dime, an 1838 one cent piece, and another coin, date obscured, similar in design to the 1838 one cent piece. Blair, p. 54

25. Blair, Appendix C.

26. KSTP-TV filmed more than two hours of the various stages in the excavation, which it edited into a 10-minute broadcast. The station generously turned over a copy of these tapes to the RCHS.

*Thomond O'Brien is a member of the Ramsey County Historical Society's board of directors. A strong supporter of the archeological dig, he also was an enthusiastic volunteer at the site, spending many days there last summer with trowel in hand as the early evidences of the Gibbsses' life there was uncovered.*



*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

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