

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Growing Up in St. Paul
During the Great
Depression

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Spring, 1997

Volume 32, Number 1

A Law Firm's 111-Year History

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OPPENHEIMER WOLFF & DONNELLY



With offices now in major American and European cities far beyond the Twin Cities, Oppenheimer Wolff & Donnelly is vastly different from the small, late-nineteenth century law firm Will Oppenheimer joined in 1913. Artwork by Linda Sheldon, She Graphics, Minneapolis, for Oppenheimer Wolff & Donnelly.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Despite the widespread exposure that TV, the media, the movies, and authors such as John Grisham have currently given to lawyers, lawyering, and law firms, most people don't know much about the long history of many of those firms, not to mention how a law firm operates. In this issue of *Ramsey County History*, Virginia Martin tells the story of one of St. Paul's oldest and largest law firms: Oppenheimer Wolff & Donnelly (OW&D). Although founded in 1886, OW&D is today an international firm conducting business around the globe.

In addition to recounting how OW&D grew to a firm of this scale, Martin also provides glimpses of how the firm is organized and manages the business of providing legal services. Along with this insight, she shows how economics, technology, and a commitment to diversity have changed lawyering from the time when Will Oppenheimer took the lead in building the firm.

This issue also includes an account of life in St. Paul in the years of the Great Depression, an era when a little girl had no fear of riding downtown alone on a streetcar and scarlet fever was a dread disease requiring quarantine. Written by Ruth F. Brin, this "Growing Up" essay offers an interesting contrast and complement to the world of the lawyers at OW&D during those same years. Together, both articles expand our knowledge and awareness of our local history.

John M. Lindley, chair, Editorial Board

Books

Minnesota Architect: The Life and Work of Clarence H. Johnston

Paul Clifford Larson
Afton Historical Society Press
220 pages, \$65 (cloth),
280 photographs

Reviewed by Virginia Brainard Kunz

Anyone who ever visited the 1916 Minnesota Historical Society building across from the state Capitol has walked through halls designed by Clarence H. Johnston. Likewise, anyone who attended one of the five state teachers colleges, been a patient in one of five state hospitals, attended Shattuck School in Faribault, or grew up on Summit Avenue in St. Paul.

Through his work as state architect for thirty years, and in his extensive private practice as the most sought-after residential architect for two generations of St. Paul's upper class, Johnston designed more buildings than any other figure in Minnesota history. Forty-two of his houses still line Summit Avenue. Now, sixty years after his death in 1936, his life and his career are brought to life by independent historian Paul Clifford Larson in this elegant new book.

In tracing the career that brought Johnston widespread recognition, the author presents page after page of fascinating architectural history and its often complex influences. Wonderful photographs that reflect a by-gone era, sometimes of refinement, sometimes of excess, are among the delights of the book.

Larson writes his way deftly through descriptions which necessarily include architectural terms that, to the untu-



*Clarence H. Johnston, about 1880.
A. Bogardus photo from the book.*

tored, might seem arcane. And designer Barbara Arney has helpfully placed photographs close to text, making it easy for the reader not only to understand but to learn as well.

However, Larson's interest in Johnston and his beautifully illustrated work isn't confined to architecture. He also includes illuminating nuggets of St. Paul and Minnesota history. He describes the "great Aberdeen hotel," built in 1888-1889 at 189-199 Virginia Street as "sited on the highest point of the city, offering panoramic views of the downtown and the Mississippi river valley from its two main facades." Staying there, he adds, cost \$5 a night, "nearly twice the going rate in St. Paul." Sadly, the Aberdeen was razed in 1944.

Larson provides a detailed account of Johnston's years as state architect

when, among many other buildings, he designed addition after addition to the City and County hospital; St. Luke's Hospital; and all the buildings at Gillette State Hospital for Crippled Children, all in St. Paul. Many of the early buildings at the University of Minnesota were his work. He designed huge projects, such as Stillwater Prison, and smaller projects, such as the Minnesota Club and the Empire Building (known then as the Manhattan Building) in downtown St. Paul.

The houses he built for the affluent around the state ranged from the red-shingled Queen Anne cottage of William Mitchell in St. Cloud to the massive Jacobean residence of Chester A. Congdon in Duluth. The Mitchell house was of immense importance to Johnston's career. As Larson explains, this was Johnston's first commission outside of St. Paul and its suburbs and the project "proved to be the point of entry for Johnston's long career in state-sponsored institutional design." At the time, Mitchell was resident director of the small but growing St. Cloud Normal School close to his home. When the state commissioned a new women's dormitory for the school, Johnston was appointed its architect.

As state architect, he occasionally was called upon to design the humble and utilitarian, as well as the massive. For example: the sleeping cottages, the superintendent's house and the cow barn at Ah-Gwah-Ching sanitarium near Walker, Minnesota.

It was characteristic of Johnston and his relationship with his clients, Larson suggests, that he was called back again and again to add refinements, to remodel, to ease an expansion or an addition onto an existing structure (usually



City and County Hospital (later Ancker Hospital) about 1915, and one of Johnston's many commissions as state architect. C. P. Gibson photo, Minnesota Historical Society.

one he'd designed originally), or, with the dawn of the automobile age, to replace a carriage house with a garage.

Larson writes of Johnston as a quiet man without much taste for public recognition, unlike Cass Gilbert, who was a close friend. This may be one reason for Johnston's relative obscurity today, despite the many buildings that are still standing as a reminder of his considerable contributions to Minnesota's architectural heritage.

This is a sparkling history of an im-

portant era in Minnesota's past. It is not at all surprising that it has received the first David Stanley Gebhard Award, sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians, for the best book on Minnesota architecture. The book includes ten pages of sources, a twenty-three-page *Catalogue Raisonné* of his work, a list of his draftsmen with biographical information, and an index.

Virginia Brainard Kunz is editor of Ramsey County History.

Sherlock Holmes and the Red Demon

John H. Watson, M.D.
Edited by Larry Millett
Penguin Books
318 pages, \$22.95 (cloth)

This entrancing book should ensnare a wide spectrum of readers, from Sherlock Holmes fans to lovers of mysteries to local and state history buffs. This reviewer is seized with envy at how easily Millett has moved from architectural history (*Lost Twin Cities, Twin Cities Then and Now*) to mystery.

Millett opens his story with the "discovery" of an unknown manuscript of Dr. Watson's describing a Holmes adventure into the wilds of nineteenth century Minnesota. Millett then hangs his tale of a mysterious arsonist bent on destroying Hill's railroad on the framework of a well-recorded historical event, the disastrous forest fire that leveled Hinckley, Minnesota, in 1894.

His story abounds with Minnesota characters and places: James J. Hill and his Eastern Minnesota Railroad; Joseph Pyle, newspaper editor and Hill biographer; Mary Robinson, St. Paul madam,

whom Millett plants, instead, in Hinckley. Local history buffs will spot a description of a one-eyed wagon driver as a dead-ringer for "Pig's Eye" Parrant. Don't miss the annotations at the end of the book where fact and fancy are mischievously mixed in a challenge to the reader to identify one from the other. In closing, Millett hints at a sequel, something to do with the 1896 ice palace. Let's hope he delivers.

V.B.K

Mexican Odyssey—Our Search for the People's Art

Bilaine W. Young
Pogo Press
\$15.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Patricia Sweney Hart

In *Mexican Odyssey*, Billie Young has written an engrossing tale of two middle-aged housewives—Young herself and Mary Wilson—who were neighbors in St. Paul and one day decided to collaborate on a trip to Mexico. Their plan was to accumulate folk art from Mexican markets and, upon their return, sell them in a huge garage or attic event. The endeavor was so successful that other trips and other sales led to the founding of The Old Mexico Shop, which they operated on St. Paul's Grand Avenue from 1972 to 1994.

Young's account is replete with humor and passion and full of ideas and anecdotes. The reader can learn how to get to know a neighbor well and how to start and run a store without knowing ahead of time what to do. The real lesson here, however, is how to communicate what you have learned about a neighboring country to people back home in Minnesota. Young tells her readers a great deal about Mexico, some of which we have known but often forgotten, and some of which is brand new.

Patricia Sweney Hart, a long-time resident of St. Paul, is a member of Ramsey County History's Editorial Board.

ALSO IN PRINT;

In *Grand Avenue - The Renaissance of an Urban Street*, Billie Young and David Lanegran have created an excellent account of how Grand Avenue reinvented itself as it moved from riches to rags and back again to something resembling riches as it passed through the 125 years of its history. Grand Avenue had the Twin Cities' first electric streetcar line, it had bootleggers selling whisky during Prohibition, and it had apartment buildings crammed with World War II workers before it had to face the decline that set in at war's end. This is a story of how a fortuitous blend of people and circumstances rescued Grand Avenue from urban blight, crime, and decay. (North Star Press, 204 pages, \$14.95)

Lyngblomsten, 1906, 1996 describes how a modern, long-term care provider serving thousands of older persons of all nationalities and religions grew out of a simple home, established ninety years ago for thirty-three elderly Norwegians. *Lyngblomsten* began as a dream shared by eleven Norwegian women led by Anna Quayle Fergstad.

Her dream, the booklet states, "began with a vivid picture of the snug little huts along the coast of Norway that sheltered the wives of fishermen who had lost their lives at sea." And it was spurred by the knowledge that in Minnesota there was no provision "for those left to grow old alone..." *Lyngblomsten* was incorporated in 1906 and its first building erected in 1912 on Pascal Street and Como Avenue. (The Lyngblomsten Foundation, 1415 Almond Avenue, St. Paul, Mn., 55108, 42 pages, paper.)

And Prairie Dogs Weren't Kosher by Linda Mack Schloff, director of the St. Paul-based Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, is a fine history that sheds new light on the Jewish experience in the region. Schloff has integrated original research with oral histories, diaries, letters, and autobiographies in creating a four-generation account of



Officer Mike Cullen and his horse, Eleanor Patch. Photo courtesy of Elberta Matters for Grand Avenue—The Renaissance of an Urban Street."

the lives of the women—the wives of fur traders, homesteaders, storekeepers and professionals—who established Jewish homes under harsh conditions.

She traces Jewish life in the Old Country, immigration, settlement and the challenges of keeping kosher in a new land. Her 120-some personal accounts are illustrated with eighty-five period photographs and four maps. (Minnesota Historical Society, 254 pages, \$29.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper).

In *Halfway Home: A Granddaughter's Biography*, mystery writer Mary Logue walks the reader through her journey to assemble bits and pieces of her grandmother's life. In the process, she paints a much larger picture of a community, a way of life, and a single mother's struggle to support herself and her five children after the sudden death of her husband.

Born in 1894 in Chokio, a small town in western Minnesota, Mae McNally

Kirwin and her story come to life through forgotten bank records, old newspapers, hand-written census forms, family documents, and faded recipes, all pieced together by her granddaughter. (Minnesota Historical Society, 196 pages, \$22.95 cloth, 14.95 paper.)

Frogtown, is a thoughtful and beautifully photographed portrait by Wing Young Huie of one of St. Paul's poorest and most ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Known as "the picture man" to Frogtown residents, Huie combines 130 compelling black-and-white photographs with some fifty quotes from residents and his own commentary. Here the face of poverty shows clearly in this depiction of life on the neighborhood's streets, porches, back yards and streets.

While his approach to his subject is frank, it also is compassionate. (Minnesota Historical Society, 158 pages, \$50 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)

V.B.K.



Kellogg Boulevard in the mid-1930s. Will Oppenheimer played a major role in the downtown rehabilitation project that cleared old buildings on the river side of Third Street to make way for the new boulevard. On the right, some remnants of pioneer St. Paul still can be seen. Ramsey County Historical Society photo. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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