

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Growing Up in St. Paul  
During the Great  
Depression

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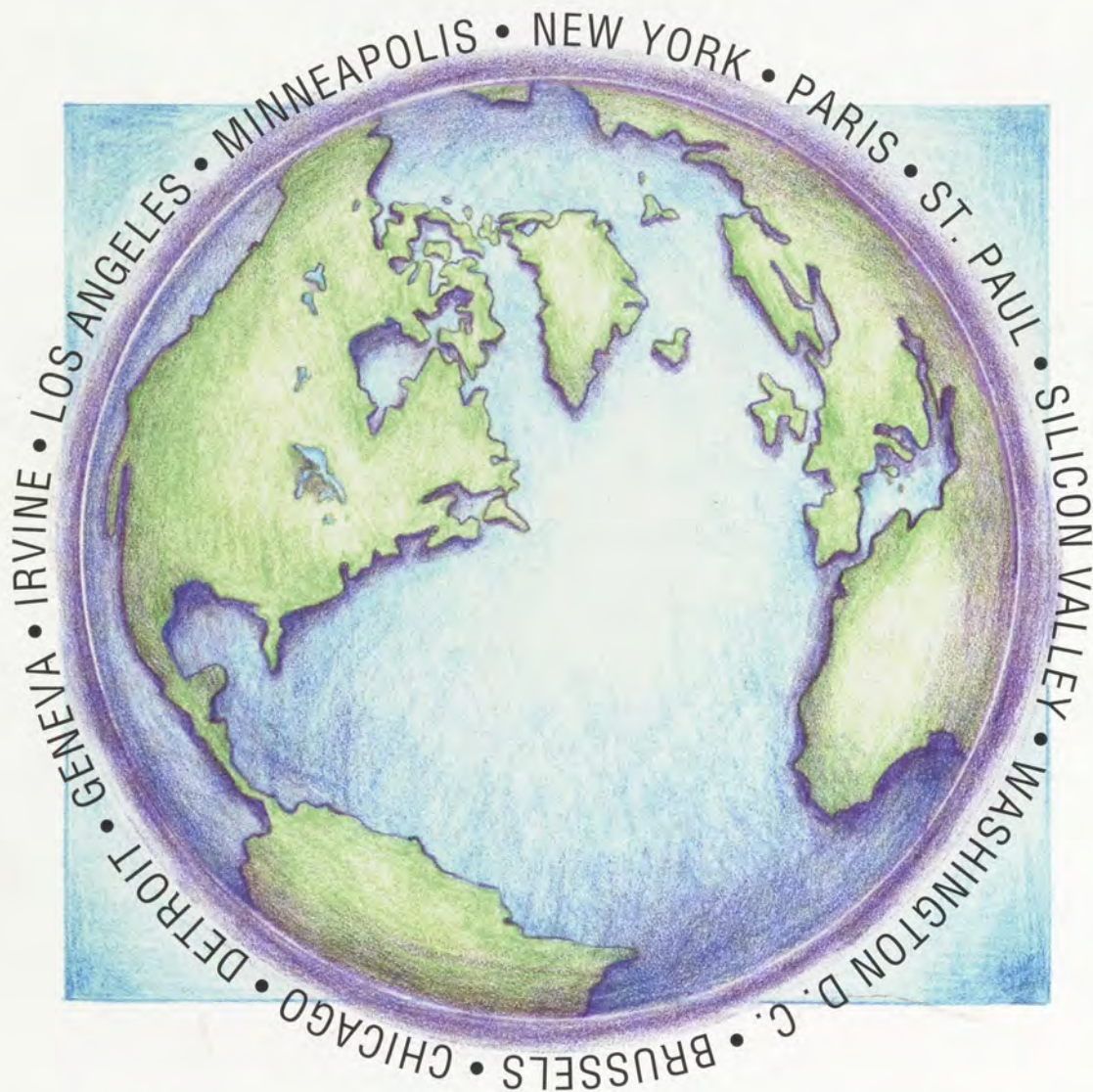
Spring, 1997

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.*



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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 32, Number 1

Spring, 1997

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

**D**espite 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*



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## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

# The Milkman, the Iceman, and Ice Chips in the Sawdust at the Bottom of the Wagon

*Ruth F. Brin*

I was born in 1921, and I lived with my parents, Milton and Irma Firestone, and my two older brothers, Linn and George, at 1866 Portland Avenue. I attended Ramsey School on Grand Avenue and Cambridge.

One morning when I was in first grade, my mother put a streetcar token in the pocket of my dress and secured it with a safety pin. She instructed me to take the Grand Avenue streetcar downtown after school and meet her at the children's room in the public library. I wasn't afraid of the streetcar, and knew where to get off, by the big white building facing Rice Park. What frightened me, but of course I wouldn't tell her, was the children's librarian, Della McGregor, although I knew she was a friend of my mother's. I was convinced that she must be Farmer McGregor's daughter, and if I said the wrong thing, she might put a flower pot over my head.

After school I crossed the street with the police boy, who was a sixth grader with a big red flag, and got myself on the yellow streetcar, where I had often gone with my mother. At that point I felt quite grown up until a woman with a black hat sat next to me and said, "Aren't you the little Firestone girl?" I nodded. She talked on, "Your father is such a fine man and does so much for our temple, and your mother is wonderful, too. I know her in Council of course." That was the Council of Jewish Women.

Instead of standing on the yellow straw seat to ring the bell for my stop, an exercise I enjoyed, this woman in the black hat would ring it for me. I got off and marched through the basement door to the children's room. My mother wasn't there, and tall Miss McGregor was looming over me. "What book would you like?" she asked. I was so dumbfounded I said "Peter Rabbit?" and



*The Firestone house on Portland Avenue, St. Paul. Ramsey County Historical Society photo.*

she smiled and said I was really too old for that, and she brought me something else. I sat at the little table, feeling my cheeks get red, until Mother finally arrived.

Most of the time when I was six or seven I was busy with public school or playing with the kids on the block. There were three girls my age. Agnes went to St. Mark's parochial school. I knew the teachers were nuns who wore black robes and they were very strict. The other two girls were Protestant and went to public school like me. The fact that one, Susan, was adopted was far more intriguing to me than her religion. In the next block was a girl my age, Micky, who was Jewish and in my Sunday school class. I started religious school on Sunday mornings when I was six. It seemed quite natural to us to think of the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph as if they were about our own family. My brothers

sometimes looked at me with disgust and said I was the favorite. At least they wouldn't throw me down a well the way Joseph's brothers did, would they?

The milkman, the ice man, the vegetable man, all came with horse-drawn wagons in those days. They came along the street but the rag man, who collected old rags, used clothes, bottles and even furniture, came down the alley with his poor old nag. I don't know if he was a Jew, but we thought so—another stereotype. The milkman, whose horse was trained to walk to the next house and stop, spoke with a Scandinavian lilt like Mrs. Hasslen, my friend's mother. She called her son Yack instead of Jack, and we thought that was funny. The vegetable man, Tony, was Italian and he came only in the summer. But the giant ice man with the black rubber cape, came all year round. I was a little afraid of him; he looked like he could sling one of us



over his shoulder; we didn't weigh as much as those 100-pound blocks of ice.

When the ice wagon came up the street, while the giant was loping around to the back of the house to put the huge block of ice through the special little door that led directly to the icebox, we liked to try to find little ice chips in the sawdust on the bottom of his wagon. We'd brush the sawdust off and suck on the wonderful cold chips, even as they melted in our hands.

Mostly the ice man ignored us, but once when my brother and I had climbed part way up on the wagon to find more chips, the ice man clucked to his horse and we found ourselves galloping down the street. I was half on and half off, and if I pulled up, I'd get slivers in my stomach. He stopped suddenly and lurched me off the wagon. I wasn't hurt but scared and out of breath. George jumped down immediately. The ice man turned around, glared, and said, "And don't climb on my wagon again!" I don't think we ever told our parents about that particular scary adventure, not able to guess if Dad would guffaw or yell at us.

We played hide-and-go-seek with the kids on our block, ran in the hose in our bathing suits when it was hot, rode around on trikes and wagons and scooters, made forts in the empty lot and tried not to get scolded about being dirty. We had a few jobs, too—picking up the windfalls from the three apple trees in the yard, weeding the vegetable garden, going to the store for Mother. If we ever said we didn't have anything to do, she was ingenious in finding work for us; it was a fine way to teach us to amuse ourselves.

When I was growing up the only immunizations were for small pox and diphtheria-tetanus. Because of the fear of tuberculosis, we slept under many Hudson Bay blankets with windows wide open all winter long. Many families slept on unheated sleeping porches, even in the winter. Lots of fresh air was considered a cure or prevention for tuberculosis before the days of antibiotics. Mother had visited some Jewish children who were tuberculosis patients at the children's sanitarium at Lake Johanna, north of St. Paul. She told me how the children went outside in the winter with only thin cloth-



*Ruth and George Firestone on a photographer's donkey, about 1924. Photo from the author.*

ing—boots, mittens and hats—but no coats or warm jackets. I was very happy I was healthy and didn't have to do that.

Nevertheless, by the time I was six, I had had mumps, measles, and chickenpox, courtesy of my brothers, who brought these children's diseases home. There were seasons for these diseases well-known in the schools and homes; measles usually erupted after the Shrine Circus in the spring. When we had these outbreaks, a man from the Health Department would come and nail big yellow signs on the front door, the back door and even the side door. Those were quarantine signs. They told any visitor the diag-

nosis of the inmates. No one was supposed to enter or leave the house unless he or she had already had that disease. When we were sick, and even when we were beginning to feel fine, we had to stay in the house a prescribed number of days. If I were well but a brother had a children's disease I had never had, I must stay in the house. This was simply considered a normal part of growing up. I didn't have whooping cough until I was a little older and my friend, Betty, who lived two houses down the block, had it at the same time. To my surprise and joy, Mother permitted me to run down the alley to Betty's house if I promised not to





*The three Firestone children: Linn, Ruth and George, about 1928. Photo from the author.*

breathe on anybody. It was a little like getting out of jail.

The most frightening illness that beset our family was when my brother George got scarlet fever. He was very ill and I knew without being told that he might die. Other children had died of scarlet fever. I was very frightened because I couldn't imagine life without him. I needed him to play with and I couldn't even go into his room. A child in my first grade class had died of meningitis. Tuberculosis was also a killer. It was not so unusual in those days for children to die young.

In order to keep the rest of us from contracting George's fever, we were not allowed anywhere near his room. Mother boiled his sheets, towels and napkins, and almost everything to do with the food that she served him: dishes and silverware and drinking glasses. The trays were scoured with cleanser and bleach. These efforts at sanitation were not so unusual, as when we were babies, the diapers had always been boiled in the big boiler in the basement laundry. We were enjoined never to pick up anything off the floor and put it in our mouths. Mother insisted that we wash our hands before eating, when we came home from school, and almost any other time when we might have picked up any

germs. This may seem excessive today, but it was the only defense available in the '20s and '30s.

The doctor, no longer Dr. Birnberg, showed up every morning with his black bag to see George. I waited in the hall in the hopes of hearing what he would say to Mother. After a few days he came out shaking his head and talking about an expected crisis. Then he left, and I saw that Mother had a worried look on her face. Would I lose my dear brother? I was terribly frightened.

Dad came home early from work that day; by then I knew that temperatures soared in the late afternoon so I suppose that was why he had come home. He and Mother washed up carefully and went into George's room. Mother sat with George most of the time; we had a maid then who did the cooking and kept an eye on me and Linn. There was silence from George's room. I waited in my own bedroom across the hall, hoping to hear what would transpire. There was silence for a long time. My clock ticked from four to four-fifteen to four-thirty. Finally I heard Mother come out of the door and say to my father, "You stay with him, I'm going to phone the doctor."

The only telephone in our house was

the black Bakelite one on Mother's desk in the sunroom. It would be too obvious if I followed Mother down there to listen, so again I waited. Finally I heard Mother's footsteps coming back up the stairs and, this time, luckily, she didn't close George's door before she said to Dad, "It's okay, he says the sweating comes when the fever is broken, and we don't have to worry that much any more." I was so happy I danced a little jig in my room all by myself.

The boiling of everything continued, as did the quarantine. All that time Linn and I had not been permitted to go out of the house because we might have carried the germs to other children. Now I was getting impatient for the quarantine to be lifted. It had been more than a week, and even though George was better, it would be several more days to make sure we weren't sick before they would remove the quarantine signs. Now Linn and I were getting bored and restless. Linn had his chemistry set in the basement, which kept him busy quite a bit, and he liked to read. Of course, I wasn't allowed near the chemistry set, but I tagged along after the maid while she did laundry, cleaned house and even helped her with chores like polishing silver. There was no use asking Mother to read to me because she was still spending most of her time with George.

I remember the first day George got out of bed and walked out of his room; he was so weak that he was hanging on to the wall just to stand up, and he was all bent over with his brown, plaid bathrobe flapping around his ankles. It was hard to believe that my strong big brother was in such a weakened condition. However, he did recover quickly from then on and soon we were back in school, returned to our normal routine.

*This article is an excerpt from a chapter in Bittersweet Berries a memoir of growing up in St. Paul by Ruth Firestone Brin. Ms. Brin has published four books of poetry and six children's books. She also is a book reviewer for the Star Tribune. Harvest, Collected Poems and Prayers is her most recent book.*





*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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