

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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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. and by a contribution from Reuel D. Harmon

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

Letters to the Editor

Who Knew the St. Francis?

I am looking for people who knew the St. Francis Hotel and can tell me more about it. Also, can anyone explain why Seventh and Wabasha was such a hub for boxing?

Paul R. Gold, St. Paul.

Gold wrote the history of the St. Francis Hotel that appeared in the Winter issue of Ramsey County History. He can be contacted through the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, St. Paul, Mn., 55102, (612) 222-0701.

He Liked It

What an article on St. Paul Company's history! Couldn't put it down, once started!

Bayliss Griggs, Hobe Sound, Florida.

Nina Clifford and the Tunnel

I've been reading about the general excitement over the discovery of the foundations of Nina Clifford's brothel below Kellogg Boulevard. Is it really true that there once was a tunnel leading from the Minnesota Club to her house of ill fame on Hill Street?

Paul Conrad, Minneapolis.

No. We hate to demolish one of the most enduring myths in St. Paul history but historical accuracy compels us to say that it's not true. In a history of the Minnesota Club, published in this magazine in 1984, author and St. Paul historian Robert Orr Baker traced the origins of the story to a tongue-in-cheek suggestion by Joe Shiely, club president in 1931, a year when the club fell on hard times. Shiely, it seems, proposed the



The St. Francis Hotel, about 1920. Gibson photo, Minnesota Historical Society.

tunnel as a money-raising scheme to keep the club afloat. A use fee would be charged. After everyone stopped laughing, they remembered that Nina Clifford had died in 1929.

About the Portrait

The portrait of Nina Clifford that a newspaper published recently was supposed to be hanging in the bar of the Minnesota club. Is that really the famous St. Paul madam?

Louise Anderson, St. Paul.

We've never thought so, and now the portrait apparently has been identified as that of a "Miss Pearce." She was painted by the well-known artist, Thomas Sully, who lived for the most part in the East and in England. He died in 1872 at the age of eighty-nine. Nina Clifford, whose real name was Hannah Steinbreker, would have been twenty-one and operating in St. Paul when Sully died.

Another Tall Story

At the Riverfront Corporation's Millard

Fillmore dinner several weeks ago, someone said Fillmore was the president who installed the first bathtub in the White House. I didn't know that.

Madeline Elaine Henry, St. Paul.

Probably because it's not true, either. H. L. Mencken, journalist and the Sage of Baltimore, made it all up around the time of World War I in retaliation for being boycotted by the newspapers for his pro-German sympathies. The story gained such credence that he tried to retract it, to no avail. President Harry Truman often repeated it to White House visitors, and it surfaced again as recently as 1992.

The Flood of '97

I remember that years ago my parents used to talk about the floods in downtown St. Paul. Wasn't the old Italian community flooded a lot?

Mary Emma Wilson, South St. Paul.

Just a century ago, in 1897, floodwaters rose to the rooftops of "Little Italy" below the High Bridge on the east bank of the Mississippi. Because the community was flooded repeatedly, the levee was cleared of housing in the 1950s.

The Rise of the Red

Reading about how Winnipeg was bracing for floodwaters from the Red River reminded me that St. Paul was the beneficiary of an earlier flood of historic proportions. In 1826 a rise of the Red and the Assiniboine rivers devastated the Selkirk Colony at Fort Garry, in what is now downtown Winnipeg. Refugees from that flood fled south to Fort Snelling and later helped settle St. Paul.

Edward Axdahl, Stillwater



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.
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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