

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

In the Beginning:
The Geological Forces
That Shaped Ramsey County

Page 4

Spring, 1999

Volume 34, Number 1

Special 150th Anniversary Issue
Ramsey County And Its Territorial Years

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"St. Paul in Minnesota," watercolor, 1851, by Johann Baptist Wengler. Oberösterreichisches Landes Museum, Linz, Austria. Photo: F. Gangl. Reproduced by permission of the museum. Two years after the establishment of Minnesota Territory, St. Paul as its capital was a boom town, "... its situation is as remarkable for beauty as healthiness as it is advantageous for trade," Fredrika Bremer wrote in 1853, and the rush to settlement was on. See "A Short History of Ramsey County" and its Territorial Years, beginning on page 8.

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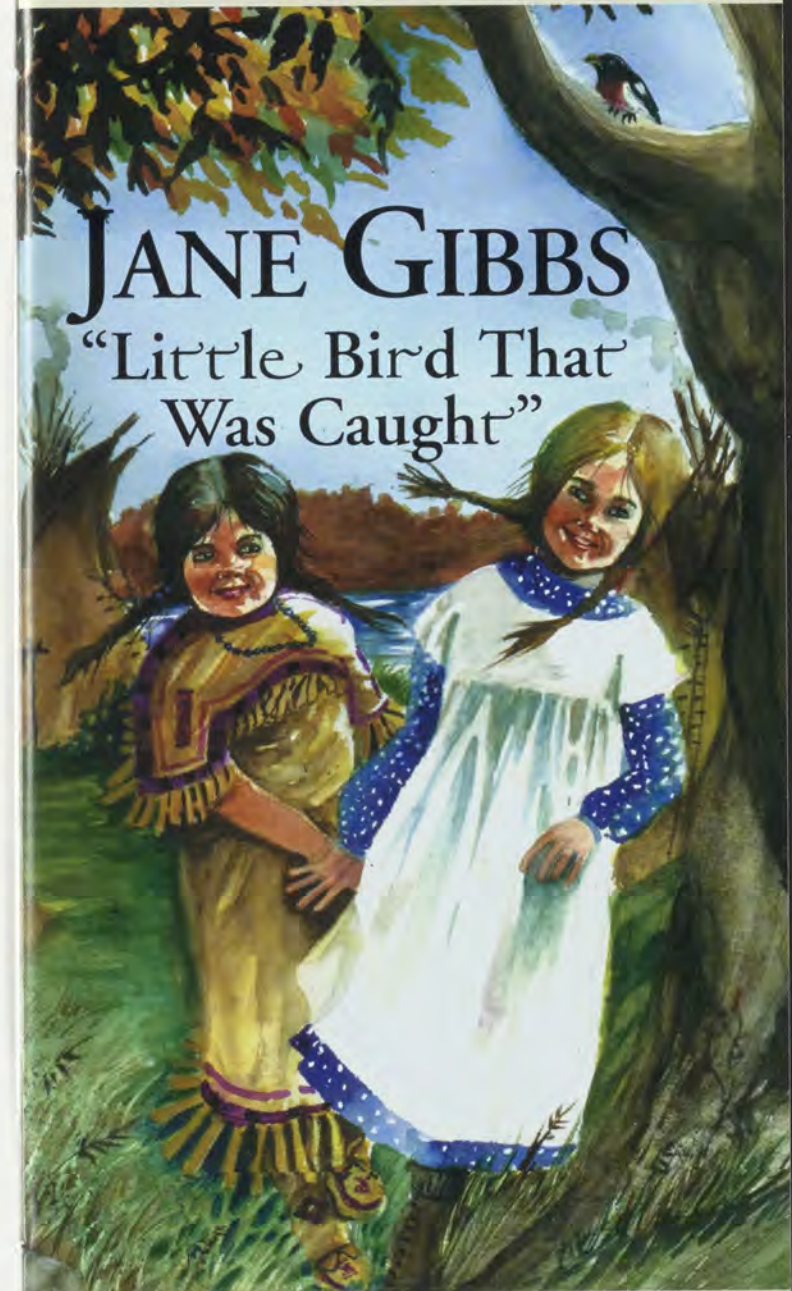
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issippi region in the 1820s, operating out of Prairie du Chien. His mother, Jane, had married Hercules Dousman, Rolette's partner and another major figure in the fur trade of the Northwest, after the elder Rolette's death.

Joe Rolette, the younger, was educated in a private school in New York City, then journeyed west to work for Henry Sibley in the vital northern plains boundary area around Pembina. His ties to the Pembina community stemmed from his marriage to Angeliqne Jerome, who was a métis. A successful trader himself, Rolette helped initiate the Red River ox cart trade between the Red River region and St. Paul. The story of his capture of the bill transferring the state capital from St. Paul to St. Peter has lost nothing and probably gained much in its passage into legend.

Rolette, a colorful man who wore Indian garb at home, possessed a well-known sense of humor but, most importantly, he was sympathetic to St. Paul's cause. To put the story simply, Rolette is said to have tucked the troublesome bill into his pocket, walked over to Truman and Smith's bank, locked it in the vault and hid out in a room in the Fuller House in Lowertown. Reportedly, he whiled away the hours playing cards while friends helpfully reported him heading north on his dog sled. When the time came for the bill to become law, Rolette appeared with it, setting off a storm of legal wrangling over whether or not the bill had or had not passed. Eventually, cooler heads prevailed and St. Paul remained the capital of Minnesota. There was one last gasp. During an adjourned session of the legislature in July, 1858, an attempt was made to move the capital to Nicollet Island in Minneapolis. Probably weary of the controversy, legislators displayed little enthusiasm and nothing came of it.

By this time Minnesota had become a state. When word arrived in St. Paul on May 14, 1858, that Minnesota had been admitted to the Union as its thirty-second state, there were no celebrations. Perhaps the heavy hand of the recent Panic still lay upon the populace. Henry Hastings Sibley was quietly sworn in as the new

state's first governor. J. M. Cavanaugh and W. W. Phelps prepared to leave for Washington as representatives and Henry M. Rice and General James Shields as senators. Within the year, prosperity made a tentative effort to return, but J. Fletcher Williams described a certain sense of forboding:

"The disunion cloud was darkening the southern horizon," he wrote, "and the utterings of war were heard in the distance."

SOURCES

This short history of Ramsey County has been adapted from a number of sources. The Ramsey County Historical Society's Editorial Board wishes to thank, in particular, County Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt for sharing with us her paper on county history and Paul A. Verret, president of The Saint Paul Foundation, for allowing us to adapt material from the first two chapters of *Saint Paul—The First 150 Years*, written by Virginia Brainard Kunz and published by the Foundation in 1991.

Other sources have included *Minnesota—A History of the State* by Theodore C. Blegen published in 1963 and reprinted in 1975 by the University of Minnesota, and *A History of the City of Saint Paul to 1875* by J. Fletcher Williams, published by the Minnesota Historical Society in 1876 and reprinted in 1983. In addition, much of the material in this article and elsewhere in this issue has come from the Ramsey County Historical Society's own publication, *Ramsey County History*, and the several hundred articles on the county's history which the magazine has published throughout the thirty-five years of its existence.

Ramsey County's Heritage Trees

At least sixteen stately reminders of St. Paul's and Ramsey County's past are scattered about the region and they are not bridges and buildings. They are trees, and they are

identified and described in a guidebook, *Heritage Trees of St. Paul, MN*, developed in 1998 by thirteen-year-old Joe Quick, a member of Boy Scout Troup 85, Indianhead Council, as an Eagle Scout community service project.

It is startling to learn from Joe's guidebook that even before Father Louis Hennepin passed through the region in 1680, two Eastern Cottonwood trees had put down their roots on Harriet Island; that around 1700 another Eastern Cottonwood was growing in the garden of a row house on St. Paul's West Side and that sixty years later a Black Willow had established itself northeast of the south parking lot at Como Lake.

Joe Quick began his research with a questionnaire he distributed to branch libraries in St. Paul and Ramsey County. Residents were asked to nominate Heritage Trees.

The result is some fascinating and little known facets of history. For instance, the description of the 1835 White Oak on Goodhue Street, nominated by Sean Kershaw, notes that "In the mid-1880s, this White Oak grew at the western edge of what then was the city limits. It grew near Grove Street, which was later renamed Goodhue Street. The tree was spared during construction of a home which was built in the Greek Revival style of architecture. The home is believed to have been built by John Hassell."

Then there is the story of Don and the 118-year-old burr oak nominated by Jack and Linda Brewer. Don was a war horse owned by William R. Marshall, Minnesota's fifth governor. Marshall, a brigadier general during the Civil War, acquired Don in 1864 in Missouri and brought him home with him at the end of the war. When Don died in 1886 at the age of twenty-nine, Marshall buried him on the "sunny side of an oak"—the burr oak—on his country estate north of St. Paul, the site today of Roselawn Cemetery in Roseville.

Joe Quick's guidebook has now been printed by the St Paul Pioneer Press with the help of the Ramsey County Extension Service and the Ramsey County Historical Society.



Map of Minnesota Territory showing the original counties as they existed from 1849 to 1851. Minnesota Historical Society collections. See "A Short History of Ramsey County," beginning on page 8

R.C.H.S.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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