

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

A Temporary Shelter for
Six Children Under 12:
St. Joseph's Orphanage

Page 10

Spring, 2002

Volume 37, Number 1

'The Best School in the City,' 1896–1916

Mechanic Arts High School: Its First 20 Years

—Page 4



The first Mechanic Arts High School building, right, shares the site at Central and Park Avenues with the old Madison School, left, where grade school pupils are playing. This spectacular 1911 photo by Charles P. Gibson also reveals a long-vanished neighborhood in downtown St. Paul. Minnesota Historical Society collections. See article beginning on page 4.

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Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 2002, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758. **All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher.** The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Fax 651-223-8539; e-mail address admin@rchs.com.; web site address www.rchs.com

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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 the late Reuel D. Harmon

A Message from the Editorial Board

In this issue historian John Larson takes us back to the turn of the twentieth century to the founding and early years of one of St. Paul's best known educational institutions: Mechanic Arts High School. Founded in 1896, Mechanic Arts High School exemplified the educational philosophy that identified vocational education and training is a prerequisite for the citizens of a nation that was rapidly undergoing industrialization. Using materials such as the high school's own student publications, Larson chronicles the first two decades of the school's history, its years under the leadership of Principal George Weitbrecht, who was an extraordinary educator.

Janet Postlewaite Sands shifts our attention to another kind of institution in a memoir of her months living at St. Joseph's Orphan Home in 1945-46. Although she was only seven at the time, Janet Postlewaite's recall of the events in her family's life that forced her and her brothers and sisters to take up temporary refuge at the orphanage is both clear and vivid. Paul Nelson follows Janet Sands's memoir with a brief essay that provides the background and history of St. Joseph's Catholic Orphan Home. In light of current newspaper headlines that raise probing questions about the function and value of orphanages today, Janet Sands's family story asks us to consider these issues in a broader context and complexity than we might first have thought necessary.

Newspaper headlines and world events are a theme that's present in Ray Barton's account of how he reacted to the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. As Barton explains, the events in New York, Washington D.C., and western Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, helped bring back his own recollections of his youthful years between 1941 and 1945 when the United States was fully committed to war with its Axis foes.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Books

Fredrick L. McGhee
A Life on the Color Line,
1861–1912

Paul D. Nelson
Foreword by David Levering Lewis
St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society
Press
261 pages, photos, index
\$29.95 (cloth)

Reviewed by Anne Cowie

In the midst of the German-Irish-Yankee population of St. Paul in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lived an independent, strong-willed, and influential African American lawyer: Fredrick L. McGhee. McGhee originally left a promising future in Chicago to practice law in St. Paul, a city with a small African American population and no other attorneys of color. This book does a fine job of portraying his life in the local and national contexts of 100 years ago.

McGhee was one of a small group of influential black leaders, including W.E.B. DuBois, who founded the Niagara Movement, an early national civil rights organization that was a forerunner of the NAACP. Locally, he enlisted the help of the Catholic church, led by Archbishop John Ireland, to further the platform of civil rights as a humanitarian cause. He also became active in Democratic politics; in 1896, he introduced at a St. Paul rally that party's presidential nominee, William Jennings Bryan.

Nor did McGhee neglect grassroots issues. In 1908, during the period when Jim Crow laws were enacted in other parts of the country, the Crispus Attucks home, an orphanage with many black children, moved close to the Mattocks School in St. Paul. In contraven-



Fredrick McGhee. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

tion of Minnesota law, some white parents proposed that the school be divided into two rooms to separate African American and white children. McGhee and a large delegation of black citizens appeared before the St. Paul school board to insure that the law was indeed enforced, and the school remained integrated.

Professionally, McGhee was an accomplished criminal defense lawyer who took seriously the cases of those whom society neglected—alleged thieves, prostitutes, and even murderers. The book details several of these cases; some he won, some he lost. As an attorney of color, he had little access to the middle and upper-class clients who could help line the coffers of the white lawyers in town. As a result, he often had financial problems and accrued substantial debt. Nonetheless he was able to purchase a farm on the Apple River in

Wisconsin, where he retreated for fishing and quiet time with his family.

It must have been a challenge to assemble this biography, for when McGhee died prematurely in 1912, he left only his wife and a daughter who never married. There are no current descendants or family records to help flesh out the portrait of a proud but somewhat mysterious man. This book, however, makes good use of contemporary source material. In particular, Nelson frequently cites St. Paul's African American newspaper, *The Appeal*, to describe contemporary events from a local black perspective.

McGhee's life, as detailed in this book, teaches two important lessons to those who study St. Paul history—first, that prejudice did exist here, and second, that implacable determination can change the social fabric, little by little. McGhee was not above living this change on a personal level. As *The Appeal* reported in 1912:

“Attorney McGhee went into Neumann's restaurant a few days ago and the waiters filled his orders with red pepper but he promptly called them down and sat there until he was properly served. He has been in the same place several times and each time some act of discrimination more or less obnoxious has been committed, but Mr. McGhee says he will continue to go until he is properly served.”

Anne Cowie is an attorney and a member of the board of directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society. A frequent contributor to Ramsey County History, she wrote the history of the Ramsey County Attorney's office for the Fall, 2000, issue of Ramsey County History.



Clarence W. Wigington in 1940. Photo from the Minnesota Historical Society.

Cap Wigington: An Architectural Legacy in Ice and Stone

David Vassar Taylor with Paul Clifford Larson
 St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press
 136 pages, photos, index
 \$22.95 (cloth)

Reviewed by Richard Faricy, FAIA

Clarence W. (“Cap”) Wigington was one of the most significant architects in St. Paul. He designed nearly sixteen structures for the city, including three that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places: the Highland Park Water Tower, Holman Airfield Administrative Building, and the Harriet Island Pavilion, now named for Wigington. He also designed six ice palaces for the St. Paul Winter Carnival. Yet until recently, he has received little recognition for his work. Thanks to David Vassar Taylor and Paul Clifford Larson, who have collaborated on the first biography of Wigington, we now have an opportunity to learn about this remarkable man.

Their book is nicely divided into five distinct chapters, with Taylor focusing on Wigington’s personal and civic accomplishments, and Larson chronicling his professional career. In the first chapter, Taylor provides a summary of Wigington’s life growing up, his education, and his early work in Omaha. We probably owe a lot to the elementary school teacher who urged Wigington to study art. In addition, had it not been for an opportunity to work as a clerk in the architectural firm of Thomas R. Kimball (who later became president of the American Institute of Architects), Wigington might have become a dentist. It was during his six years with Kimball that he became a craftsman and gained enough experience to open his own architectural office, offering “Complete Blue Prints and Specifications for all Classes of Buildings, Bungalows and Residences a Speciality.”

In the second chapter, Larson outlines Wigington’s continuing professional career, after he moved his family to St. Paul in 1914 and joined the Office of the City Architect, becoming the first African American municipal architect in the country. He would continue his career primarily in this office, taking leadership roles on some of St. Paul’s most significant buildings and designing many of the city’s public schools, including Homecroft Elementary School; Wilson, Marshall, and Monroe Junior High Schools; and Washington High School. These buildings became models for the Collegiate Gothic structures which followed throughout the 1930s.

During the depression, Wigington found himself working on park buildings funded by the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration. These modest projects resulted in lasting monuments on a neighborhood scale. Larson also describes how political and economic shifts brought on by World War II led to drastic changes in the Office of the City Architect, sending a frustrated Wigington to California and back as he endeavored to more firmly establish and advance his career.

The third and fourth chapters are

probably the most interesting. In the third, Taylor takes over again to examine, with some detail, the social climate in which Wigington worked and lived, giving us a glimpse of his personal struggles. In this chapter, a portrait of a thoughtful, principled, and diplomatic man, with a firmly rooted work ethic, emerges. During a time when segregation was taken for granted, Wigington worked hard not only for himself and his family, but to help provide opportunities for African Americans in this community.

His leadership role in forming a St. Paul Chapter of the Urban League, and in establishing, after America’s entry into World War I, a battalion of the Minnesota Home Guard for African Americans (where he rose to the rank of captain, this earning the nickname “Cap”) stand out among his major accomplishments. But the philosophy and values that guided these efforts are most evident in the way he individually fought for employment opportunities for blacks, and encouraged African American men to apply for civil service



The Holman Field Administration Building designed by Clarence Wigington in 1939 and built with resources provided by the Works Progress Administration. It is one of three Wigington buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Photograph by Don Wong, Don F. Wong Photography, Bloomington, Minnesota.

jobs, which traditionally had been inaccessible to them.

In the fourth chapter, Larson resumes with a closer look at Wigington's design style, its development over time, and historical significance. The ice palaces are of particular interest to me. I can recall piling into my father's 1937 Oldsmobile with my brothers and riding to Como Park to see the ice palaces. They were such marvelous structures, glistening in the snow with lights and fireworks, providing the magical setting upon which the Vulcans would storm to marshal in the coming spring. At the time, I was never aware of who designed them. As I look at the photos and drawings in this book, I now see classic compositions of great robust form, combining Gothic, Moderne, and Art Deco styles.

Given how much Wigington contributed to the architectural landscape and civic community of St. Paul, it is astonishing that he has gone so long with such little recognition. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that much of his work was done under the auspices of the Office of the City Architect, and most of his designs were for municipal projects, with his most spectacular work being his short-lived ice palaces. It may be due to the fact that he never received a baccalaureate. Yet many architects of his day learned the trade as he did, through apprentice-like experience. In the final chapter, Taylor brings the professional and personal elements of the man together, reflecting on his contributions within the social context of the times in which he lived, and pointing out not only the inherent racism of those times, but also the conflicting philosophies within black communities regarding how to overcome that racism.

Cap Wigington: An Architectural Legacy in Ice and Stone is a short but thorough introduction to, and survey of, Wigington's life and work. It is well-illustrated with Wigington's own drawings, splendid photographs of his extant work by Don Wong, and archival photographs, including a couple of family snapshots taken by Gordon Parks, whose

fabulous portrait of Wigington standing before his Highland Park Water Tower, graces the cover of the book. In addition, the authors provide a comprehensive list of designs attributed to Wigington and a map detailing where to find his work in St. Paul. Written for any reader interested in architecture, St. Paul, or African American history, Taylor's and Larson's book is a fine tribute to Clarence W. Wigington.

Richard Faricy is a practicing architect, a founder of Winsor Faricy Architects, and a former president of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

*Views on the Mississippi:
The Photographs of
Henry Peter Bosse*

Mark Neuzil

With a foreword by Merry A. Foresta
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
Press, 2001

272 pages, 95 cyanotype photographs,
36 illustrations
\$34.95 (hardcover)

*Mississippi Blue:
Henry P. Bosse and His Views
on the Mississippi River
Between Minneapolis and
St. Louis, 1883-1891*

Charles Wehrenberg
Santa Fe, N.M.: Twin Palms
Publishers, 2002

168 pages, 60 cyanotype photographs,
6 maps and illustrations
\$60 (hardcover)

Reviewed by John M. Lindley

Readers of this magazine will recall that the Winter, 1992-1993, issue of *Ramsey County History* carried two articles about the discovery of Henry Peter Bosse's cyanotype photographs of the Mississippi River and what is known of Bosse's life and career with the United States Army Corps of Engineers.

Publication of these feature articles coincided with the opening of an exhibition mounted in Landmark Center by the Ramsey County Historical Society to display reproductions of selected Bosse photographs, especially as they related to St. Paul and Minnesota. This exhibit has been remounted and is currently open to the public in the north lobby of Landmark Center.

The University of Minnesota Press has published a handsome and affordable hardcover volume that is likely to become a standard reference source on Bosse and his photographs. Written by Mark Neuzil, who teaches journalism and mass communication and environmental studies at the University of St. Thomas, this book reproduces ninety-five of the more than 300 photographs of the Upper Mississippi from Minneapolis to St. Louis that Bosse made between 1883 and 1893.

As an added benefit for readers, the book by Neuzil and Foresta also reproduces in twenty-seven increments the topographical map of the Mississippi from the Falls of St. Anthony to the junction with the Illinois River that Bosse and his assistant, A. J. Stibolt, prepared in 1887-88.

Less than a year after the publication of the Bosse volume by Neuzil and Foresta, Charles Wehrenberg has published *Mississippi Blue: Henry P. Bosse and his Views on the Mississippi River Between Minneapolis and St. Louis, 1883-1891*. Given the seemingly limited commercial appeal of books about a relatively unknown nineteenth-century American landscape photographer such as Bosse, the nearly simultaneous publication of both these volumes is remarkable. Together these two books offer the admirer of Bosse and his cyanotypes more to see and think about concerning this enigmatic German immigrant and his marvelous photographic artistry than can be expected.

Henry Peter Bosse (1844-1903) was born in Germany and received a solid classical education that included drawing and engineering before he emigrated to the United States around 1870 and initially settled in Chicago. The Corps



St. Paul from Cherokee Heights, photographed in 1885 by Henry Bosse. Photo from the St. Paul District, United States Corps of Engineers.

of Engineers hired him as a draftsman in 1874. Bosse lived briefly in St. Paul in 1875, then took up residence in Rock Island, Illinois, after the army assigned him to the district headquarters in that city. Until his death in 1903, Bosse remained a draftsman and mapmaker with the Army Corps of Engineers, moving up and down the Mississippi from Minneapolis to St. Louis and documenting in maps, drawings, and photographs the work of the Corps on the river.

Although Bosse's photographs were used by the Corps to record and promote its work on the Mississippi during Bosse's lifetime, public knowledge and awareness of Bosse's extraordinary landscapes quickly fell out of sight after Bosse's death. Then in the 1980s Mike Connor, an antique dealer in Washington, D.C., uncovered a collection of Bosse photographs. Connor's subsequent search for information about Bosse and his work led to the discovery of other albums of Bosse photos in the archives of the Corps of Engineers. Much of the credit for bringing Bosse and his cyanotypes to public attention belongs to John Anfinson, a historian who formerly

worked for the Army Corps of Engineers in their St. Paul office.

In *Mississippi Blue*, Charles Wehrenberg calls Bosse an "American Impressionist." He writes that he's come to regard Bosse's "masterpieces as major works of American impressionism, a landmark in cartography, and a magnificent emblem of Midwestern creativity." He goes on to explain why Bosse chose to print his photographs as cyanotypes with their unmistakable blue tint: "[C]olor dominates the first impression. It excites an anticipation that greater detail would not, a feeling that infers Henry Bosse's intention. While Bosse set out to impart information, he first wanted the viewer to feel the environment in the hands of man, and sense the frailty of human ambition in the face of nature. . . . Light seems to effervesce from the water itself. The images float on the pages, dense with information yet light in spirit."

Neuzil and Foresta reproduce ninety-five Bosse cyanotypes; Wehrenberg reproduces sixty. Each volume has some photographs that are not in the other, which adds to the enjoyment the books

deliver. Each book has a different sequence for displaying Bosse's work and different typography for identifying each scene. In a section of his book called "Bosse's World," Wehrenberg reprints contemporary newspaper and magazine articles dealing with aesthetic issues of Bosse's day, including a piece by Mark Twain from 1875 that anticipates some of what Twain later published in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). There is also the reprinting of an article by John Anfinson about Bosse and his photographs. Curiously, both books reproduce a whimsical self-portrait sketch of Bosse floating down the Mississippi sitting in a tub beneath his camera, but the two drawings have Bosse facing in opposite directions.

These rich volumes on Bosse help us to understand what was happening in the Midwest after the Civil War. In Bosse's photographs, we see that the landscape along the Mississippi in the 1880s and '90s was neither a howling wilderness nor an Edenic garden. Both books reproduce, for example, two cyanotypes of St. Paul. One shows the city and the Mississippi from the vicinity of Cherokee Heights (1885); the other from Dayton's Bluff (1890). Both capture the urban landscape of a city of more than 100,000 inhabitants spread out along the Mississippi, but whose economic future no longer depended upon St. Paul being the practical head of navigation on the Mississippi. These photographs, or "views" as Bosse called them, represent a middle ground in which technology was the agent of change. Even though Bosse was aware that technology was abusing the river in some places by destroying the delicate balance of the ecosystem, most of Bosse's landscapes focus on an apparently natural harmony of nature and technology in which both have their place and their value to the viewer.

We are fortunate today to have Bosse's photographs as a documentary record of a Mississippi River that is long gone. Bosse's views of the river also challenge us to reflect on the ways the Mississippi has changed since these photos were made and what that means for the Midwest in the twenty-first century.



Fredrick McGhee, family and friends on the porch of the McGhee home at 665 University Avenue, St. Paul, around 1910. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See "Doing History in Ramsey County and St. Paul" on page 20 and a review of Paul Nelson's biography of McGhee on page 24.

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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