

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.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Executive Director

Priscilla Farnham

Editor

Virginia Brainard Kunz

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Howard M. Guthmann

Chair

James Russell

President

Marlene Marschall

First Vice President

Ronald J. Zweber

Second Vice President

Richard A. Wilhoit

Secretary

Peter K. Butler

Treasurer

Charles L. Bathke, W. Andrew Boss, Peter K. Butler, Norbert Conzemius, Anne Cowie, Charlotte H. Drake, Joanne A. Englund, Robert F. Garland, John M. Harens, Scott Hutton, Judith Frost Lewis, John M. Lindley, George A. Mairs, Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Richard Nicholson, Marvin J. Pertzik, Glenn Wiessner, Laurie Zenner, Ronald J. Zweber.

EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chair; James B. Bell, Henry Blodgett, Thomas H. Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Mark Eisenschenk, Pat Hart, Thomas J. Kelley, Tom Mega, Laurie Murphy, Richard H. Nicholson, Paul D. Nelson, G. Richard Slade.

HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

Elmer L. Andersen, Olivia I. Dodge, Charlton Dietz, William Finney, William Fallon, Otis Godfrey, Jr., Robert S. Hess, D. W. "Don" Larson, George Latimer, Joseph S. Micallef, Robert Mirick, Marvin J. Pertzik, J. Jerome Plunkett, James Reagan, Rosalie E. Wahl, Donald D. Wozniak.

RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner James McDonough, chairman
Commissioner Susan Haigh
Commissioner Tony Bennett
Commissioner Rafael Ortega
Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt
Commissioner Janice Rettman
Commissioner Jan Wiessner

Paul Kirkwold, manager, Ramsey County

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

RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 37, Number 1

Spring, 2002

CONTENTS

- 3** Letters
- 4** 'The Best School in the City,' 1896-1916
Mechanic Arts High School: Its First 20 Years
John W. Larson
- 10** A Memoir
A Temporary Shelter for Six Under 12—
St. Joseph's Catholic Orphan Home
Janet Postlewaite Sands
- 14** Donations and Their Own Pockets
An Orphanage's Roots in 1869 St. Paul
Paul D. Nelson
- 16** Growing Up in St. Paul
The War to End All Wars:
A Schoolboy's Recollection of World War II
Ray Barton
- 19** The Fire Insurance Patrol: Gone But Not Forgotten
John S. Sonnen
- 20** Doing History in Ramsey County and St. Paul:
A Review Essay
John M. Lindley
- 24** Book Reviews

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

Growing Up in St. Paul

The War to End All Wars: A Schoolboy's Recollections of World War II

Ray Barton

Beyond Belief! the *Pioneer Press* headline screamed. The September 11, 2001 attack on America stunned the senses. We were witnessing the horrible destruction take place before our eyes, and it was like a bad dream. A terrible nightmare.

As I watched, it brought back another day sixty years earlier when just a few weeks before my twelfth birthday, I was lying on the living room floor reading the Sunday comics and listening to the radio. It was a dreary winter day without much to do, too cold for a walk to the drug store on Smith and Annapolis, or to the movie at the Mohawk theater. The date was December 7, 1941.

Suddenly CBS News interrupted the music on the radio with a news bulletin announcing that Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on the island of Oahu was being bombed by the Japanese. At that age you don't pay much attention to what's going on in the world, so the news in the paper and on the radio for the past few months hadn't made an impression on me. But if I had been paying attention, I would have known that something like this was bound to happen sooner or later.

The next day President Roosevelt spoke on the radio to ask Congress for a declaration of war, and the students in our small grade school on Dodd Road gathered in the gymnasium to listen. The principal brought her table radio to the gym and turned up the volume so everybody could hear.

"Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a day that will live in infamy" the President began, and as young as we were, everybody knew that what we were hearing would be part of history.

As we listened to the President speak, it was a shock to realize that we were in a war for the first time in our lives, and although we didn't know it then, nothing would be the same for the next four years. Our brothers, cousins, friends, and

neighbors went away to war, and some never came back. It seemed like everything: comic strips, movies, songs, radio programs were about the war. Dick Tracy, Jack Armstrong, Orphan Annie, even Tom Mix were fighting the Nazis and Japan in their afternoon radio serials. "Why doesn't Superman just end it himself?" my dad asked me with a smile one day.

Growing up I had heard stories about the World War that happened before I was born, and how it was a war to end all wars. My Uncle Harry had been in it and was considered a big hero in our family. He came back from France in 1918 and claimed 80 acres of wilderness around Ballclub, Minnesota, as part of his soldier's bonus. I always figured his ability to carve out a homestead from those woods came about because of what the Army had taught him about survival. Now they were calling this World War II, and once again they were saying it was the war to end all wars. Uncle Harry and Aunt Stella had raised fourteen children on their farm in the wilderness, and his fame as a soldier, I thought, was in danger of being overshadowed by his sons.

We were just coming out of the Great Depression, and the big duplex on Sims Avenue had been our home during most of those years. Somehow my mother and dad were able to hold the family together during those hard times, and now we were living in a nicer home in the Cherokee Park neighborhood of the upper West Side. Government defense contracts meant good jobs again, and prosperity was "just around the corner," according to President Roosevelt. It just didn't

seem possible to me that America, as big and strong as we were, could be attacked by a little country like Japan.

Why, Japan was where we sent our tin cans to be melted down and made into those flimsy little toys. Japan was the country that copied other people's ideas and came up with cheap imitations of the real thing. "Made in Japan" meant second-rate junk you found in the dime stores or in Crackerjack boxes.

I learned from the *Terry & the Pirates* comic strip that for the past hundred years Japan had been trying to subdue China without success, and calling them the "Invaders," the strip even predicted the attack on the U.S. in 1940. How did they ever expect to defeat America, the country that built the world's best cars, trucks, airplanes, radios and just about anything else you could name?

To be sure, we believed that America had never lost a war. But as I listened to people older and wiser than I, I got the feeling that we might not win this one. Almost all our Navy ships were gone, Germany had taken over most of Europe and Africa, and suddenly we were fighting two wars at once on opposite sides of the world.

There was a virtual stampede to the military recruiting stations after war was declared, and like thousands of other young men, my brother Wes joined the Army shortly after Pearl Harbor. Another brother, Don enlisted in the Navy as soon as he was old enough. Nearly every able-bodied male between seventeen and thirty-five years old was in one of the branches of the service, and for most of them, proud to be there.

I remember my horror when I read in the newspaper about the Bataan Death March in April, 1942; 70,000 American prisoners of war in the Philippines were marched 65 miles to Japanese prison



This photo from 1945 shows the Barton family reading letters from Wesley Barton, a U.S. Army corporal in Germany. Wes was awarded the Bronze Star for capturing a squad of German soldiers. l to r: Ray Barton Jr., Ray Barton Sr., Mary Barton, Wes's wife, Nancy Barton (mother). Photos for this article are from the author.

camps, and 10,000 were shot or died of disease, starvation and brutality along the way. I recall the frustration of a twelve-year-old, feeling the pain of those men but too young to do anything about it. Long after the war ended, I discovered that one of those survivors was a friend of my wife's family. The forced march lasted eight days, and he recalled that "anyone who lagged behind on that first day was shot. After the first day they just bayoneted you. They didn't think you were worth a bullet." He spent the rest of the war working in a Japanese coal mine in violation of International Law, and to me he will always be one of the greatest heroes I have ever known.

Little flags with blue stars hung in the windows of homes, one for each member of the family who was in the service, and many had gold stars for the ones who had died. Every day on my walk to school, it seemed there was another flag in the windows of the homes I passed.

This was a different war from all that came after it. Everyone was involved in some way, whether in the service or not, and it was a cause everybody believed in. We had neighborhood scrap drives,

where kids would pull coaster wagons up and down the sidewalks collecting old coffee pots, frying pans, kettles, newspapers, rubber boots and scrap iron, and then take them to salvage depots. I never knew what they did with the stuff, but it was supposedly recycled into things that would help win the war.

Men and women bought War Bonds at work through the payroll savings plan, and kids bought War Stamps at school. A stamp cost 10¢, and when you filled a book you could trade it for a War Bond. Families planted Victory Gardens and raised their own vegetables to conserve food. Our school had a Victory Garden that was planted and cared for by our mothers, and the vegetables cooked by them in the school cafeteria kitchen.

Butter was precious, and so was sugar, coffee, Fels Naptha soap and Chicken of the Sea tuna. New cars and trucks were a thing of the past; every assembly line was converted to making military vehicles. In the history of the automobile, the only models missing are the years 1943, '44, and '45.

Gasoline, food, and clothing were rationed. Tires were such a precious com-

modity that almost nobody could buy new ones for the next four years. In fact a national highway speed limit of 35 mph was imposed with the idea that slower speeds would conserve rubber, or at least discourage people from taking long trips. I remember one family trip to visit relatives in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, that took us eleven hours, including time out for a picnic lunch and flat tires.

I learned to drive by practicing with my brother's Model A Ford, which he left parked in the driveway while he went to war. Needless to say, I only drove backward and forward within the confines of our back yard, until at fifteen, I was old enough to get a driver's license.

Almost everyone who wanted a job had one now, except those too old or infirm. Even kids like me were part of the war effort. I had a job at Klein's food market on Smith Avenue at age thirteen, stocking shelves and carrying groceries to customers' cars or delivering them to their homes, replacing eighteen-year-olds who were in the military. And I wrote letters to my brothers while they were in the service to let them know they weren't forgotten.

Patriotism was prevalent in school activities, too. Junior high and high school plays, pageants, and other activities paid



"Going Home", a drawing for the Humboldt High School newspaper by Ray Barton in 1945.



The Humboldt High School newspaper staff in 1945. The author is seated, center.

tribute to our armed forces. Students enlisted in the Civil Air Patrol, Girl Reserves, War Council and ROTC. Our high school newspaper, the *Humboldt Arrow* kept up with the experiences of students who graduated or dropped out of school to join the service.

More patriotic songs were written during World War II than during any other period in America's history, and we danced at our Friday night CYC and high school "Sock Hops" to songs like *White Cliffs of Dover*, *Stage Door Canteen*, *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree*, *Rosie the Riveter*, *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition*, *Remember Pearl Harbor*, *I'll Be Seeing You*. Scores of movies were also made about the war. Movies like *Corregidor*, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Flying Tigers*, *Midway*, *Bataan* and too many more to remember.

June 6, 1944, was D-Day, the turning point in the war, the newspapers said. 2,700 ships and 176,000 troops invaded Normandy in northern France, and along with everyone else, it seemed the kids at Humboldt High School were caught up in the fervor. The yearbooks had just come out that day, and one young lady wrote the following message in my book: "*To Ray. The 2 greatest things to celebrate in 1944 are D-Day and you.*"

Less than a year later President Roosevelt died without seeing the end of the war in Europe, and that day remains focused in my memory like it was yesterday. We were a group of boys walking home from school, laughing and jostling

each other as boys do, when a newsboy making a special trip through the West Side neighborhoods, shouted word of the president's death. The mood suddenly changed, and I had a chilling feeling similar to the one I felt when I heard the news about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He was the only president I ever knew, and I couldn't imagine anyone else in his place. The others must have felt it too, because our usual after school routine of stopping for a Coke at Thera's drug store was postponed for that day.

Today, sixty years later, books and movies are still being written about those days between 1941 and 1945. We have been through other wars since, and millions of people have died. But no other war was quite like that one. America was unified, really united in World War II, and a spirit of patriotism and love of country prevailed that is unimaginable now. Today I suppose it would be called politically insensitive, but in 1942 it was called patriotism when the Italia Club on Payne Avenue took down its sign, and the German House on Rice Street was renamed the American House. The American flag flew proudly and ubiquitously during those years, and we who remember the love of that flag shudder today when it is defiled, burned and desecrated by those who *just don't get it*.

It was the last war in the history of the world that would have the absolute support of nearly everyone back home.

And on the day it finally ended, there was a celebration all over the world that

will never be equaled. It was August 14, 1945, a warm, sunny day in St. Paul. A few days earlier, atomic bombs had been dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and after four long years everybody knew it was just about over.

President Truman announced the end of the war on the radio at about noon, and I decided to go downtown and see what was happening, to be part of the most important thing that had ever happened in my life. By that time our family had moved from the West Side to the Selby-Western area of St. Paul. I could have ridden a streetcar, but I wanted to savor this experience of a lifetime, so I walked down Selby past the Angus Hotel, the Cathedral and the Selby tunnel, down the steps to Kellogg Boulevard, past the Cathedral school where I had attended so many CYC dances during the past four years, and as I neared downtown I could hear people shouting, automobile horns honking, and church bells ringing, sounds that are as clear in my memory today as they were in 1945.

Seventh and Wabasha was bedlam. The streets were jammed with people, everyone celebrating in his own way. Offices and stores closed for the day . . . bars were the exception . . . and if you were in uniform you could write your own ticket. Gasoline and food rationing stamps littered the streets and sidewalks, and the whole scene was like New Year's Eve and St. Patrick's Day rolled into one.

I stood around and looked, what else could a fifteen-year-old boy do? I had this feeling of euphoria that defies description, and I wished I could be part of what was going on. But I settled for what I was experiencing, bought a copy of the *St. Paul Dispatch* that proclaimed "PEACE!" with a six-inch headline, and walked back up the hill, feeling warm and happy that this, the war to end all wars, was finally over. Little did I know that in five short years kids like me would be part of the next one.

Ray Barton, a retired instructor in advertising art, is a freelance writer and artist and a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History.



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

Address Service Requested

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul, MN
Permit #3989

