

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

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## 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*

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# Doing History in Ramsey County and St. Paul

## A Review Essay

John M. Lindley

Doing history in St. Paul dates from 1876 when the Minnesota Historical Society published *A History of the City of St. Paul, and of the County of Ramsey, Minnesota* by J. Fletcher Williams. "Doing history," as used here, means the writing of accurate history that's based on the available sources relating to the events, people, places, and times in St. Paul and Ramsey County. It's history that is done with an effort to comprehend the ways in which the people of St. Paul interacted with their natural and material environment. This kind of history is meant to enlighten the subject for the reader, who typically wants to know how things were then, or who someone was, or what life was like in some earlier time in this area.

Williams and other late nineteenth-century historians of St. Paul, such as Nathaniel West and T. M. Newson, may have been motivated to write about St. Paul and its people out of a recognition that the pioneer generation of settlers in the city was starting to die off. These writers may have had a felt need to keep alive the memory of those who had played a part in the founding of the city and had helped it to become one of the leading communities in the Northwest. These early historians may also have had a less conscious awareness that the day was rapidly approaching when St. Paul would no longer be a city on the frontier of settlement and the ready availability of nearby land might give way to other forces, such as the industrialism that was epitomized by the railroad, in shaping the city's future.

Whatever the impetus for doing history at the end of the nineteenth century, we are fortunate to be living in a time at the beginning of another new century when doing history in St. Paul is flourishing more than ever. In addition to all the historical articles that have appeared in journals such as *Minnesota History* and this Society's *Ramsey County History*, we are experiencing an outpouring of carefully researched, well written, and engaging book-length studies of St. Paul, Ramsey County, and the people who have had a part in the area's history.

Some of these accounts are straightforward histories; others are autobiographies or biographies. A few of these books are cross-disciplinary in their approach and don't readily fit into a convenient niche. Collectively they signal that there are historians and publishers who take seriously the value of doing history in the city and the county and doing it well. This essay will discuss some of these recent publications, but by no means all of them, as a means for assessing where the doing of history in St. Paul currently stands.

Although Virginia Brainard Kunz published her third history of St. Paul, *St. Paul—The First 150 Years* (The Saint Paul Foundation) in 1991, this book represented a new direction in the telling of the city's story because its primary focus was on the various peoples and ethnic groups who settled in the area. Kunz began with the Dakota and the French, British, and American fur traders who are a part of a familiar story of exploration and settlement. She recounted how Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant and the others who were living near Fort Snelling, such as the Selkirk refugees, moved downstream from the fort in the 1830s to take up land outside the control of the United States Army. Continuing her account of how the city grew as a consequence of its location at the navigable headwaters of the Mississippi, Kunz gradually shifted her

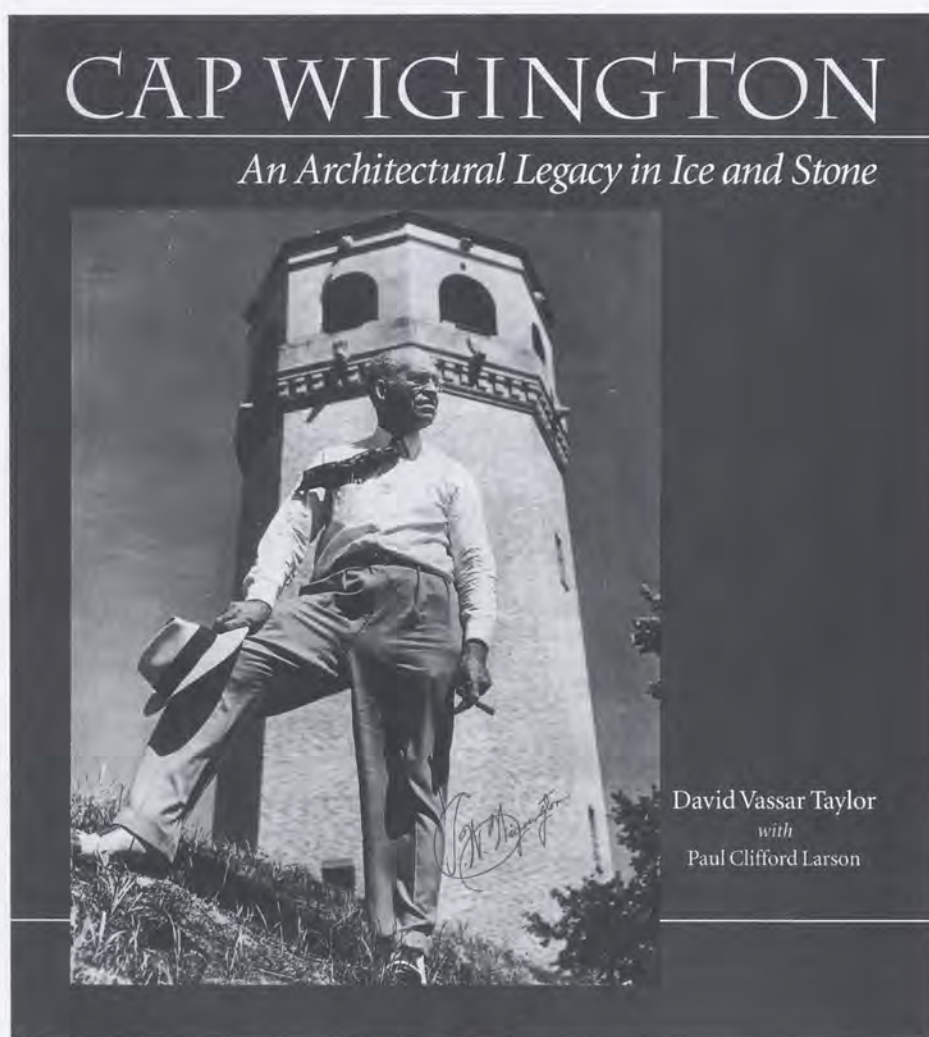
perspective to the coming of settlers from the East and states of the old Northwest, such as Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, along with the arrival of various immigrant groups from overseas, such as the Irish, the Germans, and the Swedes. She didn't limit herself, however, to the better-known immigrant communities who settled here, but brought the story forward to include African-Americans, Hispanics and Latinos, the Vietnamese, the Laotians, and the Hmong. Kunz's emphasis was on the experiences these immigrants had when they settled here, the problems they encountered, and how their presence helped to shape the city. Although she didn't ignore the many contributions of famous men and women who were important to the development of the city, she was more concerned with what these immigrant groups have added toward making St. Paul what it is today.

From Kunz's newer approach, doing history in St. Paul and Ramsey County has gone in many directions, both new and old. Among the newer approaches, there are two recently published books about Henry Peter Bosse and his cyanotype photos of the Mississippi River. Bosse was a draftsman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who worked as a map-maker and photographer documenting the Corps's dredging and dam-building work on the river between 1883 and 1891. Bosse made more than 300 photos during those years that subsequently slipped from public knowledge until they were rediscovered in the early 1990s. Thanks to Mark Neuzil's *Views on the Mississippi: The Photographs of Henry Peter Bosse* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001) and Charles Wehrenberg's *Mississippi Blue: Henry P. Bosse and His Views on the Mississippi River Between Minneapolis and St. Louis* (Twin

Palms Publishers, 2002) we now have two books that carefully reproduce many of the most significant and important Bosse photos. In addition, these books give us a real sense of what St. Paul and the Mississippi looked like when J. Fletcher Williams and the other historians of his era were recording the passing of St. Paul's pioneer generation.

Celebration of St. Paul's pioneers hasn't been limited to J. Fletcher Williams because Henry Hollinshead Morgan has written *Four Pioneer Families of Minnesota and Their Puritan and Quaker Heritage: The Hollinshead, Baker, Rice, and Kneeland Families, Their Stories, Ancestries, and Descendants* (Heptagon Press, 1998). This handsome book traces the histories of these four pioneer families of St. Paul and places them within the wider context of the history of the city. At one point Henry Morgan writes: "To a remarkable degree, the lives of our various pioneer ancestors were intertwined through marriages, business associations, and social activities. Likewise their lives were intertwined with those of many other St. Paul pioneer families, creating a community whose members were on much more familiar terms with each other than could be said of the Twin Cities more than 100 years later." Although Morgan's focus is on his extended family and its forbearers, his book is a revealing chronicle of how the members of these families have been a part of the development of St. Paul from its earliest days into the twentieth century.

An engaging and insightful autobiography by Minnesota's thirtieth governor, Elmer L. Andersen, deserves a place alongside Henry Morgan's collective family biography and genealogy in the doing of history in St. Paul. Andersen's personal narrative, *A Man's Reach* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000) is much more than an account of a politician who served in the state legislature before being elected governor in 1960 and was the losing candidate in the celebrated gubernatorial election of 1962, with its four-month-long recount. This autobiography is also the story of Andersen's accomplished wife Eleanor and all her contributions to their partnership and



Clarence Wigington photographed by Gordon Parks in front of the Highland Park Water Tower in 1928. The tower, which Wigington designed, is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Photograph copyright Gordon Parks. Jacket design by Dennis Anderson.

friendship, of his many years at H. B. Fuller, a long-time St. Paul manufacturing company, and of his later career as a publisher of community newspapers that serve many of St. Paul's northern suburbs. Because Governor Andersen believes "Life is not an entertainment vehicle. Life is an accomplishment vehicle. Real living is working, doing something and making a difference," he was thus able to see "government as the people's partner, a useful tool in getting the people's work done" and to communicate his belief that government "is the way people have of getting together and cooperating in getting things done."

Three new biographies expand our awareness of some famous and not-so-famous names of St. Paul's past. Geof-

frey Blodgett's *Cass Gilbert: The Early Years* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001) tells the story of how Gilbert (age nine) and his mother moved in 1868 from Ohio to St. Paul, where in 1876 the young Cass began his career as a draftsman's apprentice. Following formal training in architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a liberal education while touring Europe, and further apprenticeship with the famous New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, Cass Gilbert returned to St. Paul in 1882 to strike out on his own as an architect. In the 1880s Gilbert and his close friend and sometime business partner James Knox Taylor readily earned commissions for designing homes, churches, and other public buildings in

St. Paul and Minneapolis because both cities were undergoing a building boom. Although the Panic of 1893 severely curtailed Gilbert's income, by the early 1890s he had honed his skills as an architect so that he subsequently was able to win in 1895 the prized commission to design Minnesota's state Capitol.

Clarence W. Wigington, an African American and another St. Paul architect who's less well known than Cass Gilbert, is the subject of a biography written by David Vassar Taylor with Paul Clifford Larson, *Cap Wigington: An Architectural Legacy in Ice and Stone* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001). Unlike Gilbert, whose clients in his early years were typically St. Paul's elite, Wigington's principal client was the City of St. Paul. Born in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1883, Wigington came to St. Paul in 1914 from Omaha at a time when many African Americans were moving from the rural South and Midwest to the industrial cities of the North where better job opportunities and housing beckoned. In Omaha Wigington had apprenticed with architect Thomas R. Kimball and already had completed the design of a church and at least eight residential projects for a clientele of whites and blacks before coming to St. Paul in search of greater professional opportunity. He found it working for St. Paul's Office of the City Architect for the next thirty-four years.

During that time, Wigington designed more than fifty buildings, including the Highland Park Water Tower, the Holman Airfield Administration Building, and the Harriet Island Pavilion, all of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Wigington designed six ice palaces between 1937 and 1947. In this book, Taylor and Larson not only detail Wigington's professional career and family life, they also provide an assessment of the impact Wigington had on St. Paul's black community.

Another recently published biography that measures the life and achievements of a St. Paul African American community leader is *Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861-1912* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002) by Paul D. Nelson. McGhee was born a slave in rural Mississippi; yet by dint of



*Drawing of Fifth Street, St. Paul, in 1925 by John M. Doherty. Minnesota Historical Society collections. Jacket design for the book by Jo Robinson.*

hard work in 1889 he became the first black lawyer admitted to the practice of law in the state of Minnesota. The story of McGhee's ability to overcome the handicap of his birth in poverty and his determined pursuit of an education that led to his becoming an outstanding criminal lawyer and early civil rights leader is remarkable.

By means of careful and persistent research, Paul Nelson has brought McGhee from obscurity to deserved prominence as an African American leader dedicated to the betterment of race relations in St. Paul and the nation. Nelson's research gives us a clear account of McGhee's role in the Niagara Movement of 1905, which was the forerunner of the NAACP, and his relationships with Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, the two great African American leaders of the early twentieth century. Nelson also points out that McGhee's life is even more significant in the history of St. Paul because McGhee became a lay leader in the city's Roman Catholic community and the local Democratic Party at a time when most blacks were Protestants and Republicans.

In *The Saint Paul & Pacific Railroad: An Empire in the Making, 1862-1879* (Northern Illinois Press, 1999), Dutch historian Augustus J. Veenendaal Jr. has written the definitive biography of one of Minnesota's first railroads. The St. Paul & Pacific was not only built the state's first operating rail line (a ten-mile stretch between St. Paul and St. Anthony) that opened on July 2, 1862, but it was also the railroad that James J. Hill and others bought in 1879 and reorganized as the Saint Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railroad, which later became the Great Northern Railroad. What Veenendaal emphasizes is that even though the St. Paul & Pacific was a land grant railroad, it was unusual among early Minnesota roads because it was largely financed by Dutch investors. The early stockholders of the line were all St. Paul business leaders: Edmund Rice, Alexander Ramsey, Francis R. Delano, George Becker, and Elias Drake, among others, but the initial money to build the line came from Amsterdam rather than from London, Frankfurt, Paris, New York, or Boston. By juxtaposing the early railroading photos in this book with the Bosse photos of St. Paul in the 1880s, the importance of transportation in the Northwest comes alive and the reasons why the railroad quickly supplanted the Mississippi as the major transportation system in the region is easily grasped.

The city of St. Paul and the reasons for its differences from Minneapolis is the central question in Mary Lethert Wingerd's *Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul* (Cornell University Press, 2001). Wingerd uses extensive historical research to show that St. Paul's "civic identity" was very different from that of Minneapolis; beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing into the 1930s. Although Minneapolis and St. Paul are geographically close on either side of the Mississippi River, they have developed along divergent paths, largely due to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in St. Paul. For Wingerd, the differences between the two cities were not just that Minneapolis was predominantly Scandinavian, Protestant, and Republican Yankee progressive while St. Paul was Irish, Catholic, and Democratic; there was the

very real difference between the way the two cities dealt with labor issues. Minneapolis became an aggressive open shop city in the early twentieth century while St. Paul's declining economy forced it to develop a culture of compromise on labor issues where the closed shop was more typical. Wingerd's cross-disciplinary approach is innovative and insightful in the questions it raises about Minneapolis and St. Paul today.

Another innovative book that looks at both Minneapolis and St. Paul is *Downtown: A History of Downtown Minneapolis and Saint Paul in the Words of the People Who Lived It* (Nodin Press, 2000), edited by David Anderson. Anderson has collected forty-four accounts of the downtowns of the two cities ranging in time from 1850 to 1997. The authors of these personal recollections and accounts are in some cases well known (Cedric Adams, Garrison Keillor, Mark Twain, Gordon Parks, Evelyn Fairbanks, Patricia Hampl, and Oliver Towne) and in other instances, obscure or forgotten memoirists. Taken together, they provide verbal portraits of the two downtowns that show the differences between St. Paul and Minneapolis in an approach that is completely unlike Mary Wingerd's but equally insightful and persuasive. Anderson's book includes period photos of the downtowns that make this anthology a rich and rewarding history. In combination with Larry Millett's two books (*Lost Twin Cities* [1992] and *Twin Cities Then and Now* [1996]) on the urban landscapes and architectural history of the Twin Cities, Anderson's book gives us another way of seeing and understanding Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Two other recent books extend our vision and grasp even further through their path-breaking approaches to telling the story of St. Paul. In *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century* (University of Texas Press, 2000) Dionicio Nodín Valdés, a professor of Chicano Studies at the University of Minnesota, examines the lives of individuals and families from Mexico and Texas who came directly to Midwestern cities, such as St. Paul, to live and work. Although the focus of this book is on St. Paul and its large Mexican popu-

lation on the city's West Side, Valdés's sociological approach puts St. Paul's history into context with other Midwestern cities, including Minneapolis, that have significant Mexican populations. Because this book is a part of the growing body of research in Chicano Studies, it also focuses on the issue of group inequality as experienced by Mexican populations in the Midwest. As such, Valdés uses an internal colonial model that sees similarities between the barrios of the Mexicans and the ghettos of African-Americans and the reservations of Native Americans. Thus Valdés explicitly rejects both the widespread notion that Mexicans in the Midwest are the "last of the immigrants" to cities such as St. Paul and the assimilationist premises that accompany this portrayal.

The other new book that takes a hard look at St. Paul in the twentieth century from an unusual perspective is Ricardo J. Brown's *The Evening Crowd at Kirmser's: A Gay Life in the 1940s* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Brown's book is a memoir of what it was like, and how it felt, to be a homosexual young man in St. Paul in the 1940s. Kirmser's was a bar on Wabasha Street in downtown St. Paul that was straight by day and gay by night. Through Brown's account we meet the differing men and women who peopled Kirmser's at night and learn of their experiences of living in St. Paul at a time when there was little solidarity among gays and lesbians and even less acknowledgment of the existence of homosexuality by the general population of the city.

As this review of histories and biographies shows, doing history in St. Paul is alive and vibrant today. If we added the various works of fiction that include St. Paul in their story lines (for example Stanley Gordon West's *Until They Bring the Street Cars Back* [1997], Robert Clark's *In the Deep Midwinter* [1997] and *Mr. White's Confession* [1999], Larry Millett's *Sherlock Holmes and the Ice Palace Murders* [1999], and Bob Garland's *R.I.P. 37E* [2000]), the outpouring of books in which St. Paul is a central character is even greater.

While historians and other writers, including novelists, are mining the past, an enormous trove of history reposes in the

memories of those who lived it. The sources are varied: parents, grandparents, other family members, friends, and neighbors; and they can be supported by materials ranging from old letters, photos, diaries, newspaper clippings, and the like found in places as different as dusty attics and manila folders saving hard copies of today's e-mails. How many of us have listened to someone reminiscing at a holiday gathering, for instance, and thought somebody should get that person's story recorded on tape so that it would not be lost?

In one fortunate instance, *Jimmy Griffin, A Son of Rondo: A Memoir* (Ramsey County Historical Society, 2001), a path-breaking St. Paul leader, Jimmy Griffin, has done this with the help of Kwame JC McDonald. Griffin is an African-American who grew up in the Rondo section of St. Paul, joined the city's police force in 1941, served in the U.S. Navy, and then rejoined the police force in 1946, where he rose through the ranks to become St. Paul's first black Deputy Chief of Police. Griffin also served from 1973 to 1990 as a member of the St. Paul School Board. He has led an energetic and rewarding life centered on the city of his birth, where in his words: "I am Black and proud of it, but I was raised within the existing white system during the 1930's-1960's when St. Paul was predominantly a white community. When I felt this system wasn't treating me fairly or offering me equal rights, I fought my battles within this system—the system I knew. I'd like to feel I won more of these battles than I lost."

Those who want to know more about the history of Ramsey County and St. Paul and their people are lucky to have so many dedicated authors, like Jimmy Griffin, who are willing to invest the time in doing history and publishers who bring these richly varied books into print. Let us hope that they will keep up the good work so that we can continue to enjoy and learn from the fruits of their labors.

*John M. Lindley is a freelance editor and writer, a member of the board of directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society and chairman of the Editorial Board for 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.**  
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