

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

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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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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

The Fire Insurance Patrol: Gone But Not Forgotten

John S. Sonnen

Citizens of St. Paul in the late nineteenth century enjoyed a visible and stirring service financed entirely by funds from private industry. No public tax or general assessment supported it, despite the fact that the service was one of property protection. It was the Fire Insurance Patrol, made up of a crew of hustling, daring, flamboyant men who responded to all fire alarms to protect or salvage property from the damage a fire would create.

Authority to establish the corps came from the 1894 Minnesota legislature. Its insurance laws gave fire insurance underwriters authority to establish "salvage corps" financed by assessments of 1.25 percent on 1894 fire insurance policy premiums. As a consequence, the St. Paul Board of Insurance Underwriters filed articles of incorporation on May 20, 1895. Duties of the patrol were described as "attending all fires and entering any building on fire or about to take fire from any other building for purpose of protecting and saving property."

And how that Insurance Patrol attended all fires! Old-timers from St. Paul's north-central neighborhood remember the excitement of dashing down to Rice Street at the sound of the first whistle or bell from fire department Station Nine just to witness the race between the fire fighters and the Insurance Patrol's crew.

The crew's goal was to reach the fire before the fire fighters, thus allowing time to spread canvas over personal property, such as furniture, store stock, or equipment within the burning building. The patrol's station was downtown and Station Nine, three blocks north of University Avenue and a block west of Rice Street, had a one-mile jump on the patrol toward any alarm in the North End. One advantage the patrol had was weight.

Their wagon was lighter, its only load being folded canvas pads, plus four or five men, and it only needed a team of two horses.

But what horses! Slick, trim, young, yet heavy enough and with muscle enough to pull a load at, or better than, the speed expected. The Insurance Board's minutes of October 17, 1895, noted payment to Chas. Brown & Co. of \$150 "for one horse" and on October 27, payment of \$125 "for second horse," thus putting together the patrol's first team.

It was not until 1911 that the lower Rice Street fire alarm "race" spectators shifted the odds in favor of the Insurance Patrol. That was the year the patrol be-

came motorized. One year later the City of St. Paul purchased its first automotive truck, but assigned it to the main downtown station. Neighborhood Station Nine had its horses seven to eight more years.

The Insurance Patrol was a familiar sight in St. Paul for forty-four years. Then, in October, 1938, employees were notified that the patrol would be discontinued in 1939 and were "given liberty to seek employment elsewhere."

Adapted from "St. Paul's Fire Insurance Patrol—Gone But Not Forgotten," by John S. Sonnen, writer and longtime resident of St. Paul. Ramsey County History, Vol. 18, No. 2.



Fire Patrol members proudly displaying their "motor driven" vehicle. By 1909 motor vehicles were replacing the horse-drawn wagons. Minnesota Historical Society collections.



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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