

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Irvine Park in 1854:  
*Its Homes and the People  
Who Once Lived There*

See article on page 20

**Spring, 2004**

Volume 39, Number 1

*'High and Dry on a Sandstone Cliff'*

St. Paul and the Year of the Chicago and  
Rock Island's Great Railroad Excursion

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This postcard dated 1909 shows St. Paul's Lower Landing where the Great Railroad Excursion came ashore 150 years ago. From historian Robert J. Stumm's collection and used with his permission. See articles beginning on page 4 and page 20.



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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 39, Number 1

Spring, 2004

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

**R**amsey County Historical Society is celebrating two major events this spring. The first is the sesquicentennial of the Great Railroad Excursion in June of 1854 that heralded the completion of the railroad to the Mississippi River at Rock Island, Illinois, and the opening up of the trans-Mississippi west to settlement. In the lead article in this issue, historian Steve Trimble deftly reports what the historical record tells us about St. Paul in 1854. Then Robert Stumm, an avid collector of historic postcards, takes us on a tour of present-day homes in Irvine Park that have their origins in the era of the Grand Excursion and explains what those buildings tell us about the people who lived in them.

This issue of *Ramsey County History* completes forty years of unbroken publication. Begun in 1964 under the editorship of its founder, Virginia Brainard Kunz, our magazine has won two awards for excellence from the American Association for State and Local History. *Ramsey County History* has also demonstrated that local history, especially when it concerns the history of Ramsey County and St. Paul, can be a rich source of materials for authors, historians, and readers. Given the pleasure and enlightenment that this magazine has provided to all who have read it over the years, we thank the many authors who have contributed the fruits of their research and writing to RCHS. In addition Virginia Kunz deserves special thanks for her sterling editorship of this history magazine for the past forty years.

*John Lindley*, Chair, Editorial Board



## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

# Mechanic Arts—An Imposing ‘Melting Pot’ High School that Drew Minorities Together

*Bernice Fisher*

I was petrified with fear the first time I walked through the front door of Mechanic Arts High School. I had spent seven years in St. Adalbert’s grade school with a class of more or less the same thirty people, all white and Catholic; now I was in high school with more than 1,400 kids, four floors, and halls crowded with students of many nationalities and religions. What if I couldn’t find my classes? What if I had to eat lunch alone?

Mechanic Arts was an imposing brick building on Robert Street, near the state Capitol and the Minnesota Historical Society. A park in front of the building had once provided green space for the residents of the brownstone mansions sprawling down the south side of the hill from the Capitol. Many students took shop, drafting, and cosmetology classes at St. Paul Vocational School on the other side of Robert Street. To the west, in a neighborhood of older houses, were the homes of many of the Hispanic, Jewish, and Italian students.

I began my freshman year in September, 1942. World War II was raging in Europe and the war in the Pacific was moving from island to island. Many of my classmates were enlisting or being drafted.

As the Great Depression formed the backdrop of my grade school years, the war, with rationing of canned goods, sugar, and shoes, was part of my high school experience. A special flag hanging at the front of our school auditorium had blue stars for alumni who were in service, and gold stars for those who were killed in action.

The word “diversity” hadn’t yet become politically correct, but our principal, James Smith, called our high school a “melting pot,” a place where many different minorities could come together. A few African-Americans came from

the neighborhood west of the school. My Class of 1946 was proud of having elected an African-American class president. Our fellow students were Hispanics, Jews, and Syrians from across Robert Street; Italians from the Lower Levee on the banks of the Mississippi River, and Polish, German, and French children from Frogtown. Many were first-generation Americans whose immigrant parents had convinced them that education was the passport to success in American

### **Jobs or Careers?**

After I saw the movies “Kitty Foyle” and “His Girl Friday,” I knew I wanted to be a secretary. Marriage and a family were

supposed to be every girl’s goal in those days. We talked about jobs rather than careers, because we were expected to get married, have families, and be homemakers until our children left home. But the war changed everything. Women entered the work force *en masse* when they filled the jobs of men who had enlisted or been drafted.

At Mechanic Arts, I met the single working women who defied the norm—Clare Steffanus, Elmire Moosbrugger, Grace O’Brien, Margaret Turnbull, Frances Ek, Helen Scully, Miss Grant, Miss Peglow, Miss Williams, Mary Copley, Miss Schuhardt, Vera Strickler, and the Dean of Girls, Katherine Tschida—all



*Mechanic Arts High School and its students in 1928. The building had changed little by the time Bernice Fisher was a student there. Charles P. Gibson photo, Minnesota Historical Society collections.*



veteran teachers whom we respected for their skills. I can't recall any teacher in the building who was younger than forty.

Misconduct was rare. Tardy or recalcitrant students sat out parts of the school day on the Mourner's Bench, placed at the entrance to the main office as a warning to all. Girls who misbehaved were sent to Katherine Tschida. She could greet students by name years after they had graduated.

The highlight of our week was "assembly" every Wednesday morning. As we filed into the auditorium, we checked the flag hanging in front of the room to see if any new gold stars had appeared. We heard guest lecturers—politicians, prominent writers and artists, and motivational speakers. There were jugglers, singers, musicians, and magicians. When the program ended, cheerleaders dressed in blue and white taught us cheers for the football games we could attend at Central Stadium.

We sang songs from World Wars I and II as the words were projected on the screens—"The Caissons Go Rolling Along," "Over There," The Marines' Hymn," and "Anchors Aweigh." One of my favorites and the only song I remember that was not a war song was "The Grandfather's Clock."

The yearly student talent show was a major event. The Rangel family danced in glittering costumes to the accompaniment of guitars and singers. Bill Durand played "boogie-woogie" on the piano. Once a year there was a spelling bee. I placed second in my sophomore year.

### Comics Confiscated

The auditorium doubled as a study hall, with a stage in front and about fifteen rows of desks, bolted to the floor and stretching to the back of the room. The study hall teachers often walked upstairs to the balcony where they could look down at us and spot comic books hidden behind textbooks. Comics always were confiscated, along with a stern warning from the teacher that a detention would be issued for the next infraction. For freshmen and sophomores, study hall and physical education were on alternate days.

Our Phy. Ed. teacher was "Johnny" Ransler, so named because her maiden



*May Kellerhals as a young woman. She taught science and biology at Mechanic Arts High School in the 1920s and had a snake as her classroom pet. Photo from the author.*

name was Johnson. Most of the male teachers were married, but she and Mrs. Edridge were the only two married women teachers I remember. At the beginning of class, we lined up against the wall so Johnny could check our uniforms—royal blue gym suits and white tennis shoes. Squad leaders took roll and directed some of our activities.

The people who made out my schedule made a point of assigning me to a fourth-hour class after gym, so I had to

make a choice: either take a shower and be late to class, or convince the squad leader to check me off her clipboard and give me credit for showers I never took. Three tardies to class equaled one detention, so it was an easy choice.

School buses were non-existent, so most of us walked to and from school, some as far as two or three miles. Students came from the Levee, Frogtown, and Williams Hill, and a few from as far away as Dale Street. On snowy and cold



days, we incurred the anger of the custodians at the Capitol by taking shortcuts through the building and leaving wet, grimy trails.

### **A Snake as a Pet**

My favorite teacher was May Kellerhals, my sophomore biology teacher. She had been teaching at Mechanic Arts since the early 1920s and had a reputation for being very strict. An outspoken advocate for all creatures great and small, she chose the much-maligned snake for her special attention. She kept a pet garter snake in a terrarium at the back of the room and carried it around the class occasionally so we could touch it, because most of us believed that snakes were both slimy and dangerous. The boys outdid each other by volunteering to hold the snake, but a few of the girls threatened to faint.

One day a student came into our classroom with a message from the main office. He noticed that May was cradling the snake in her hands. As he was speaking, she slipped the snake into his shirt pocket.

"You aren't scared, are you?" she asked the startled messenger. With thirty pairs of eyes watching him, he tried hard not to look frightened.

"N-no," he stammered.

"Good for you," she said, and reached into his pocket to remove the snake.

After I had been in her sophomore biology class for two months, May took me aside and questioned me about my schedule. She was horrified to learn that I wasn't taking math and insisted that I get into an algebra class immediately, although fall classes had been in session for almost three months. Math always had been my worst subject, but she was not the kind of person to take "no" for an answer. Makeup would be easy, she said; she would tutor me, and I'd get caught up in short order.

Every morning for six weeks, May tutored me in algebra for half-an-hour before school. By January, I had caught up with the rest of the class and passed with an A average. May was a good mentor. She encouraged me to enter several essay contests, for which I won a trip to Itasca State Park, some monetary prizes, got my picture in the paper, and hoped to be a great writer some day. Her favorite

bit of advice was: "Try to be more open-minded. Remember: Minds are like parachutes. They don't work unless they're open."

### **The Class Clown**

During my sophomore year, I took my first year of French and met Elmire Moosbrugger, who also had been at Mechanic Arts since the early 1920s. She wore what we used to call "granny" shoes, black with a row of watermelon-seed-shaped cut-outs on each side of the laces, and favored print dresses.

Elmire was the epitome of a "lady," gentle and soft-spoken, quick to say "Pardon me?" or "Please;" she never lost her temper in class and never raised her voice. Most of us found these characteristics difficult to understand or admire, since we didn't see them often in our daily lives. A few of my classmates considered it a challenge to "get her goat," just to see what she would do.

One day the class clown, Tommy Hendricks, took the doorknob off the classroom door, so that when Elmire returned from lunch, some of the students were already in the room, but she couldn't get in. That was as close as I ever saw her come to losing her temper. She gave Tom a withering look, demanded that he replace the doorknob, and strode angrily into the room.

Mechanic Arts offered us free tickets to performances by the St. Paul Civic Opera Company and to plays, all of which were performed downtown. My friend Betty and I walked downtown from our homes near Rice Street and University Avenue to what is now the Roy Wilkins auditorium and saw *Madame Butterfly*, *La Bohème*, *La Traviata*, and *Carmen*. We saw a play by Pearl Buck and the great author herself, as well as a number of operettas: Sigmund Romberg's *Desert Song*, *The Student Prince* and *The Gypsy Baron*. The Red Shadow displaced the Scarlet Pimpernel as my new fantasy hero.

During those growing up years, when we were trying to cope with the complexities of our everyday lives, we weren't too concerned about a war that was thousands of miles away, but our teachers had other ideas. Current events were an im-

portant part of our social studies and history classes; we knew all about the Normandy invasion and Guadalcanal. Our chemistry teacher, Mr. Griffin, theorized that another atomic bomb might cause a chain reaction which would destroy the entire planet. In grade school we had memorized the names of the members of President Roosevelt's cabinet, so that bit of knowledge served me well through our high school years, since the cabinet remained fairly constant.

### **Singing Valentines**

We read the school newspaper, *The Cogwheel*, from first page to last. On Valentine's Day, the paper sponsored the *Cogwheel* Cupid Messenger Service. For a small fee, any student could leave a message at the newspaper's office for another student, and on Valentine's Day, a group of musically-talented staff members would deliver a singing valentine to the recipient in his or her class. We welcomed the class interruptions and the discomfiture of some of the athletes, who received multiple messages from loving admirers, and we learned who the popular students were, if we hadn't guessed by then.

The war had opened up a number of jobs; the men who went to war had to be replaced, usually by women, and often by teenagers. I had taught myself to type fairly well, thanks to my father's gift of a typewriter when I was in seventh grade. I was hired as a clerk-typist in the office of the Minnesota Public Health Association on lower Summit Avenue, about half a mile from school. During my junior and senior years, I worked after school and on Saturdays. Although I missed out on extracurricular activities, I met real secretaries whose day-to-day existence was far different from the romanticized lives secretaries led in films. My secretarial ambitions vanished, and I began saving my money for college.

My experiences at Mechanic Arts were of lifelong value. I gained a love of knowledge, made enduring friendships, and graduated with great faith in the future.

*This is Bernice Fisher's second contribution to our Growing Up in St. Paul series.*



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**R.C.H.S.**  
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