

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.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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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, 2004, 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 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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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

Ramsey 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

A Quilt and a Diary

The Story of the Little Girl Who Rode an Orphan Train North to a New Home

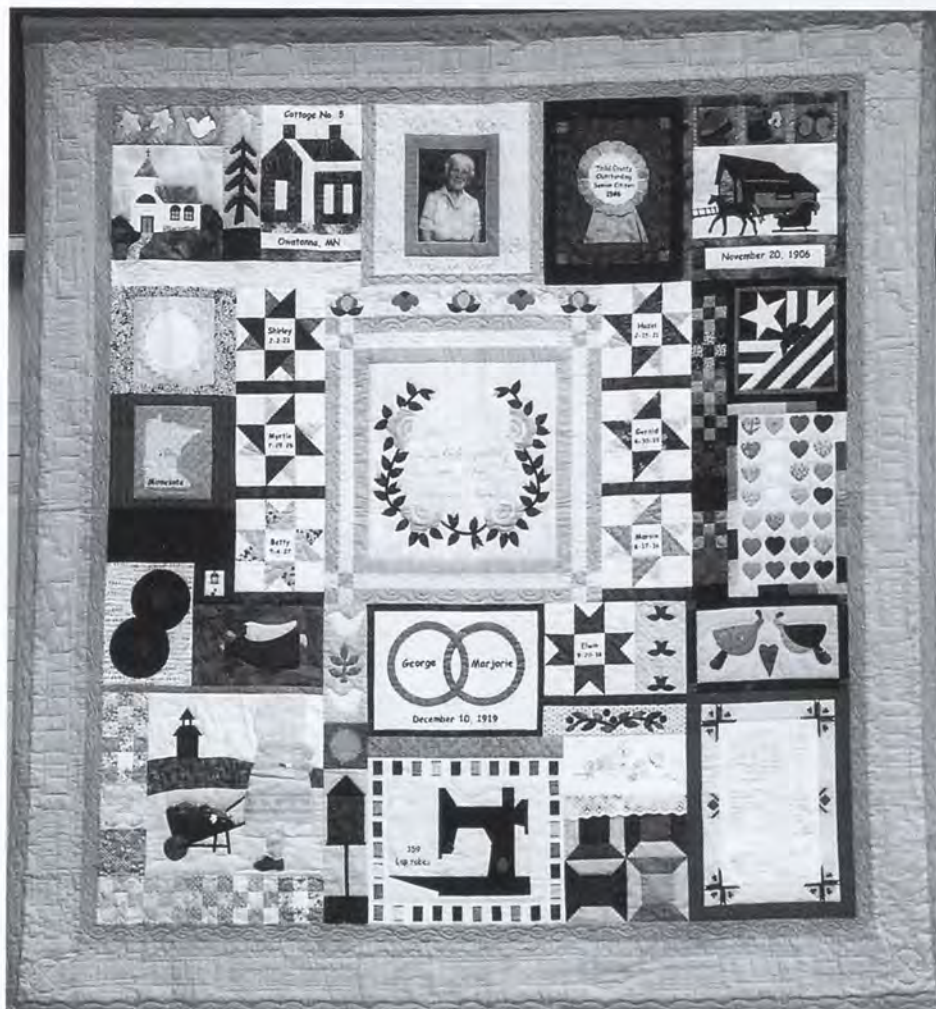
Ann Zemke

Editor's Note: For thousands of years, quilts have provided not only comfort but also a way of telling a story, as Ann Zemke of Minnetonka demonstrated recently in speaking at a Volunteer Recognition Dinner for the Ramsey County Historical Society's Gibbs Museum of Pioneer and Dakota Life., "I made a very special quilt in memory of my maternal grandmother," she said. "I used the quilt to tell the history of the orphan trains, my grandmother's story, and my memories of her." The Gibbs Museum has an extensive collection of historic quilts, some of which will be on display there on Sunday, August 1. Visitors will be encouraged to try their hands at quilting. The museum is located at Cleveland and Larpenteur Avenues in Falcon Heights. For more information, call 651-222-0701.

My grandmother, Margaret Peterson, was one of thousands of children who, during the last half of the nineteenth and much of the early twentieth century, rode the "orphan trains" to new homes. Many were orphans; others had been abandoned; and some simply were placed on the trains by their parents who hoped they could find a better life somewhere else.

From 1854 to 1929, an estimated 150,000 to 250,000 children rode these trains, from New York City and other overpopulated areas of the East Coast to rural parts of the country, mostly in the Midwest. For the thousands of immigrants who were flooding into the United States, seeking to find their place as part of the thriving Industrial Revolution, jobs were scarce. Hours were long, wages minimal, and social aid virtually nonexistent. Industrial accidents took immigrants' lives; some who stole to support their families went to prison. Children were abandoned in disease-infested slums or the streets where they tried to support themselves.

Charles Brace, a graduate of Yale Theological Seminary, saw the problem in New York. Raised by his father because his mother had died, he was particularly sympathetic to orphaned children. In 1853 he began a program known as "placing out," which sought new homes in the prosperous west for New York's orphaned children or children of poor parents. The following year, the first group of orphans climbed into a boxcar and were sent west. Brace estimated that it cost \$15 to transport a child. As funding became available, children were sent coach class. Brace later founded the Children's Aid Society that sent groups of children age five to twelve also by train and accompanied by a matron or chaperone. Announcements listing the arrival of an orphan train were sent in advance



The quilt that catches the memories of a grandmother's life. All images with this article are from the author.



Marjorie Peterson when she was three years old.

to local churches or community leaders. When the train arrived, the children were placed on a platform where they were selected by their new families. Siblings often were separated and never saw each other again.

Today an estimated 200 orphan train riders are still alive in Minnesota. They and their families hold annual reunions, organized by Sister Justina Bieganek, at the St. Francis Center in Little Falls, Minnesota. Now ninety-one and an orphan herself, Sister Justina, rode an orphan train from New York to Minnesota when she was two years old. Pinned to her clothes was a number 41, matching the number of a family in Holdingford, Minnesota, where she made her home.

At the 2002 reunion, my mother told the story of her mother and I decided to

capture my grandmother's special life story in a quilt. I've been quilting for more than thirty years and have made 100 quilts, but the quilt I made to tell her story is the most memorable and significant for me.

My grandmother, Margaret Peterson, was born in St. Paul and taken by orphan train to northern Minnesota. The autobiography she wrote and the diary she kept for forty years have helped me write this account of her life. Her story begins with her birth on May 17, 1896. (For some unknown reason, she later changed her birth date to June 18, 1898.) She was sent to a church home, then adopted by Philip Sutton and his wife who lived in Owatonna, Minnesota. They changed her name to Mary.

She wrote: "Mr. Sutton worked in a foundry. He had been a soldier in the Civil War and I saw him dressed in his uniform. He and Mrs. Sutton were good to me" However, Mrs. Sutton died after a long illness; her husband was unable to care for Mary, so he arranged with another family to take care of her. Eventually, he remarried and brought Mary home with his new wife. Grandmother remembered:

Mrs. Sutton used to send me to bed early at night, and I used to peek down the floor register and see that she had boyfriends visit her while Mr. Sutton was at work. Sometimes she would leave me alone at night and I would cry. One day I told my dad what was going on. I didn't mean anything by it, at that time. One night Mr. Sutton came home and found a boyfriend there. Then trouble

began. So I guess Mrs. Sutton didn't like me too well. One day she and dad took me to the Home School in Owatonna. It must have been in March, 1906, because I remember singing songs for Easter.

At the Home School there were "lots of children to play with," Grandmother wrote.

She lived in Cottage No. 5 with about fifty girls aged six to eighteen years. They had many rules to follow and were punished for not obeying them. In the morning the children were called at 6 o'clock to get up, dress, wash their faces and hands, then march about a block to the dining room to eat breakfast. After eating, they went back to the cottage to do some cleaning; then they were sent off to school in another building. After school there were more chores in the cottage, but also time to play. At night the children hung their clothes and their long black stockings on the backs of their chairs, placed their shoes carefully under their beds (each child had a single bed), and knelt to say their prayers before lights out.

One day a matron told my grandmother that she was going on a train to a new home. Grandmother didn't welcome the news because "I was having fun playing with the other children." But the day came.

I got a new blue dress, shoes, coat, and whatever else I needed and was taken by a lady with four other children to the depot in Owatonna. The train traveled north and stopped in Bertha, Minnesota. This day, how well I remember. It was November 20, 1906. I was eight years old. Mr. and Mrs. Peter Lind met the train with a team and a sleigh and selected me as their child. They stopped at a department store to buy me overshoes, mittens, leggings, and a hood. That night I felt lonesome, so I sat on dad's lap and cried until I went to sleep. They named me Marjorie. I learned to like my new home.

For her first two years there, she was the Linds' only child; then they had a child of their own. Mrs. Lind home-schooled grandmother until she was allowed to attend school. She wrote that "I loved school and worked extra hard at home so I could continue going. We used



George, seated, and Marjorie Peterson, right, on their wedding day, December 10, 1919. With them are Alice Lind and Everett Peterson.

to wash on Saturdays or in the evenings and I would do all I could on evenings and weekends so I could go to school. I walked a mile-and-a-half to school, usually in twenty or thirty minutes. I always had to be home from school half-an-hour after school was out."

My grandmother lived with the Linds until November, 1917, when she was nineteen years old. Then she worked as a maid in Long Prairie, Minnesota, where in the spring of 1919 she met her husband, George Peterson. They were married the following December 10, and had seven



Marjorie Peterson at the age of eighty-six.

children, twenty grandchildren, twenty-five great-grandchildren and three great-great-grandchildren. After working in Portland, Oregon, during the World War II years, they returned to Long Prairie where they lived the rest of their lives.

My grandfather died in 1985 at the age of ninety-four. Grandmother continued to work hard and diligently. She loved to do handcrafts. She made 359 lap quilts and gave them to veterans at a VA home; she was an active member of the Ladies Aid at United Methodist church, often serving lunches for weddings and funerals; she was president of the Women's Relief Corps for twenty-two years; in 1986 she was named Todd County Citizen of the Year.

The quilt, which my grandmother didn't live to see, is my way of documenting her life. Like every piece of art, every quilt needs a name. I've named mine "The Green Green Grass of Home."

Ann Zemke teaches quilting and conducts quilting workshops and a camp for those interested in quilting. She can be reached at 952-937-0417; e-mail: ann@crocuslanequilts.com. Her web site is www.crocuslanequilts.com.

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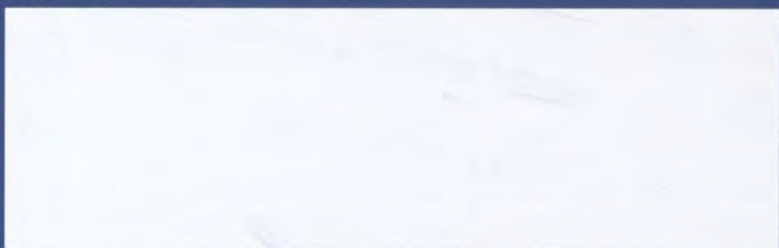
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Stock certificate for five shares at \$100 par value, each issued in 1853 by the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad Co., organizer of the 1854 Great Railroad Excursion. The certificate is signed by John B. Jervis, the railroad's president, and its treasurer, A. C. Flagg. Both Jervis and Flagg were New York investors. The \$100 that a share cost in 1853 would be equal to \$2,244 in 2004. Also from Robert J. Stumm's collection.

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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