

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Spanish Influenza in 1918:
The Year St. Paul Found
The 'Wolf' at Its Door

Page 19

Spring, 2005

Volume 40, Number 1

The Force that Shaped Neighborhoods
1890–1953: Sixty-three Years of Streetcars
And Millions of Dollars in Investments

—Page 4



Selby Tunnel. A Selby-Lake car on its way downtown emerges from the east portal of the Selby Tunnel. Built to relieve the grade on Selby Hill and replace an awkward cable-counterweight system, the tunnel cost \$366,000 when it opened in 1907. The west portal of the tunnel on Selby has been covered over and sealed. The east portal is still visible, albeit in considerably deteriorated condition. Minnesota Transportation Museum Collection.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 40, Number 1

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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

The completion of the light rail line between the Mall of America and downtown Minneapolis within the past year and the possible construction of additional light rail in the metropolitan area have encouraged considerable discussion of the streetcar era. Without indulging in either nostalgia or finger pointing, transportation historian John W. Diers takes us through the complex history of the electric streetcar system in St. Paul in our Spring issue. His account is based on wide research into the predecessor systems, the economic pluses and minuses of streetcars, the human side of streetcar employment, and the ever-present competition from automobiles after 1920.

The Spring issue also includes an intriguing look at the effect of Spanish influenza on the city of St. Paul in 1918, a time when there was a world-wide influenza pandemic. Susan Dowd, a devoted researcher of old newspapers, shows us how St. Paul dealt with this deadly disease and survived far better than many other cities of that time. This issue of our magazine also includes another in our ongoing series, "Growing Up in St. Paul," with a delightful piece by historian James Bell that recalls his boyhood on Hague Avenue and Fry Street in the first half of the last century. Lastly, Steve Trimble supplies a look at St. Paul history through the eyes of four contemporary novelists who use St. Paul as the backdrop for their fiction. These novelists have steeped themselves in local history and used it to enliven and enrich their stories of the human condition.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Book Reviews

Henry Hastings Sibley: Divided Heart

Rhoda R. Gilman
St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society
Press, 2004
286 pages, \$32.95
Reviewed by Mary Lethert Wingerd

Sibley County, Sibley Street, Henry Sibley High School, the city of Hastings . . .

The legacy of Henry Hastings Sibley is writ large on the map of Minnesota; yet for most who travel this everyday geography, neither the school, street, county, nor city awaken a historical memory of the man who left such an indelible footprint on the making of our state. Once lionized as the “first citizen of Minnesota,” later condemned for his role in driving Native Americans from the land, today Henry Sibley—trader, politician, governor, and general—is very likely unknown to the vast majority of Minnesotans.

In this remarkable volume, Rhoda Gilman weaves a narrative that vividly reconnects us to that distant world where Sibley made his mark—where European and Native Americans collaborated and collided in determining the future of the upper Northwest. As a product of his time, Sibley emerges as neither entirely hero nor villain, but rather as a complex individual poised between two worlds. As “civilization” inexorably obliterated the Minnesota frontier and drove its native inhabitants into exile, Sibley rose to fame as a statesman and agent of progress; yet even at the pinnacle of his career, he struggled unsuccessfully to reconcile his “divided heart.”

As a biographer, Gilman succeeds with style and sympathy, but her achievement far exceeds a conventional biography. In her telling, Sibley is one character—albeit a central figure—in a much larger story that illuminates the economic, political, and cultural transformation of present-day Minnesota in the space of a mere forty years. Drawing on insights gained in a long and distinguished career as a historian of Minnesota, Gilman brings a level of sophistication and complexity to her tale that is unmatched in any previous work on the subject.

This making of Minnesota was no simple clash between Indians and European Americans. Rather, it involved shifting economic and social relationships that redefined loyalties, partnerships, marriages, and even definitions of race and identity. Long before Minnesota Territory was charted on any official map, whites and Indians were engaged in mutually beneficial trading relationships. Rather than an untracked wilderness, by the 1820s the territory was firmly attached to the market economy. It was parceled into geographic “outfits” by the American Fur Company, which then contracted exclusive trading rights to individual traders. Whether the traders turned a profit or sank into bankruptcy would depend equally on their economic savvy and their ability to establish working partnerships with Native bands. Henry Sibley arrived at Fort Snelling in 1834 to try his skill as one of these traders.

Born and raised in Detroit during its heyday as a fur trading center, Sibley was comfortably at home in the Minnesota borderland with its multicultural and racially fluid population of Anglo

and French Canadians, Dakota, Ojibwe, and Euro-Americans. Intermarriage was common among all and mixed blood offspring knit the various relationships into intricate patterns of mutual accountability and respect. Sibley settled in with gusto as the “squire” of Mendota, hunting with the Dakota, hobnobbing at Fort Snelling, and dabbling in territorial politics—all the while with an eye on nudging a profit from the declining fur trade.

Less than thirty years later, the state of Minnesota promised a bounty for Dakota scalps and General Henry Sibley commanded a military force that hounded Native Americans from the state, or confined them to bleak reservations. True, this became a familiar historical tale that repeated itself again and again as settlement rolled westward across the continent. But rather than simply accept its inevitability as another instance of American imperialism, Gilman untangles the web of human, economic, and political contingencies that enabled the tragedy to proceed. Though by every material measure, Sibley emerged a winner in the transformation; in the end he appears as something of a tragic figure himself, unable to reconcile the contradictions of his life choices.

This fine biography is history written at its best. The insights that it reveals tell us not only about the past but something about ourselves and the human condition as well.

Mary Lethert Wingerd is assistant professor of history at St. Cloud State University and author of Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul.

The Great Northern Railway: A History

Ralph W. Hidy, Muriel E. Hidy, Roy V. Scott, and Don L. Hofsommer
Foreword by Alfred D. Chandler Jr.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004
360 pages, \$29.95
Reviewed by John M. Lindley

Although this classic history of the Great Northern Railway was first published in 1988 in hardcover, thanks to the University of Minnesota Press it is now once more readily available in softcover at an affordable price. The origins of this book are complicated, but they deserve an explanation.

In the 1950s the Great Northern Railway approached Ralph and Muriel Hidy, who had already published a history of the Baring Brothers banking firm, written a book on Standard Oil of New Jersey, and would later write a history of the Weyerhaeuser Company, to research and write the story of the Great Northern. Ralph and Muriel Hidy subsequently produced a long, two-volume work that carefully documented the railroad's history. The railroad then asked the Hidys to condense their fine study into a single volume that would be more accessible to a larger audience. Unfortunately, Ralph Hidy died in 1977. Muriel Hidy, who was then assisted by Roy V. Scott, then died in 1985, before that one-volume history was completed. The railroad, to its credit, stuck with the project and brought in Don L. Hofsommer, a highly qualified railroad historian, to complete the manuscript, which he did. Dr. Hofsommer is currently a member of the history faculty at St. Cloud State University and is still active in railroad history.

Because the original hardcover edition of the history of the Great Northern Railway was out-of-print until the University of Minnesota chose to publish this new edition, anyone who wanted to read about the Great Northern had to search hard to find the 1988 printing. Big libraries had copies of the 1988 book, but this standard account of one

of the nation's great railroads was not readily available in many new or smaller libraries that wanted to expand their collections in railroad history. Keeping histories such as this in print is important because the Great Northern is so much a part of the history of Minnesota and St. Paul, in particular. Once more the history of the Great Northern Railway has currency for all who want to know about the role that the road played in the Upper Midwest from 1856 to 1970.

The book is divided into two sections. The first covers the railroad's history from 1856 to the death of James J. Hill in 1916. Although Hill and his sons figure prominently in this history, this first part is not simply a biography of Hill, the Empire Builder. It is institutional history at its best, covering the road's early trials and expansion strategies, its relations with its many workers, and the countless ways it influenced the development of the Upper Midwest. Many black and white photos are scattered throughout the book. These images document visually the life and labor involved in working on the railroad as well as showing how changing technology influenced a major trans-continental road.

The second part of the book brings the story of the Great Northern forward to 1970, when the road merged with the Northern Pacific, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy, and the Spokane, Portland & Seattle Railroad to form the Burlington Northern Inc. In 1995 the Burlington Northern merged with the Santa Fe and became the Burlington Northern & Santa Fe. By that time, however, the BN, which had been headquartered in St. Paul since the days of James J. Hill until the 1980s and had been a major component of the local economy, was long gone from its massive general office building that had once housed both the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific. Gone, too, were the jobs that had employed so many at Bandana Square and the Jackson Street shops.

Because railroads such as the Great Northern helped make St. Paul the city it is today, the publication of this new edition of the railroad's history ensures that

the Great Northern's many contributions to this area will not soon be forgotten by any who care about the region's past. In a larger context, however, the story of how this exemplary business history was initially published, then went out of print, and is only now back in print is significant. It reminds us all of how much time it takes to write and publish institutional business history, typically because of its complexity, and yet how rewarding to readers the results can be if those involved in the funding, writing, and publishing have the patience to see such a large undertaking through to completion. The richness of the history of the Great Northern is a legacy to St. Paul because the many leaders and employees of this railroad continuously served the wider community throughout the road's long history.

Historian John Lindley is an independent researcher and writer, and chairman of the RCHS Editorial Board.

Strange Days, Dangerous Nights

Photos from the Speed Graphic Era
Larry Millett
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004
Reviewed by Tom Kelley

Larry Millett worked for the *St. Paul Dispatch* and *Pioneer Press* for thirty years as a reporter and editor and, most recently, as an architecture critic. One of his earlier books, *Lost Twin Cities*, described, the indifferent destruction (in the name of progress) by urban renewal of many of the landmarks and institutions of the Twin Cities.

His most recent book, *Strange Days, Dangerous Nights*, is built around 202 photographs from the collection of an estimated 500,000 photos stored in the morgue (archives) of the *St. Paul Dispatch* and *Pioneer Press*. With the help of a researcher, he found the accompanying news stories the pictures illustrate. Millett's tightly written accounts containing the essential information accompanying the photos aid, but do not

interfere with the photos in telling their stories.

The pictures cover events of the 1940s through the 1960s, a period Millett calls "The Speed Graphic Era," because the speed graphic camera was the standard of news photographers during those years. It was used almost exclusively for pictures of crimes, murders, fires, auto accidents, and other tragedies.

All during that period, radio was competitive with newspapers, but lacked the visual impact of the print media. The Speed Graphic camera was particularly suited for news work. Though by today's standards the camera was large and cumbersome (it weighed six pounds), it was a utilitarian tool especially suitable for news coverage. All of the settings had adjustments that were manual and simple. This made it possible for beginning photographers to learn their profession by serving an on-the-job apprenticeship. The camera used large 4 x 5 cut film carried in a cassette. Each cassette held two sheets of film and was inserted in the camera for each shot. After the first shot, the cassette was turned over and reinserted for the second shot. Photographs from those 4 x 5 negatives were of high quality.

For those of us who lived during those years, the large Speed Graphic camera was a familiar sight at news and sports events. It was equipped with flash bulbs that enabled photographers to take excellent pictures on dark nights. About the size of a flashlight, the flash was mounted on the side of the camera and had a wire that plugged into the camera and synchronized with the shutter. The photographer who chose not to use the flash simply unplugged it.

Ideally suited for news work, the Speed Graphic had a large lens that took advantage of natural light in capturing details. It also had a bellows which made it possible to focus by moving the lens forward and back on a special track. Most photographers carried a bag that held many cassettes.

The remarkable pictures in the Millett book were made possible not only because of the Speed Graphic, but also because of the special, close working

Life in the Back Shop

Printers tell their stories, 1900-1965



relationship between the police and the photographers. It was a relationship that gave the photographers "permission" to be at the scene, and, as Millett's choice of pictures demonstrates, sometimes even before the investigating police officers arrived.

One picture reveals the damage caused by an explosion at the 3M plant on St. Paul's East Side on February 8, 1951. Another, which probably would not be shown in today's newspapers, shows the decapitated body of an employee in the street. I had just started working at 3M as a production scheduler in the abrasives department. Eleven people died in that explosion. I was lucky; my only injury was to have the hair on the back of my head singed.

The end of the Speed Graphic era was foreshadowed in a picture by Roy Derickson showing the 1956 flood of the Mississippi River, with President Lyndon Johnson and other politicians viewing the flood waters in St. Paul. A television photographer can be seen winding his spring-driven Bell & Howell 16 mm camera while nearby another photographer carries on his shoulders a large television camera with WCCO clearly marked on its side.

The hand-held Bell & Howell television camera appears again in a photo

of an arrest. Taken by Buzz Magnuson at the Alvin Theater in 1956, the picture shows police making an arrest for lewd performances. (The police waited until the end of the performances before making the arrest.)

Strange Days, Dangerous Nights documents a space in time in the history of St. Paul which was occupied by our grandparents, parents, and some of us. Its 202 large, vivid photos put us at the scene of events from the 1940s through the 1960s and compel us to become part of the action, part of the scene. The characters are looking at you, the shadows on the ground in some of the photographs could be yours. The picture on the book jacket urges you to open the book. Spell-bound, you are drawn from one image to another. The book is a dramatic account of a period in St. Paul's history.

Tom Kelley, a member of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Editorial Board, is a former journalist and a veteran of the "Speed Graphic era."

Life in the Back Shop: Printers Tell Their Stories

Robert MacGregor Shaw
Superior Letter Press Company,
Cornucopia, Wisconsin
Reviewed by David Riehle

My great grandmother, Jennie Jones, was the founder and editor of a weekly newspaper in the village of Bloomer, Wisconsin. Her husband George, a blacksmith, was the "publisher" and her nephew Frank learned the printing trade there. Four generations later I became the last typesetter in the family, working as a teenage printer's devil at a weekly newspaper in St. Paul.

Jennie's paper was called the *Bloomer Workman*, and its masthead carried the banner, "Defend the Rights of the Poor—the Rich Will Guard Their Own." The weekly (and daily) journals of that era made no pretense of objectivity and forthrightly campaigned for the particular social and political views of their owner, editor, and publisher, who was usually the same person.

My great-grandparents, who had apportioned the titles of editor and publisher between themselves, contributed in an apparently equal manner their vigorous editorial statements on the issues of the day, not the least of which in their view was to urge support to the great party of protest and reform of the 1880s, the Greenback Labor Party.

The composing room I worked at in the 1960s relied substantially on the same technology that the *Workman* utilized, with the exception of the presence of the now ubiquitous Linotype machine. It had replaced the handsetting of lines of type, hence “line-of-type,” with a vastly more productive, and infinitely more complicated Rube Goldberg-like contraption with 35,000 parts. The amazing thing was that it actually worked. Handsetting still continued, however, for ad material, headlines and other specialized text. The printed page came directly from a press that mechanically transferred the image of the inked metal type to paper.

For the most part, the operations would have been familiar to printer Mark Twain, or even printer Benjamin Franklin. But within a few years of my arrival on the scene, it was all gone, replaced by offset printing and electronic typesetting. I had to find another trade. A little later I was shocked to come upon a working printshop as part of a living history display in a museum. Although the actors were dressed in the late-nineteenth century garb my great grandparents would have worn, the type cases, composing stone, and other *accoutrements* of “the art preservative of all arts” could have come out of the shop I had worked in a few years earlier.

This lost world, especially as it was in the small town print shops and country newspapers of America, is celebrated by historian, collector of tales, and author Robert MacGregor Shaw in his book, *Life in the Back Shop: Printers Tell Their Stories, 1900–1965*. Shaw, who spent a lifetime in this world, although, as he says, not as a printer, but as a front-office man, has woven his tale from interviews

he conducted in 2003 with thirty-six veterans of those back shops.

“This is not a book about printing,” Shaw writes. “It’s about letterpress printers in small shops and what they experienced on the job . . . These were the people who, from the arrival of line-casting machines in the late 1890s to the coming of offset printing and computerized typesetting in the mid-’60s, did the dirty and often dangerous work of printing weekly newspapers. I hope their story will fill a gap in the history of American journalism.”

Shaw has done an admirable job of presenting, through the words of the participants themselves, the reciprocal relationship between humans and technology as it expressed itself in a certain time and place.

And since what they produced, and reproduced, was not just metal forms, ink, and paper, but *information and ideas*, this industry, modest as it was if taken one shop at a time, influenced the society we lived in as it evolved throughout the era he chronicles. “Each week,” Shaw relates, “*from scratch* with our own brains and hands, we made a brand-new product, permanent record of our community.” (Emphasis in original.)

Historians and researchers know, or soon learn, that the “little papers” of the era are indeed an indispensable record, often the only record, of the life and times of smaller communities. And not only a record of births, deaths, weddings, graduations, and ice cream socials, but of social and political debate and struggle, as exemplified by Jennie and George Jones’ crusading weekly. It is, for example, impossible to understand the course, and organization, of the political movements that swept across this state—Republican, Democrat, Populist, Farmer-Labor, Progressive—without grasping that the small papers not only recorded events and ideas, but advocated and organized for them. The credo of the individualistic and often iconoclastic editor of that era was, as it was proclaimed in my great-grandparents’ newspaper: “Educate, Agitate and Organize.” Shaw interviews descendants of long-time Republican

state treasurer Val Bjornson, one of almost innumerable political movers and shakers who originated as opinionated, partisan, and influential editors.

Although the subject is beyond the immediate scope of *Life in the Back Shop*, activist editors not only captained the myriad weeklies of the heartland, but the somewhat more specialized and focused journals of what might be called the horizontal components of the broader community.

Like most of his peers, *Union Advocate* editor Cornelius Guiney, who owned and conducted the paper from 1897 to 1920, was a journeyman printer and a proud and active member of the International Typographical Union, the oldest labor union in America.

Shaw’s conscientious and painstaking work of weaving the oral histories of the participants with his own informed narrative is an exceptional contribution to the permanent record of a lost art and the old-time “prints” that conducted it. It also inescapably underlines the elimination of an institution that was, partisan or not, far more a reflection of the communities within which they functioned than the boilerplate, mass-circulation, “community newspapers” of today—that are all produced in the same impersonal way, impervious to creative and innovative expression, audacity, and iconoclasm of the editor-proprietors of Shaw’s narrative.

“About once a year,” Shaw reports, volunteers, mostly retired printers, “tie on their aprons and re-live the old days in the Newspaper Museum at the Minnesota State Fair.” For about twelve days some 65,000 people pass through for a glimpse of a more democratic and less impersonal form of mass communication, as it once was, and an introduction to the technology and the human beings who made it work.

Shaw’s book is available from the Superior Letter Press Company, PO Box 205, Cornucopia WI 54827 (\$19.95 plus shipping.)

David Riehle is a member of the RCHS Editorial Board and a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History.



Another view of Wildwood Amusement Park on the south shore of White Bear Lake. This postcard view was mailed to Mrs. H. Freedland of Red Wing, Minn., on August 12, 1912. From historian Robert J. Stumm's postcard collection and used with his permission.

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