

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

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Spring, 2005

Volume 40, Number 1

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

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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

Spring, 2005

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

Across the street lived Ed and Lucille Finley and their daughters—Joan, Rosellen, and Sally; next door were the Carleys, Tom, Dick, and Midge; across the street were Janet and Lindy Dahlstrom; Edward and Janet Rose resided on the east side of our house. He was of the venerable Rose Brothers Fur Company in St. Paul, while John Wilson, whose father played such a pivotal role in the development of the area, was nearby.

My sister and I played golf with Dick Carley at the Highland Park Golf Course during the summer vacations. He was delightful and easy company. As his mother's family had produced a number of physicians, Dick followed in the footsteps of his grandfather Dr. Jerome Hilger and became one of St. Paul's leading Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat specialists.

Hamburgers and Pie

The neighborhood held other attractions too: the Highland Theater, the Highland Drugstore managed by Harold Shapiro and his wife, Lee's Village Kitchen for hamburgers and pecan pie, the Italian Village, Cecil's Delicatessen, presided over by Cecil J. Glickman and his wife Faye, and Hove's Supermarket.

After graduating from University High School in 1950, I entered the University as a student in the College of Science,

Literature, and the Arts. It was an enormous transition from a high school of 360 students and where I knew almost everybody by name, to a large impersonal campus of about 17,000 students. I look back on the 1950s and wonder if it was the University's "Golden Age" for several departments. For example, the Department of History included such luminaries as Clarke Chambers, Ernest Osgood, David Noble, Rodney Loehr, and George Anderson. Theodore Hornberger and Louis Coxe were American literature stars in the English Department and George Amberg and Ralph Ross were sparklers in the Humanities program, as were George Tselos in Fine Arts, and Johann Rhodell in Music. Each had a remarkable impact on my academic development, broadening my literary, music, and artistic horizons that enrich my life today.

I remember the lectures on Bach by Rhodell, an excellent musicologist and a credit to any first-class university. As a history major, I was well served by Clarke Chambers as my advisor. Ernest Osgood was a brilliant lecturer. When he settled in Wooster, Ohio, we reestablished our friendship when I was moonlighting from the faculty of Ohio State University, teaching a history course at the College of Wooster and being courted to join the college's faculty. It remains an excellent

liberal arts college and I think my career would have been fulfilled had I accepted the job rather than going on to Princeton. Theodore Hornberger's introduction to American literature has stood me in good stead; George Tselos's course in Art History introduced me to a field that continues to nourish my interest while visiting art museums in America or Europe.

For the Bachelor Cotillion Dance in December 1955 at the University Club I invited Miriam Seeger Reay, a longtime friend. The dance was an annual highlight that introduced the new set of debutantes to friends who, ironically, they probably had known since childhood. She and I attended the same church, Messiah Episcopal, on Ford Parkway at Macalester Street, where her uncle, Robert M. Wolterstorff, was rector. Later he became rector of a church in La Jolla, and subsequently the first Episcopal Bishop of Southern California. Miriam and I were married at the church by her uncle in August, 1957.

James B. Bell has written four major articles for Ramsey County History, including histories of Norwest Bank St. Paul, Yoerg's Brewery, and The St. Paul Daily News. A member of the RCHS Editorial Board, he currently is working on a history of St. Paul's Seeger Refrigerator Company.

A Novel Look at History

Novelists and poets can serve as true guides to local historians. As historians rarely do, they penetrate the inner, more subtle and sensual sides of human experience. When successful, poets and novelists make the particular . . . beautiful and universal.

—Joe Amato

Steve Trimble

It's clear from the passage above in his recent book, *Rethinking Home*, that Minnesota writer Joe Amato thinks that novels can provide a valuable resource for historians. Feeling that literature is an overlooked historical source, he often used it in his classes at Southwestern State University. Such an often-debated position

is hardly new. In the 1960s, pioneer urban historian Richard Wade told students that the *Studs Lonigan* novels by James T. Farrell resurrected the sights, sounds, and smells of the city and provided a better feel for the Irish experience in Chicago than most scholarly works.

People interested in considering the

value of fiction as a historical resource may want to sample four recently published novels in each of which the past plays a major role. While all are based either on personal experiences or extensive historical research, each has a unique approach. What the four literary works share is a belief that using the city as a

setting and a plot involving its past is a great way to tell a story.

Mr. White's Confession by Robert Clark is set in St. Paul in 1939. The novel opens in the old White Castle restaurant in downtown St. Paul, where Herbert White sits eating three hamburgers. He is a balding, rotund, peculiar man who works as a clerk in a grocery store. An eccentric recluse, he records his life in journals and keeps scrapbooks of newspaper clippings because he has a faulty memory, unable to recall even the recent past. He is an avid movie-goer, saying films were "memories for those of us who have no memories."

Herbert is also an avid amateur photographer, snapping shots of young women from the Aragon, a downtown dime-a-dance hall on Wabasha Street. When two of the women are found murdered on the hill near the Cathedral, Herbert becomes the main suspect. Unable to remember whether he did or didn't kill them, Herbert is talked into signing a confession by the police.

One detective, Wesley Horner, begins to suspect that Herbert may be innocent. Wesley is a lonely detective who lives in a small house two blocks off West Seventh Street. His wife is dead and his daughter has run off to places unknown. Familiar St. Paul locations are colorfully described as Wesley visits the Ramsey County Morgue, goes to Schuneman's to buy a coat for a girl who starts living with him, or has a few drinks at Alary's Bar. He treats St. Paul in classic mystery genre manner, describing a local street scene:

Wesley thought he would walk home, all the way down West Seventh . . . As he approached Seven Corners . . . the street, the buildings, and the empty parking places looked raw, wind battered and forlorn. And the sound of Wesley's scraping on the pavement was wearing at him, the grit and the dirt and the filth of the city and the world grinding at his soles . . . By the time he reached Exchange Street, he was irritable as boiled coffee, and then he saw the girl.

Author Robert Clark knows the city; he grew up in the Highland Park area and spent a great deal of time visiting relatives on Summit Avenue. However, as

said in an interview, he was born in 1952 and had to do research to "live inside my grandparents' and parents' generation." As Clark saw it, the times portrayed in this work were "right on the cusp of the world we're living in now. I was interested in writing about that transitional time." The novel evokes the tensions and fears of the times, the effect of the depression, and the concern that the United States would be pulled into the military conflict in Europe.

While there are many references to real events, the story goes beyond the usual approach taken by historical novels. According to Clark, "the main theme" of the book "concerns to what extent life is contingent on memory." The characters continually reflect on their own lives. Wesley spends his evenings remembering and regretting events of his past. Herbert White constantly tries to remember what happened even a few days ago, and is able only to conjure up scattered memories. He sums up the agonizing attempt to rescue his personal history, writing in his journal:

All I ever really recover are fragments, the shadow, the husk of what was once a green leaf . . . It goes without saying that search as we will, we cannot know the future; but it seems we cannot even know the past, however much we search it; and so we are always longing for it and seeing it beyond our reach, anticipating what is past as though it were to come.

Summit Avenue, by Mary Sharratt, is set in the Twin Cities in the years between 1912 and 1918. Its main character is Kathrin, who came to the United States from Germany, lived with her cousin in a northeast Minneapolis boarding house, and worked sewing bags in a flour mill. Then she meets Violet Waverly, a wealthy, widowed woman who hires her to translate German fairy tales. Kathrin eventually moves into her Summit Avenue mansion to facilitate the work. The fact that Violet has taken a liking to her employee—a liking that would later become romantic—does not sit well with her family or the young man who is trying to pursue Kathrin. He drops by to court her, takes her out to dance halls on Selby Avenue, and

eventually she becomes pregnant. The women are separated, lose track of each other, and finally are reunited.

Sharratt is careful to describe the shabby Minneapolis apartment in which Kathrin lives, the low-paid, hard work sewing of flour bags, the smell of machine oil in the unsafe workplace, and the rowdiness of Schmidt's, a neighborhood tavern. This she constantly compares with the upper class homes and life styles in St. Paul's premier neighborhood:

On Summit, it was late afternoon. Everyone was outside enjoying the fine May weather. Families were having tea parties and playing croquet on their endless mansion lawns. The women and children were dressed in white, the men in tan, pipes in their mouths, laughing. As the women sipped tea from porcelain cups, their servants stood in the background, silent as stones waiting for their next summons.

Sharratt, a Minneapolis native, became fascinated with fairy tales while teaching in Germany and wanted this novel to reflect the fairy tales Kathrin was translating, calling it an "archetypal fable." She divided the book into three major feminine archetypes—maiden, mother, and crone. Sharratt believes that historical fiction allows writers "to explore facets of history that textbooks too often ignore—the hidden lives of working class women—and sees it as a way "to address issues of labor, sexuality, feminism, and militarism without seeming didactic or heavy handed."

Call Me Kick by John Osander is a novel that speculates about what happened to Nick Carraway, protagonist of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, when he returned to St. Paul and a career in the wholesale hardware business. The 1934 story is narrated by his twenty-year-old niece who likes to be called "Kick." At the novel's outset, she is in the Anoka State Asylum being treated for depression. After scenes that portray the unfortunate mental health treatment of that era, Kick runs off to seek refuge in her Portland Avenue home and at her Uncle Nick's residence one block south of Summit Avenue.

Kick sees Nick being kidnapped by ransom-seeking gangsters in a manner

similar to other kidnappings that actually happened in St. Paul at that time. She decides to try to rescue her beloved Uncle Nick, and her travels take her to several familiar local landmarks. One night, looking for information, she ends up at a legendary West Side location to try to overhear conversations of hoodlums who hang out there:

I faced the limestone cliff where the iron E-stair zigzagged up the bluff above the sparkly lighted entrance to the caves. The Castle Royal Nightclub opened last year as Prohibition ended . . . a uniformed host on duty . . . ushered us through the first vaulted cave with its walls, smooth limestone, oriental carpets, silver and crystalline settings, and sparkling chandeliers.

There are scenes in Calvary Cemetery at a family funeral, the Hamm Building, with a mention of the speakeasy in the basement, a visit to William Hamm's House on the East Side and a trip to the Federal Courts Building to talk to an FBI agent. Kick's forays finally take her to the Hollyhocks Club, another notorious gangster hangout. She learns that Nick is being held at a roadhouse in Wisconsin, and heads off to try to rescue him.

Osander grew up in Minneapolis, left it to follow a career in education and has now returned home where he has begun to write fiction. He did careful research before writing this historical novel and even secured the approval of the Fitzgerald Estate before using the names of characters from *Gatsby*. In the front of the book, the author includes information on actual historical figures. The list of sources in the appendix includes the Ramsey County Historical Society. While it is a fact-filled book, the author uses a lively narrative and a touch of humor to keep the reader's interest. Perhaps Kick was speaking for the author when she sums up her talents as an observer of history:

I'm not everywhere always, but I look a lot. I remember and ponder. I consider and imagine too. Also, Uncle Nick fills me in. So I can come pretty close to telling you the truth about what happened around St. Paul in '34.

The novel *July, July* is the story of a group of people attending a 2000 reunion of the class of 1969. The school is named Darton Hall College, but it obviously is meant to be Macalester, the alma mater of Minnesota native Tim O'Brien. The book jumps between their activities at the reunion and how their lives played out over the previous three decades. Among the characters is a damaged Vietnam war veteran, a woman minister who lost her job, an overweight but highly successful mop manufacturer, a sexy siren who has two husbands, a cynical former war resister, and the new lieutenant governor and his trophy wife.

The reunion heightens everyone's memories of the events of their college years—what happened to them, their earlier hopes and what they feel about their current situations. Many of them are disillusioned with society and disappointed with the course of their lives. Their dinner dance features—along with heavy drinking and suggestive conversations—a media presentation:

The twin slide projectors pinned history to the wall. RFK bled from a hole in his head . . . and Amy Robinson hoisted a candle for Martin Luther King, and a helicopter rose from a steaming rice paddy west of Chu Lai, and David Todd bent down to field a sharp grounder, and Spook Spinelli grinned her sexy young grin and Billy McCann dropped a fiery draft card from the third-floor balcony of the Student Union.

While most of the reunion's action takes place at the college, some people venture off to nearby locations. One group heads down Grand Avenue to The Red Carpet. They find that the seedy bar that

once was their hangout has been transformed into a trendy spot—based on the Green Mill—and was decorated in “college chic,” complete with exposed brick and fake ferns.

O'Brien jumps, one chapter at a time, between 1969 and the year 2000. The setting shifts from Vietnam and Canada to White Bear Lake and upscale St. Paul neighborhoods and back again to the campus reunion. He juxtaposes an earlier era of strong beliefs, activism, and moral fervor, with a later sense of loss, disappointment, and hope gone stale that ushered in the millennium.

Like Joe Amato, O'Brien would argue that in many ways this and other novels can be a true reflection of the past. As he once put it in an interview:

The literature I admire most is not only rooted in history, not only about and of and within history, but is history. *War and Peace* is history. *Hansel and Gretel* is history. These books are not less real for having been imagined, just as the American war in Vietnam is no less real for having been remembered. . . . What we imagine, like what we remember, represents a good part of what we will become.

Steve Trimble wrote the history of the St. Paul Opera Association for the Winter, 2005, issue of Ramsey County History.

* * *

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Osander, John, *Call Me Kick* (Edina, Mn: Beaver's Pond Press) 2002.

Sharratt, Mary, *Summit Avenue* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press) 2000.



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.

R.C.H.S.
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