

RAMSEY COUNTY

# History

*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

A Farmer's Fair:  
The Birth  
of the Ramsey County Fair  
*James Lindner*

—Page 11

Spring 2014

Volume 49, Number 1

## *Neither Posters Nor Stamps:* Poster Stamp Advertising in St. Paul

*Leo J. Harris, page 3*



*"Poster Stamps" promoted the wide range of poster stamps printed by Brown Treacy & Sperry Company in St. Paul in the first decades of the twentieth century. A related printing company, the Harvey Blodgett Company, used a poster stamp to highlight its marketing of poster stamps to merchants. This particular poster stamp features a bill poster in overalls examining a poster stamp under his magnifying glass. The Brown Treacy & Sperry stamp is courtesy of Robert Bradbury and the Harvey Blodgett stamp is courtesy of Leo J. Harris.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 49, Number 1

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations  
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program  
of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon*

## A Message from the Editorial Board

Colorful and quirky—those adjectives could describe several articles in this issue. Lovely poster stamps advertised St. Paul businesses in the early part of the twentieth century. Leo Harris gives us a tour of this nearly forgotten art form, which was produced by several respected St. Paul printing establishments. It's a great illustrated read. Steve Trimble has provided us with Mike Sanchelli's vivid remembrances of the Italian community in Swede Hollow, where poverty coexisted with a great neighborhood spirit. He recounts his father's vivid rendition of "America, the Beautiful," which rang out every Sunday night from the bridge over Phalen Creek and signaled bedtime for the children playing outside. And Janice Quick reminds us that even in the 1920s, police were on the alert for cars without lights sitting in city parks after dark, which could mean (gasp!) covert affectionate activity. It's unclear whether such activity also occurred at the Ramsey County Fair, whose White Bear Lake origins James Linder traces for us in another article. But we know that a circus performed there, complete with trapeze artists. Ramsey County has always had its share of fun!

*Anne Cowie,*  
Chair, Editorial Board

# Book Reviews

## *Secret Partners: Big Tom Brown and the Barker Gang*

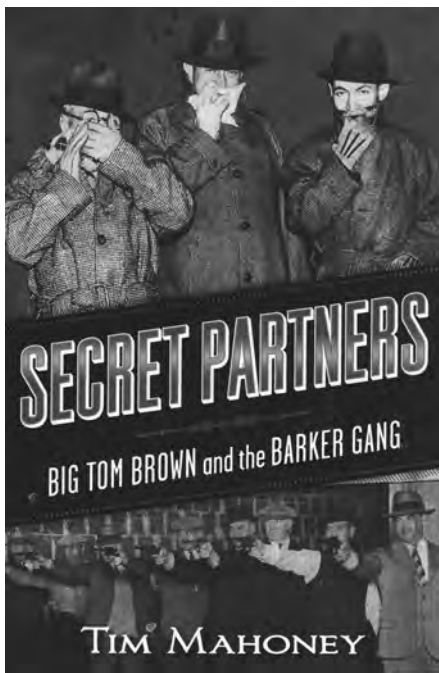
Tim Mahoney  
St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society  
Press, 2013  
309 pages; photos; paperback and e-  
book; \$17.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Paul D. Nelson

How much you may enjoy this book depends on whether you have read Paul Maccabee's *John Dillinger Slept Here* (MHS Press, 1995). If you have not, then you will find this fast-paced and entertaining—gambling, bootlegging, payoffs, betrayals, kidnappings, shootouts, and murders in our now staid and law-abiding city.

If you have read *John Dillinger Slept Here*, then your brow may furrow as you read *Secret Partners*. You will wonder, What does this book add to what has already been written?

Both books tell essentially the same story, the last years and the violent breakdown of the O'Connor System, an arrangement whereby gamblers, bootleggers, and thieves were welcome in St. Paul so long as they behaved themselves and made the proper payoffs. The System always carried its own seeds of destruction because it relied on the good faith and restraint of a selfish and cynical class—professional outlaws. Because, with Prohibition especially, so much money ran through the System it was inevitable that greed would overpower restraint. And so it did, resulting in the



car-bomb murder of speakeasy owner Dan Hogan (1928) and the kidnapping of mobster Leon Gleckman (1930). *Après lui, le deluge.*

In due course visiting thugs such as the Barker-Karpis gang turned the waning System on its head—they continued to enjoy police protection while committing terrible crimes, including the murders of police officers, nearby: the Third Northwestern Bank robbery in Minneapolis (1932, three dead, \$122,000 stolen); the Hamm kidnapping (1933, \$100,000 ransom); the South St. Paul payroll robbery (1933, one dead, one injured, \$33,000 stolen); and the Edward Bremer kidnapping (1934, \$200,000 ransom).

*Secret Partners* puts St. Paul police

detective (and, for two years, police chief) Tom Brown at the center of it all. Author Mahoney argues that Brown's crucial early protection of Alvin Karpis and the Barker brothers allowed them to mature, so to speak, from merely violent hillbillies into a sophisticated, effective (and still violent), and durable criminal enterprise. Hence the losses, maimed bodies, and deaths that followed all belong on Brown's eternal ledger. Like all counter-factual spinings, it is conjecture, but it's hard to disagree.

Mr. Mahoney has added some valuable new material (the fruit of commendable digging), chiefly regarding Brown himself and also about another central figure, gangster Harry Sawyer—the probable author of the Dan Hogan murder that began the unraveling. We learn Tom Brown's ultimate fate. Still, this book is at least 80% a recapitulation of *John Dillinger Slept Here*, a book that MHS Press produced more completely, with maps, timelines, a list of *dramatis personae*, and superior illustrations.

If you are new to this chapter of St. Paul history, you will find *Secret Partners* a revelation and a good read. If you already know the story, then this book serves as a supplement to the still-indispensable masterpiece, *John Dillinger Slept Here*.

*A St. Paul resident, Paul D. Nelson is the author of the award-winning biography of Fredrick L. McGhee, several articles in this magazine, and a member of the RCHS Editorial Board.*

*Computers and Commerce:  
A Study of Technology  
and Management at Eckert-  
Mauchly Computer Company,  
Engineering Research Associates,  
and Remington Rand, 1947–1957*

Arthur L. Norberg  
Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press,  
2005

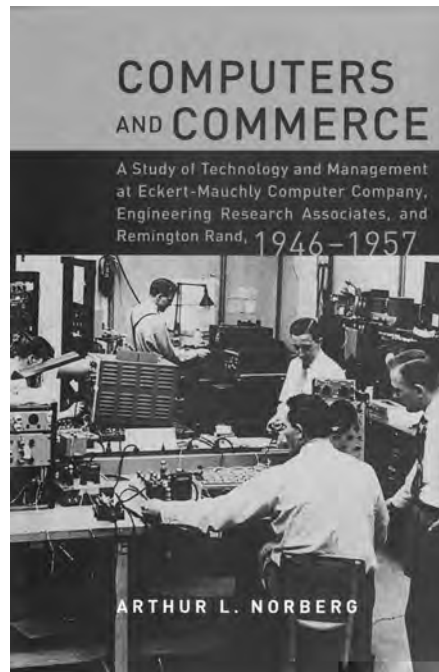
384 pages; hardcover; 33 illustrations;  
\$40.00.

*Reviewed by Robert F. Garland*

**C**omputers and Commerce is likely to interest Ramsey County History readers. Engineering Research Associates (ERA) was a Ramsey County/St. Paul company and a significant predecessor of the Control Data Corporation. The book tells an important part of the story of the early development of large-scale electronic computers, some of which were either created in St. Paul and/or used by St. Paul businesses.

Arthur Norberg writes from the scholarly perspective of the past director of the University of Minnesota's Charles Babbage Institute (Babbage is credited as the inventor of the first mechanical computer). Norberg does a good job of recording highly technical events of half-a-century ago. He generally overcomes the difficulties of the lapse of time, incomplete document files, and the fact that much of ERA's work was for the U.S. government and of a highly classified nature.

Norberg is interested in the way that scientists and engineers do their work and communicate about it and weaves this into his account of the early days of ERA and Eckert-Mauchly (EMCC), an early computer manufacturing company that was based in Philadelphia. He reintroduces us, along the way, to important early figures including John von Neumann, Presper Eckert and John Mauchly (lead creators of the first UNIVAC), and William Norris, the very able, longtime CEO of Control Data. Norberg writes well and makes good use of interesting photographs. Most readers will wish, however, that he had included



a handy glossary of the very numerous acronyms found throughout the book, and some may wonder at the omission of any reference to Alan Turing, the British mathematician who was a seminal figure in the early development of computers.

When compared to the computers developed by ERA and EMCC, twenty-first century readers may be amazed by the changes and improvements on the scale of several orders of magnitude that are found in every aspect of today's devices. The enormous physical size, tiny memories, plodding processors, limited output displays, use of vacuum tubes, and so on that characterized the products of ERA and EMCC in the 1950s are hardly recognizable today as computers. Software writers using today's virtually instantaneous processors and totally accessible memories would be dismayed by the complexities of accessing data stored in elaborate "lattices" on revolving drums or in electronic waves in tubes of mercury.

We now carry powerful computers in our pockets and purses, connect them to large display screens, receive information wirelessly, and display results wirelessly at remote locations. By contrast, the Great Northern Railway's far, far less potent UNIVAC I that was installed on the fifth floor of the rail-

road's St. Paul headquarters at 175 East Fourth Street in 1956–57 consisted of: (1) the Univac I central computer (effectively only 12,000 digits of internal memory) and its cooling unit, each as large as a medium-sized house trailer; (2) 10 Uniservo magnetic tape handling units, each the size of a standard refrigerator; (3) Unicard and Uniprinter input and output units each nearly the size of a large side-by-side refrigerator and with two more dedicated Uniservos; a large control-panel desk with its own oscilloscope and connected electric Uni-typewriter; and last and not least, the computer center's vacuum cleaner that some humorist had labeled the "Unisuck." The GN initially leased the UNIVAC I for \$22,500 per month and about two years later purchased it for about \$500,000.

There are enjoyable takeaways from *Computers and Commerce*. They include the discovery that ERA's "DNA story" includes not only Control Data, but also that of St. Paul's World War II glider manufacturer, Northwestern Aeronautical Corporation. The book is also a good reminder that having technically superior products (as ERA and EMCC often did) is not a sure recipe for success if you are often out-managed, out-sold, and out-performed in technical support to clients by IBM, as ERA, EMCC and Remington Rand often were.

A subset of readers, who once were (with this reviewer) ERA or Univac software writers and systems analysts, will enjoy the reminders of what it was like to program these fine machines. As a bit of a "Parthian Arrow," this particular reader and reviewer must add, however, that based on his personal experience at the Great Northern Railway, Norberg's inferences that the UNIVAC Solid State computer was a worthy successor to the wonderful UNIVAC I are overblown.

*Robert F. Garland is a retired financial executive and past RCHS board member. He is the author of a number of articles and book reviews in Ramsey County History, and of two series of novels, the most recent of which are The Hoisted Petard and Nonsense on Woodhouse Avenue.*



**R.C.H.S.**  
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*About 1935 artist Jacob Theodore Sohner painted this scene of the Phalen Creek neighborhood in Swede Hollow. Although the colors Sohner used here are primarily shades of brown, black, and other dark tones, the reminiscences of Mike Sanchelli, who was born and grew up in Swede Hollow in the 1920s and '30s, largely reflect other, more colorful shades of an artist's palette. Photo of Swede Hollow by Jacob Theodore Sohner courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society. For more on Mike Sanchelli and Swede Hollow, see page 17.*