

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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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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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

A Farmer's Fair:

The Birth of the Ramsey County Fair

James Lindner

Elkanah Watson never heard of Ramsey County, Minnesota. Indeed, he died seven years before Minnesota became a territory. Similarly, most people in Ramsey County, Minnesota have never heard of Elkanah Watson, a native of Plymouth, Massachusetts. But Watson began in Pittsfield, Massachusetts in 1810 what Ramsey County would emulate just over a century later. An agriculturalist who raised sheep, Watson sought to promote ways to improve farm productivity through education. Watson's brand of education did not involve classroom study; instead it was a hands-on approach based on "personal ambition" and early America's competitive nature. The result was the Berkshire County Fair, an event Watson designed to promote an exchange of agricultural experiences among the local farmers in western Massachusetts whose very lives depended on innovation. Elkanah Watson thus became the founding father of the American county fair where people took pride in winning prizes and gaining recognition for their personal efforts to produce better crops or healthier livestock than their neighbors but in an atmosphere of friendly competitions and social gatherings.¹

Early Organizing Efforts

Elkanah Watson's name did not enter into conversations at meetings of the Auditorium Association of White Bear village in February 1913. But his vision of agricultural improvements did, even if the participants did not realize it. The Auditorium Association was founded as a vehicle to promote local civic activities, among which were both a public affairs committee, as well as a Farmer's Institute.

Unlike modern White Bear Lake and northern Ramsey County, these areas in 1913 were predominantly rural with farms nearly as abundant as most rural Minnesota counties. The 1910 population of Ramsey County was 223,675 persons of which 214,744 resided in the City of St. Paul. Fewer than 9,000 people lived elsewhere in Ramsey County; some in nascent villages, but mostly they lived on farms.²

To promote citizen input and increase membership, the Auditorium Association sponsored its first "Association Night" on March 1, 1913. The Farmer's Institute

held its first meeting on March 12, 1913.³ While the Association served as what is today called a steering committee and became involved with other civic projects, its Farmer's Institute focused exclusively on agricultural endeavors fell under the guidance of the University of Minnesota's Department of Agriculture, located on the University's St. Paul campus. College professors and researchers were available to provide insight on raising crops, livestock, and poultry.

The March 12 meeting was well attended by farmers living within an eight-mile radius of White Bear village. The *White Bear Press* reported in its March 14, 1913 edition that "over two hundred and fifty visitors partook of White Bear's hospitality and participated in sessions of the Institute." It was an all-day event that started at 10:00 a.m. and ran without pause to 4:00 p.m. This was not a simple gathering of farmers discussing random topics; the meeting was well organized and structured toward agrarian education. Chaired by County Commissioner Leonard Bures, the



A photo of a typical barn on a farm in the northern portion of Ramsey County in the first decade of the twentieth century. The pieces of equipment in the foreground and attached to the side of the barn indicate that these farmers had mechanized some parts of their operations. Photo courtesy of the White Bear Lake Area Historical Society.



Frank H. Gibbs, a son of pioneer settlers Jane and Heman Gibbs of Rose Township in Ramsey County, was the first president of the Ramsey County Agricultural Society. This undated photo of Frank alongside a grain binder probably dates from the first decade of the twentieth century. Photo courtesy of the Gibbs Family Papers, Ramsey County Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn.

Institute had invited a number of presenters from well outside Ramsey County's boundaries. Presenters from Zumbro Falls and St. Cloud discussed and demonstrated farming techniques. One presenter, H.E. Caden travelled all the way from Chicago to participate.

Not content to be just an educational enterprise, the Institute opted for even more permanent organization by deciding to reestablish the Ramsey County Agricultural Society (RCAS), an organization that traced its roots to the early statehood period but had fallen by the wayside for one reason or another. White Bear village found itself in the center of a new found enthusiasm for all things agricultural. The *Press* proudly declared that "local stock" went up as the RCAS proposed "holding an annual county fair" as part of its efforts to increase farmers' knowledge of their occupation. The *Press'* assumption was that there was going to be a Ramsey County Fair, and it was going to reside in White Bear.⁴

As winter gave way to spring, organizing and planning for a county fair inten-

sified. The Ramsey County Agricultural Society was formally organized in April 1913 and immediately began to promote the fair. In addition to local farmers who paid an annual \$2 membership, prominent citizens from local politics, education, and business also joined the RCAS.

The group established a board of directors made up of the following officers and members:

President: Frank H. Gibbs, gardener, Rose Town

Vice President: F.H. Murray, mayor, White Bear⁵

Secretary: J.K. Dixon, horticulturalist, North St. Paul

Treasurer: John Leinen, farmer, Rose Town

Edward Knowlan, dairyman, Rose Town

Ira E. Richardson, farmer, New Brighton

Henry Bucher, farmer, Mounds View

R.D. Ducharme, farmer, New Canada

William A. Gall, farmer, White Bear Town

P.F. Murphy, mayor, North St. Paul

F.F. Farrar, Superintendent of Schools, White Bear

J.H. Spink, merchant, White Bear

E.A. Webb, publisher of *The Farmer*, no residence provided

George T. Slade, Vice President, Northern Pacific Railway, no residence provided

George H. Reif, Superintendent of Schools, Ramsey County, no residence provided

The names, occupations, and residences of these fifteen members indicate that there was strong and widespread interest in agricultural development in Ramsey County and that the members of the RCAS council presented considerable diversity in economic status. Only in America would farmers and gardeners serve on the same executive board as elected officials and railroad executives. Noticeably absent from the places of residence was any mention of the City of St. Paul.

On the other hand, no one attending this meeting would have been unaware that

George Slade was the son-in-law of railroad magnate James J. Hill, who also happened to own a 5,000-acre farm at North Oaks in northern Ramsey County west of White Bear, on which Hill experimented in livestock breeding and other advanced agricultural practices. According to the *St. Paul City Directory*, George Slade's residence was at 435 Summit Avenue. Edward Webb, the publisher of *The Farmer*, lived at 1079 Summit. Superintendent George Reif resided in White Bear Lake. Frank Gibbs (the newspaper incorrectly identified him as "Frank S. Gibbs"), who was elected president of the RCAS, was the son of Jane and Heman Gibbs. He represented



F.H. Murray, vice president of the newly organized Ramsey County Agricultural Society and president (or mayor) of the village of White Bear Lake, in a 1915 illustration from the White Bear Press.

a pioneer family in the county whose parents had been farmers in Rose Township (now Falcon Heights) since 1849.

At this meeting, the RCAS also crafted a mission statement. Its intent was to develop

the agricultural interests of the County; the creating of a closer relationship between town

and country, to encourage and aid in the organization of social and business clubs within the various villages, townships and School Districts of the County; to co-operate in this work with the United States Department of Agriculture, the College of Agriculture of the State of Minnesota, and the Minnesota State Agricultural Society . . . [and] also to conduct and hold an Annual County Fair at the Village of White Bear of Minnesota, to purchase and maintain grounds for that purpose and for general athletic sports.

A lofty mission if ever there was. The fair was set for the last week of August, and the board of directors were elected to serve until the RCAS annual meeting, which was set for the following December.⁶

But the RCAS held a much longer range vision than just 1913. It was organized to continue for thirty years and had responsibilities well beyond the annual fair. Fourteen departments, including amusements and privileges, admission and grounds and police, agronomy, horticulture and forestry, market gardening, dairy cattle, poultry and bees, other livestock, social and educational organizations, athletic sports, machinery, farm women, and boys and girls were all established for the specific purpose of the fair, but would be engaging members and holding events throughout the year. The RCAS was able to receive



When visitors came to the first Ramsey County Fair and also toured downtown White Bear Lake, they would have seen wide streets and a strong mercantile presence in the village. Photo courtesy of the White Bear Lake Area Historical Society.

monetary donations to help carry out its mission and was eligible for state and federal aid.⁷

While the fair was the most prominent activity of the RCAS, it was not the only task. It also created the position of County Agent who was to serve as an advisor “to any farmer in the County requiring his service” and to organize local farming clubs and various contests. Other duties included offering demonstrations and instructions in all things ag-

ricultural. By May the RCAS had hired Harvey G. Krumm as the first agricultural agent for Ramsey County. A major part of Krumm’s job was to secure more and more members to the RCAS.

Preparing For The Fair

If White Bear was to play host to all of Ramsey County, then it needed to make sure it presented a clean, vibrant image to further impress its anticipated visitors. Unrelated to any effort of the RCAS was a general call to help promote White Bear as a fitting host for the fair. The week after it reported on the organization of the RCAS, the *Press* took up the cause of beautifying White Bear. “Ladies [are] especially invited” to lead the efforts to clean up (literally) White Bear, wrote the *Press* in its April 18 edition.

The following week the *Press* listed several suggestions it believed would make the village a better place and a proper host for the fair. The paper called for refuse boxes at street corners, the planting of hardy flowering shrubs in local parks, for bathhouse owners to repair and paint their establishments, for the City Council to regulate the placement of any new bathhouse, the planting of flowers at the train station (a primary means of travel to town), for residents to clean and paint (or remove) dilapidated



The White Bear Press carried this headline in the issue it published just before the first Ramsey County Fair opened in August 1913. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

fences, and for outside toilets to have sealed vaults.

The *Press* also called for action against “loafers,” those unemployed or underemployed young men who congregated along village sidewalks and made “rude comments to ladies walking along.” Finally, the *Press* suggested that notices be sent to absentee property owners that they, too, be held accountable for the condition of their buildings.⁸ How successful the *Press* was in its call for cleanliness was not reported, but with active organizations such as the Auditorium Association and the RCAS, there were plenty of people of authority and influence who could obtain positive results.

With the clean-up progressing, the RCAS sought to increase its membership. More members meant there would be more money to promote the fair and fund its prizes. A “mass meeting” was scheduled for May 13 where new members could join the RCAS. Everyone was invited and the *Press* reported that “everyone [was] expected” to attend. The land the fair was to be held on was selected and entertainment was planned as part of the meeting. To increase attendance even further, board member and school superintendent George Reif agreed to “show a series of lantern slides of the Panama Canal” which American workers were building to connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.⁹

The *Press* recognized the importance of a successful fair in the greater context of promoting White Bear village. “The possibilities of this County Fair for the well-being of the Village are so important and the time so short” that the RCAS board needed to use any reasonable means to draw in potential new society members and their funds. The visual dynamics of the lantern-slide presentation and the technology of the canal project itself seemed likely to appeal to the farmers and mechanics of the local area. The following week’s newspaper simply reported that several new members were enrolled as a result of the mass meeting.

As the summer progressed, a sense of urgency began to envelop the fair’s planning. In July, the board of directors closed on the deal to acquire land for



St. Paul's mayor, Herbert P. Keller, gave an opening address at the first Ramsey County Fair. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

the fairgrounds. Fourteen acres “located on Bald Eagle [A]venue between Sixth and Eighth streets” were purchased by the RCAS. As soon as the real property transaction occurred, crews began the task of leveling the grounds. “No trouble or pains,” the *Press* reported, “will be spared to provide for the comfort of the patrons” of the fair. City water pipes were run to the site, lights were installed all around the fairgrounds, and several tents, including the main tent which measured 100 by 200 feet and was to be 45 feet high were set up.¹⁰

There was insufficient time to construct more permanent buildings, so tents would have to do for this inaugural fair. The main tent was designed to accommodate 1,500 people while other 40-by-60-foot tents were set up to house livestock and other exhibits. There were even plans for a “day nursery” so that parents might safely drop off their children while they strolled around the fair. The RCAS had thought of nearly everything to make the fair experience enjoyable and convenient. The local newspaper’s editor was so impressed with the RCAS’s efforts that it wrote that the amusement committee “had just completed their program and assures us that it cannot be

excelled, even at the [Minnesota] State Fair.”¹¹ This was high praise indeed.

By early August the fair was just four weeks away. To promote participation in the judging events, the *Press* reported that the RCAS had secured \$1,800 for prizes and that the “Live Stock Department” headed by Thomas G. Patterson obtained an additional \$1,123 for even more prizes.¹² There was a wide range of categories for which people could register. Aside from the primary activities of crop raising and livestock, other categories included honey production, fruits, flowers, cooking, needlework, and children’s arts and crafts. There was also a baseball tournament scheduled with \$150 in prize money available. Teams from White Bear, Stillwater, and St. Paul’s Como Park were scheduled to play a round robin set of ballgames.¹³ The *White Bear Press* made one last call for residents to beautify their village on August 8 and reported that a sizeable crew of carpenters was working to complete the fairgrounds on time.

From its inception to its final preparations, the *White Bear Press* made reporting on the fair its primary task. The principal newspaper of Ramsey County, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, did not pay much attention to the events in White Bear until the fair was set to open. Aside from reporting on the news of the nation and world, the *Pioneer Press* had its own fair to report. Exactly one day after the Ramsey County Fair was scheduled to close the Minnesota State Fair was set to open. This event dwarfed any county fair in the state and appealed to visitors from not only Minnesota, but also from most of the surrounding states as well as some Canadian provinces. While the state fair also had its roots in agricultural endeavors, it was also a major source of entertainment in an era when people had few other means of entertaining themselves within their individual households. The state fair was big business for St. Paul, and its newspaper reported on it accordingly.

The *Pioneer Press* also acknowledged, however, the importance and significance of the Ramsey County Fair. Under the headline “Ramsey Fair at White Bear Opens This Week” the *Pioneer Press* went on to provide its

readers a solid summary of how the fair came to be. The newspaper described the county fair's organizing body, provided a description of the venue, and then explained the intent of the fair. "The purpose of the fair," the *Pioneer Press* wrote, "is to improve conditions in rural districts of Ramsey county [sic]," and added that "the agricultural interests . . . were little known" to many urbanites from St. Paul. It further reported that the City of St. Paul, because of its size, "naturally overshadows the county, and few people have realized that [Ramsey County] produces several million dollars' worth of agricultural products each year." It concluded by saying that the fair's organizers hoped to "create a closer relationship between town and country and to encourage and aid in the organizing of social and business clubs in the different villages."¹⁴ By including a baseball team from Como Park as part of the tournament, the hope was there would be reason for St. Paulites to travel from St. Paul to White Bear. For the moment at least, White Bear and St. Paul had something in common besides being simply within the same county boundaries; they both hosted fairs.

The Fair Opens

The first Ramsey County Fair officially opened on Thursday, August 28, but there was a preview event complete with music and dancing on August 27. This event was free to enter the fairgrounds, though it cost 25¢ to gain admission to the grandstand. Since distance made it unlikely that people from remote county villages would attend, this pre-fair event was intended for the enjoyment of residents of White Bear. They had pulled together to organize the fair and clean up their village. They had made it possible for the fair to have a home. So this first event was their chance to take in what they had created. Now the stage was set and for three days, all of Ramsey County would be focused on White Bear.

The fair started as planned on August 28, 1913. Herbert Keller, mayor of St. Paul, was invited to give an opening address to the crowd. White Bear's own mayor could have taken the stage, but by inviting the leading local official of the county, the RCAS showed just how



Visitors could travel to the fair by train on the Northern Pacific tracks or take the streetcar on the Twin City Rapid Transit Company's branch that serviced the south and west shores of White Bear Lake. Photo courtesy of the White Bear Lake Area Historical Society.

humble it could be. The society also invited J.J. Furlong, the president of the Minnesota Agricultural Society to speak on Friday, and Minnesota governor, Adolph Olson Eberhart, to address the fair on Saturday.

But the fair was not only about political speeches. It was also about agriculture in Ramsey County. Consequently more than 830 people entered their crops and cattle and crafts into the competitions, and many farmers had a range of opportunities to learn about machinery from the several vendors who participated or about how agriculture impacted the state's economy.¹⁵ Schoolchildren from Irondale and Lake Owasso entered their crafts into the competitions. Many of the prizes were won by local White Bear residents, but contestants from Hugo and Forest Lake also took home awards.¹⁶

Ramsey County came to White Bear for the first time in August 1913. It truly was a family friendly event. No gambling or alcohol was allowed, and the competitions were all for good fun. It was White Bear's moment to shine, and shine it did. No final attendance reports were

made, though the *Pioneer Press* reported that 1,200 people attended on Friday, August 29 and even more were expected on Saturday.

After the fair had closed, the *White Bear Press* listed each of the winners in all of the fair's competitions. Ironically, there is no report as to which team won the baseball tournament. Promoters from the Minnesota State Fair brought a baby elephant to White Bear (the elephant also was at the State Fair the following week), which added an unexpected attraction to the inaugural fair. As soon as the first fair was concluding, plans for the next year's event were already underway. The fair's secretary, Frank Reif stated he was "more than pleased with Ramsey county's [sic] first fair and the interest shown" and he looked to make subsequent fairs even more popular. Reif added that the fair had "gone along smoothly" with no evidence that the village was unprepared for the event.¹⁷ With an entire year to prepare and the experience of having one fair already in the books, the village looked forward to 1914.

Over the Years

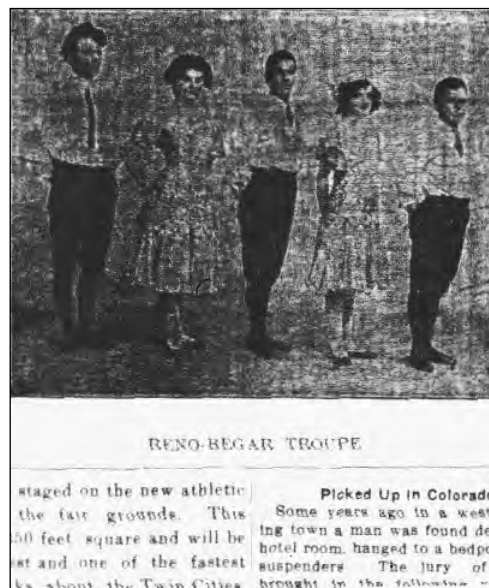
The Ramsey County Fair remained in White Bear for four decades. In 1953 the White Bear Lake School District purchased the county fairgrounds when it determined it needed to expand White Bear Lake High School, the fair's next door neighbor. Homeless, the organizers of the fair looked outside of White Bear Lake for their new home. They settled on the former Ramsey County Poor Farm site at 2000 White Bear Avenue in what was then Gladstone, but would eventually become Maplewood. With the exception of one year, 1996, the Ramsey

County Fair has been at this Maplewood location ever since.

Aside from personal vegetable gardens and small-scale market gardens, today there is but limited traditional agriculture performed in Ramsey County. The Gibbs Museum grows a few crops for educational demonstrations on farmland that once belonged to the Gibbs family and there is experimental agricultural research on the University of Minnesota, St. Paul campus. The family farm has long since ceased to exist in Ramsey County, but the county fair is still sponsored by the Ramsey County Agricultural Society. The fair nearly

ceased to exist in recent years, but it has hung on by popular demand and now typically occurs the second week of July. Elkanah Watson would likely not recognize the modern Ramsey County Fair, but he would have been pleased to see the original 1913 event.

James Lindner is a lifelong resident of Ramsey County. He holds a M.A. in History, is the author of a history of Gem Lake, and serves on the Vadnais Lake Area Water Management Organization Technical Commission. This is his second article published in Ramsey County History.



Entertainment that was available at the first Ramsey County Fair included Blake's Comedy Animal Circus and the Reno-Begar Troupe, whose specialty was performing on the high wire and trapeze. Illustrations from the White Bear Press, August 22, 1913. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Endnotes

1. Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 325–26. “Elkanah Watson,” last modified November 14, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elkanah_Watson.
2. “Ramsey County, Minnesota,” last modified on November 20, 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramsey_County,_Minnesota. “St. Paul, Minnesota,” last modified January 3, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Paul,_Minnesota.
3. *White Bear Press*, February 13, 1913:1; March 7, 1913:1.
4. *White Bear Press*, March 14, 1913:1.
5. The term “mayor” was cited in the *White*

- Bear Press*, though the leading officer of the village was formally known as the “President.” The term “mayor” first was applied to the leading officer of White Bear around 1920.
6. *White Bear Press*, April 11, 1913:1.
 7. *Ibid.*:8
 8. *White Bear Press*, April 25, 1913:1.
 9. *White Bear Press*, May 16, 1913:1.
 10. *White Bear Press*, July 18, 1913:1.
 11. *Ibid.*
 12. *White Bear Press*, August 1, 1913:1. The *Press* did not specify the Live Stock Department to which it was referring. Most likely it was either the University of Minnesota or the State Agricultural Department.

13. *Ibid.* *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, August 28, 1913:14.
14. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, August 24, 1913:6.
15. Vendors included John Deere, International Harvester, and Studebaker Automobiles all from Minneapolis and other local merchants such as White Bear Lumber. In all the *White Bear Press* listed more than 20 specific vendors whose products ranged from plows to silos.
16. *White Bear Press*, August 29, 1913:1; September 5, 1913:1; September 12, 1913:1. The *Press* dedicated several columns in the September 5 and 12 editions to report the names of all of the winning contestants in each category that people could enter.
17. *White Bear Press*, August 29, 1913:1.

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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.