

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**

A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Summer, 1990  
Volume 25, Number 2



**FOR HER HONOR'S SAKE.**

There are cases where a brother must interfere in his sister's affairs.

*An acid commentary on the Great Census War of 1890 and the rivalries which have colored the history of St. Paul and Minneapolis. See page 4.*

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

*Executive Director*  
Daniel J. Hoisington

*Editor*  
Virginia Brainard Kunz

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Gregory K. Page  
*Chairman of the Board*

William S. Fallon  
*President*

Richard Lee  
*First Vice President*

Anne Cowie Wilson  
*Second Vice President*

Robert Hess  
*Secretary*

James P. Wicker  
*Treasurer*

John Costello, Joanne Englund, Deborah Gelbach, Joan Grzywinski, Lorraine Hammerly, Craig Jilk, John M. Lindley, Frank Marzitelli, Dr. Thomas B. Mega, Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Marvin Pertzik, Douglas Skor, Robert O. Straughn, Stephen Urion, Gary Woeltge, Laurie Zenner.

### EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chairman; Thomas H. Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Charlton Dietz, Craig Jilk, Thomas J. Kelley, Dr. Thomas B. Mega.

### RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Hal Norgard, chairman  
Commissioner Diane Ahrens  
Commissioner John Finley  
Commissioner Ruby Hunt  
Commissioner Duane McCarty  
Commissioner Don Salverda  
Commissioner Warren Schaber

Terry Schutten, executive director, Ramsey County

*Ramsey County History* is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 1990, 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.

Design by: Don Leeper, Stanton Publication Services; Little & Company

**On the cover:** The United States census of 1890 sparked virtual warfare in the unceasing rivalry between Minneapolis and St. Paul. This cartoon was published in the *St. Paul News* for June 28, 1890.

**Acknowledgements:** All photographs used in this issue of *Ramsey County History*, as well as the maps on pages 12 and 13 are from the audio-visual and the map collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 25, Number 2 Summer, 1990

## CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 An Excess of Zeal and Boosterism—  
Few Holds Barred in Twin Cities Rivalries  
*Virginia Brainard Kunz*
- 9 The Mississippi at St. Paul—  
Playground on the City's Door Step  
*Thomas B. Mega*
- 12-13 Mapping Minnesota: 1697 to 1857
- 19 Lillie and Ida at the Fair  
*Karen Bluhm*
- 20 Book Reviews
- 21 A Matter of Time
- 23 What's Historic About This Site?  
Ramsey County's 'Poor Farm' Barn—  
Remnant of a Rural Past

Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a grant from the Grotto Foundation and a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr.

## A MESSAGE TO OUR READERS

In May, 1988, the Board of Directors of the Ramsey County Historical society decided that they should develop a plan to broaden the appeal of *Ramsey County History*, redesign it, expand its coverage of the history of the county, and publish the magazine four times each year.

In bringing change to the look of *Ramsey County History*, the Editorial Board has tried to make sure that the strengths in content and features of its predecessors have not been abandoned. Thus we have the good fortune to be able to publish carefully researched and well written articles on a wide range of topics associated with the colorful history of Ramsey County. And we have added new features, such as "A Matter of Time" and "What's Historic About This Site?"

Throughout this process, the goal always has remained to produce the best possible magazine on the history of Ramsey County with the widest appeal within the resources available. The Editorial Board believes this new format meets those objectives. We hope you agree.

—John L. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

# The Mississippi at St. Paul — Playground on the City's Door Step

*Thomas B. Mega*

Although it has only been in the 20th century that American cities have begun to formally recognize the non-commercial value of the rivers in their midst, recreational uses of these waterways have a history that pre-dates the intense transportation and industrial exploitation of the rivers.

For probably as long as there have been human inhabitants in this region, youths have undoubtedly spent summer days swimming in the Mississippi River, fishing its waters, and courting along its banks. As far as we know, more formal recreational use of the river had to wait for the arrival of Europeans.

One of the striking things about the uses of the river, is the repetitious nature of much of the recreational activities on and along the river. The recreational value of Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant's saloon was not that different from that of "Tugboat Annie's" in the middle of the 20th century.

The mahogany speedboats of Gar Wood's day and the solidly-planked river cruisers built by Dingle Boat Works served the same purpose as the ultra-fast and richly appointed fiberglass boats of today. And Harriet Island continues to be the center of recreational activity along the Mississippi in St. Paul just as it was at the turn of the century.

Saloons were among the earliest and most popular recreational spots in St. Paul during its pioneer period. Probably the first recorded recreational use of a site along the Mississippi within the present-day boundaries of St. Paul was the saloon operated by Pierre Parrant, one of the area's most famous early inhabitants.

Parrant, known as "Pig's Eye" because of a discolored and mis-shapen left eye, used Fountain Cave as the location of his grog shop. The cave was on the east bank of the Mississippi about one-and-a-half miles above present-day downtown St. Paul and across the river from Pickerel Lake.

This location was convenient to both



*A Minnesota Boat Club regatta, about 1900. The downtown bluff looms in the background between the Wabasha and Robert Street bridges.*

the fur traders in Mendota and the soldiers at Fort Snelling; it also was convenient to the remaining Indians in the area. Not only was whiskey sold and consumed at "Pig's Eye's," but the usual entertainments associated with frontier saloons also were available. Gambling, brawling and the swapping of tall tales, undoubtedly provided the local denizens with ample recreation.

Parrant's establishment was known as far down the river as Prairie du Chien. A story embedded in St. Paul lore is that a man sent a letter to Prairie du Chien to which he needed a reply. Uncertain as to where to have the reply sent, the man posted his letter at "Pig's Eye's Landing." The return letter easily found its way to the original correspondent.

As settlement developed around "Pig's Eye's" cave, the garrison at Fort Snelling began to experience shortages of firewood caused by the additional use of wood by the settlers. In an attempt to solve this problem as well as others caused by the sale of whiskey so near Fort Snelling, the Fort's reservation was enlarged to include Fountain

Cave and its surrounding settlement.

In 1840 the settlers, including Parrant, were forcibly ejected from the settlement. They moved downstream and settled in what is now downtown St. Paul. Parrant re-established his whiskey trade near the settlement's lower steamboat landing at the foot of Jackson Street.

On the river, steamboating was not only a practical means of transportation, but by the early 1850s it also had become an elegant recreational pastime. During that decade steamboats made close to 1,000 landings in St. Paul. Travellers on these boats usually were treated to luxury accommodations and elaborate meals.

According to the artist, George Catlin, who published an account of his travels in a book entitled *The Fashionable Tour*, one of the most entertaining parts of the trip to St. Paul was the sighting of Indians along the banks of the river.

Fares were quite reasonable for these trips; a passenger travelling from St. Louis to St. Paul paid only \$12 including meals. There was an extra charge, however, for hard liquor.

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, river-boat excursions were held each year during the Christmas holiday season. The trips went from the Jackson Street Landing to Fort Snelling and back. In 1877, December 26 was the date of the Christmastime steamboat ride. The weather that day was unseasonably warm. The *Pioneer Press* described the day as "mild and balmy."

Less than two weeks later, on January 1, 1878, the steamboat *Aunt Betsy* carried another excursion. This particular trip was a publicity stunt staged by Colonel Girart Hewitt, a St. Paul real estate speculator. Again, the weather was very warm for a Minnesota January. Passengers on the *Aunt Betsy* wore linen dusters and carried palm leaf fans to try to convince potential settlers of the mildness of the climate.

A huge crowd cheered as the boat left the lower landing at Jackson Street. People lined the bluffs along the river and crowded the Wabasha Street bridge to see the revellers pass. As the *Aunt Betsy* approached Mendota, it came in view of a passenger train. The locomotive saluted the steamboat with a long blast of its whistle; the *Aunt Betsy* returned the salute with a long, low blast of her own.

According to an editorial in the *Pioneer Press* of January 3, 1878, thin pieces of ice on the river were a reminder that Minnesota winters could indeed be harsh. The writer chided Hewitt for his attempt to fool future settlers and immigrants into believing "that orange trees and magnolias are in full bloom in a Minnesota January as a regular thing." Later in the 19th century, extremely cold winters froze the Mississippi River and made outings such as these impossible.

Another form of recreation of sorts along the river were the religious camp meetings held downstream from St. Paul at Red Rock, present-day Newport. Throughout almost every summer from the late 1880s through the early 1930s, steamboats made regular trips each day, ferrying worshippers to the site of the meetings.

Minnesota's first rowing club was established on Raspberry Island (now Navy Island) in 1870. The club's organizing members were prominent St. Paulites. According to early reports, the boat club



"River Rats." As boys have from time immemorial, two youngsters row, row, row a boat gently down the Mississippi on a summer afternoon.

members were a dapper crowd. The crews were required to wear white, sailor-cut uniforms trimmed with cherry-red. They also wore a cherry-colored neckerchief and a white seaman's cap with "MINNESOTA" embroidered in gold across the front.

All members also had to own a flat, skimmer-type straw hat with a red ribbon. By the turn-of-the-century, members of the Minnesota Boat Club were winning their classes in national regattas, a tradition that continues today.

Parks along and on the river provided spectacular views and cool summer breezes. Harriet Island, located across the river from downtown St. Paul, was one of the first of these parks. More than other sites, Harriet Island was and continues to be at the center of most of the recreational activities on the Mississippi in St. Paul.

Even before the Island opened as a public park, it was a popular—and dangerous—recreation spot. According to an article which appeared in *The American City*, during the 19th century Harriet Island "became the resort of tramp fishermen and adventure-seeking boys." The island's "irresistible attractions as a bathing place" resulted in an "average of fifteen drownings per year. . . ."

Harriet Island was formally developed

as a site for public baths by Dr. Justus Ohage, St. Paul's commissioner of health from 1899 to 1907. Unable to convince the St. Paul City Council to appropriate funds to purchase and develop the island, Ohage spent nearly \$12,000 of his own money to acquire it and build public baths and other facilities there.

The baths opened to the public in 1900. During the first year "two pavilions, a bathhouse, and a cashier's office were built." Ohage also put in walking and riding paths. The first season the facilities were operated "entirely at Dr. Ohage's own risk. . . ." The result was a "net profit of \$15.12."

In 1901 Dr. Ohage donated Harriet Island and its facilities to the city of St. Paul. The only stipulation of the gift was that "the institution should always be managed by the health department without political interference, and that it should be conducted solely as a place of wholesome recreation free of money-making amusement features."

Prior to the beginning of the 1901 season, the facilities on the island were considerably expanded; "new bathhouses were added, also tennis courts, a new pavilion seating 2,000, a bandstand, chil-

*The Mississippi to page 14*



*Minnesota Boat Club members around 1884 or 1885. This is the club's old boat house on Navy Island. It was replaced before World War I by the present building.*



*The Mississippi from page 10*

*St. Paul Motor Boat member, George E. Taylor, and his first speedboat, "The Firefly," around 1920.*

dren's playground, and gymnasium apparatus." The city also began providing free lessons in gymnastics and swimming for children and adults.

Harriet Island was very much a place for the people of the city. Its location was accessible to those who were unable to afford streetcar fare to the more fashionable Como and Phalen Parks, or to Wildwood Amusement Park on the south shore of White Bear Lake.

Not only was Harriet Island accessible, but the public baths were free of charge to the "visitor who brought his own soap, towel and bathsuit." If that was too much trouble, "for two cents all needful accessories were furnished him, while for five cents he received the additional accommodation of private dressing room and locker."

For a time there was a nursery on the island where mothers could leave their young children for the day free of charge. Indeed, one of the park's primary selling points was that it was "a place in which parents may leave their children all day long with perfect assurance that they will be well looked after."

In fact, according to historian Curry Morton, writing in 1911 in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, the "bathing pools have always been patrolled so efficiently that not

a single case of drowning or serious accident has occurred in the eleven years that the baths have been in operation." Quite a change from the average of fifteen drownings per year before the building of the public baths.

Harriet Island became the most popular park in St. Paul in the early decades of the 20th century. In 1910, "the total number of bathers was 257,757; [although] the number of picnic visitors and others cannot be so closely estimated." Between 1910 and 1920, an average of 400,000 bathers were using the public baths on the island each year. Unfortunately, by the 1920s the Mississippi River had become so polluted at St. Paul that the baths, originally opened to provide for the public health of people who lived in the city, had to be closed to protect the health of the people.

Harriet Island Park had other facilities for the public's recreation. There was once a zoo on the island which included among its collection an alligator, bears, and a ground hog, the last perhaps used to help predict the annual arrival of spring.

Unfortunately for the animal residents of the zoo, spring in St. Paul often brought flood waters which endangered and at times even killed some of the animals. One of the more severe floods occurred in

March of 1929 when more than half the island was flooded. Two of the island's neighbors, Joe Brunner and Al McNeary, used their boat to bring food to the zoo animals each day during the high water.

By 1929, however, there were not many animals left. After the summer of 1920, the Health Department, in order to save money, rarely replaced the animals that died. In the 1930s, the zoo was closed and the few remaining animals were moved from Harriet Island to a new facility built by the W.P.A. at Como Park.

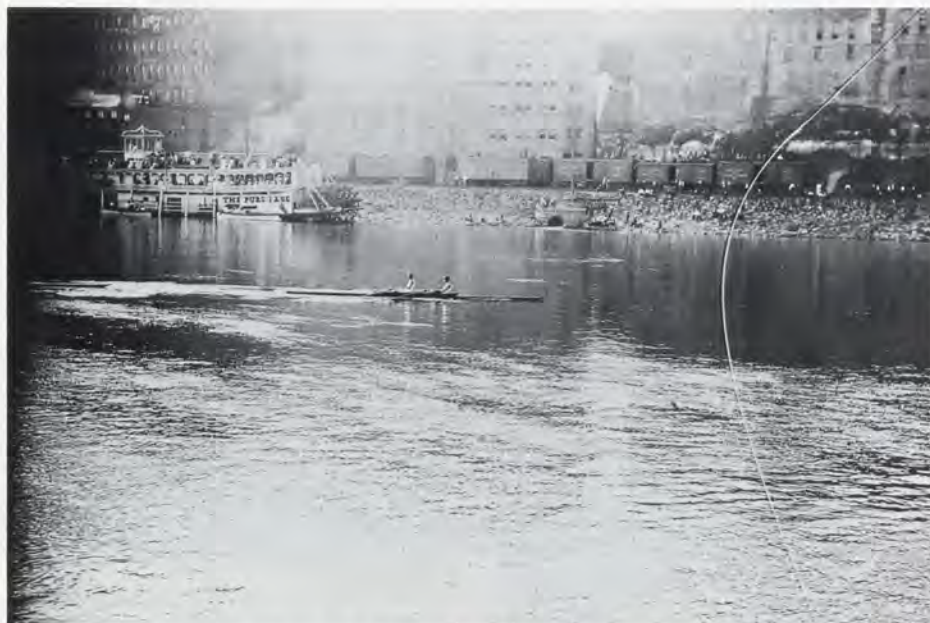
Harriet Island also was used as the site of various civic celebrations. An example of this was described by Curry Morton in 1911:

Every year the Commercial Club entertains the children of the city at a sane Fourth of July celebration on the island, providing them with plenty of harmless fireworks. Last summer [1910] about twenty thousand little guests of the Club assembled at Smith Park [in the Lowertown district of St. Paul], where each child was given a flag, and marched in orderly procession to the island, weaving a thread of bright color through the streets, across the bridge and down the levee.

The St. Paul Winter Carnival also has used Harriet Island as the center of its mid-winter activities. During these celebrations the island witnessed speed and recreational skating on the Mississippi, skiing, horse racing on ice, friendly but competitive snowball fights, and "attacks on the ice fort." In addition, the carnival's annual fireworks displays were often held there. In 1988, Harriet Island was once again the center of activities for the St. Paul Winter Carnival.

Harriet Island is also the headquarters of the St. Paul Yacht Club. This organization was founded in 1912 as the St. Paul Motor Boat Club. Its original purpose was to provide its members with slippage facilities for their boats.

According to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of February 12, 1912, "The difficulty of procuring proper dockage and storage facilities for boats has led to the demand for an organization to provide a convenient place where boats can be stored in the winter and docked in the summer." Two weeks later the *Pioneer Press* reported that, "With the organization of the St. Paul Mo-



*The steamboat, The Purchase, docked on the Mississippi in 1910. Spectators cramming the steamboat and lining the shore are watching Minnesota Boat Club races.*

tor Boat Club last week, it is believed St. Paul will become one of the most enthusiastic centers of power yachting on the river."

The prediction was not too far from wrong, for St. Paul did indeed become somewhat of a motor-boating center during the early part of this century. Joseph Dingle, an early riverboat builder, plied his trade along the river in St. Paul. His large boats were well known up and down the upper river for their unique flat-bottomed design which made them particularly well-suited for the ever changing river channel.

One of the largest boats built by the Dingle Yacht Company of St. Paul was a fifty-footer named the *Nancy Lee*. With her flat-bottomed hull of 2" x 12" cedar planking, her rakish pointed bow, and her swept-back lines, the *Nancy Lee* was beautiful and extremely durable, a design very much in advance of her times. She finally ended her days in 1965, destroyed by the high waters of the spring floods.

Another person active on the Mississippi in St. Paul during the early days of motor boating was Gar Wood, one of the most famous names in motor boating. Wood specialized in the design and building of speed boats. For a time Wood was a member of the St. Paul Motor Boat Club but he eventually moved his boat-building operation to Marysville, Michigan.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Wood's boats, with their distinctive deep-throated exhaust, successfully challenged the boats of rival Chris Smith, designer and builder of the famous Chris Craft speed boats. Today, Wood's mahogany-hulled runabouts are coveted by avid boat collectors and restorers.

The St. Paul Motor Boat Club was more directly involved in another activity which took advantage of the recreational value of the Mississippi River. In the summer of 1916 the Motor Boat Club hosted the Mid-Continent Boat Races, an annual event sponsored by the Mississippi Valley Power Boat Association. The headquarters for the event were the club's facilities at Harriet Island. The *Pioneer Press* provides a description worth quoting at length:

St. Paul is all agog over the opening this morning [July 4] of the three-day regatta of the Mississippi Valley Power Boat Association. The water front is alive with all kinds of boats, including speedy racers in which racing enthusiasts from river ports as far away as St. Louis have arrived to witness the contests of speed which will be staged over the local course.

Several years later, the published reminiscences of an early member of the Motor Boat Club filled in some of the details of the events of the day:

There were many winners in numerous events during those three exciting days, all

witnessed by thousands of spectators who lined both banks of the Mississippi and crowded at the railing of the Wabasha Street and High Bridges. Excitement was frequently at fever pitch because of the dangers created by high water and the many pieces of floating timber and stray driftwood coming down the river.

Unfortunately for St. Paul's civic pride, the high point of the regatta occurred when the boat, "Miss Minneapolis," broke the world's record for the mile straight-away. The boat, a Chris Craft designed and driven by Chris Smith, "churned the waters" of the Mississippi between the two bridges at the then unheard-of rate of sixty-two miles per hour.

In the late 1910s and early 1920s, the Mississippi River in St. Paul began to suffer from the impact of industrialization along its banks, and intensive farming upstream along the Minnesota River in southwestern Minnesota. Both of these economic activities caused the Mississippi's waters to be so polluted that the public baths on Harriet Island had to be closed.

Both boat clubs increasingly turned elsewhere for their activities, the Minnesota Boat Club almost abandoning the river and becoming a "social" club, while the St. Paul Motor Boat Club, although its headquarters remained on Harriet Island, scheduled more and more of its water activities on the St. Croix River. It was reported that, in the late 1920s, the river was so polluted that the stench which arose from the water on a hot summer day was almost unbearable.

By 1929 it no longer made sense for the facilities on Harriet Island to be under control of the St. Paul Public Health Department. Accordingly, in that year the park was turned over to the St. Paul Department of Parks. At the same time, several other parks which had been under the control of the Health Department were turned over to the Parks Department. Among these was Indian Mounds Park which commands a beautiful view of the Mississippi and the city from its position on top of the bluffs on St. Paul's East Side.

During the days of river travel, incoming steamboats could first be sighted from Mounds Park's bluffs. For many East Siders, it has been an important annual spring ritual to watch from the safety of

Mounds Park as high waters batter the sides of the city.

Just below Indian Mounds Park is another site that commercial developers were anxious to exploit for recreational purposes. This is Carver's Cave, named after Jonathan Carver, the English explorer who first described the cave. Probably the most interesting scheme for the use of the cave was reported in 1913:

Plans are being made to exploit [Carver's Cave] as a beauty spot and a lure to tourists. A large electric sign is to be placed high on the face of the cliff above the cave. It will be in plain view of the new Union Depot, from steamers on the Mississippi River and from a great part of the business section of St. Paul.

The plan was never implemented. The entrance to Carver's Cave was destroyed by railroad construction early in the 20th century. Periodically there is talk of reopening it. But, out of deference to both the Dakota and Ojibway people for whom the site remains culturally sacred, the city of St. Paul has left the mouth of Carver's Cave unopened.

Upriver from Carver's Cave, however, there are several other caves which serve as "unofficial" recreational spots. These caves, which are on both banks of the Mississippi, were natural caves in the sandstone cliffs and enlarged by early St. Paul breweries. The caves provided the proper temperature to provide the constant coolness needed to age beer in the pre-refrigeration era. The caves' primary function today, however, is the consumption rather than the production of beer.

Another municipal park which commands a spectacular view of the Mississippi River is Cherokee Park, overlooking the river from the bluffs on the west bank of the river across from downtown. During the 1920s and early 1930s, this sixty-eight acre park was a popular overnight camp catering to the burgeoning automobile tourist trade. Today the overnight camping facilities have long since disappeared and Cherokee Park is used almost exclusively for family outings during the day and as a "Lovers' Lane" after dark.

Although not formally connected to the river, the Mississippi River Boulevard, running along the top of the bluffs over-



*Strollers on the bridge from Fort Snelling to St. Paul, about 1906.*

looking the river, did serve and continues to serve an important recreational function for the residents of St. Paul. Horace W. S. Cleveland, an influential landscape architect, was the first to propose that St. Paul build a parkway along the river bluffs.

Land was purchased for public use along the river between St. Paul and Minneapolis between 1900 and 1905. An automobile parkway was built on the land. In the 1920s, when the boulevard was completed but not yet paved, the River Road, as it is often called, was a beautiful, and at times adventurous drive for those fortunate enough to own an automobile.

In the 1980s the Mississippi River Boulevard and the adjacent land continues to be an important recreational area by serving as St. Paul's most popular jogging and bicycling path. For those interested in less strenuous activity, the boulevard also has numerous scenic overlooks, picnic spots, and walking paths along the bluffs. These are maintained by the city's Parks Department, which also maintains three relatively new recreational areas on the river.

Hidden Falls Park, on the narrow river flats below the Highland Park neighborhood, was first developed by the W.P.A. during the Depression. The park fell upon hard times in the 1970s. The few facilities were rapidly deteriorating, and the park's visitors were more interested in drug trafficking than enjoying the river.

The Parks Department invested considerable money and resources in Hidden

Falls in the early 1980s, expanding the park and upgrading its facilities. The investment seems to have paid off, as Hidden Falls is one of the city's most popular summer parks, and extensively used by cross-country skiers in the winter months.

Adjacent to Hidden Falls Park is Crosby Lake Park. This was formerly a farm located on the river flats. This facility, too, has become one of the more popular walking and bicycling areas in the summer, and attractive to cross-country skiers in the winters.

Finally, the St. Paul Parks Department owns and operates Watergate Marina, located upriver from downtown St. Paul. The marina provides slippage and winter storage for approximately 100 boats and launching facilities for those boaters who want to cruise the river for only a day.

Located along the river, but not directly connected to it in any way, were other types of "recreational" facilities. These were the brothels and saloons which were built along the bluffs, in the caves and on the flats in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although the temptation is to claim that these establishments catered to the riverboatmen, there is no evidence that this was the case. Indeed, the brothels that clung to the bluffs directly below downtown seem to have catered to the city's elite. A recurring legend in St. Paul's folklore is that there was a tunnel connecting the establishment operated by the famous madam, Nina Clifford, with the Minnesota Club, one of the most exclusive clubs in the



state. It seems, then, that the choice of location for the saloons and brothels had nothing at all to do with the river, but rather was made because the spots were convenient for prospective clients.

The United States Army Corps of Engineers' involvement in the recreational aspects of the river in St. Paul has been more tangential than direct. In 1935, the U.S. Congress authorized the Corps to maintain a nine-foot-deep channel in the Mississippi at St. Paul. The dredging of the river bottom raised up millions of cubic feet of sand.

This was deposited along the shore and created some attractive beaches along both sides of the river upstream from downtown. Unfortunately, the river is still polluted and few are adventuresome enough to swim. But the beaches created by the dredging do provide beautiful landing places for motorboaters on sunny summer days.

In 1939 Congress also authorized the Corps of Engineers to build a small-boat harbor at Harriet Island. World War II interfered with the immediate implementation of the plan; it was not completed until the early 1950s.

The Corps' impact has not been entirely positive, however. While upstream from downtown the dredgings were used to create beaches, the Mississippi flows through

a narrow channel as it passes between downtown and Harriet Island. In this area there was no suitable location to conveniently place the dredgings.

The Corps' solution to this problem was to use the channel on the landward side of Harriet Island. The result was that, by 1955, Harriet Island was no longer an island. This was probably the low point in the recreational use of the Mississippi in St. Paul. The park facilities at both Harriet

Island and Hidden Falls Parks were allowed to deteriorate, and recreational boating had not yet begun its resurgence.

But there seems to be a renewed interest among St. Paulites in the recreational uses of the river. In 1970 William D. Bowell built an all-steel sternwheel riverboat, the *Jonathan Padelford*, and brought it to the landing on Harriet Island.

In the years since, the popularity of river excursions has led Captain Bowell to



*Houseboats, homes for people who live aboard and also use them for recreation, frozen into the ice at Harriet Island in December, 1960.*



*Harriet Island and the St. Paul Motor Boat Club docks around 1915.*



St. Paul Motor Boat Club, their members and their boats at Harriet Island in 1918.

lengthen the *Padelford* and to add two more boats to his St. Paul fleet, the *Josiah Snelling* and the *Viking Explorer*. Each summer these boats take well over 100,000 passengers on excursions on the Mississippi, providing them with live dixieland music, elegant meals, and even (on the *Viking Explorer* only) overnight accommodations.

Other evidence of renewed interest in the recreational river is found in the resurgence of the Minnesota Boat Club. Its membership has more than doubled since 1980, and the club is once again an active part of the river scene. Powerboating, too, has enjoyed a rebound on the river. The St. Paul Yacht Club (formerly the St. Paul Motor Boat Club) has had to almost double its docking facilities at Harriet Island since the 1970s.

And the Island itself has experienced a renaissance as well. Each summer it is the site of the St. Paul RiverFest, a week-long celebration of music and various other entertainments including the 1987 appearance of Barnum and Bailey's Carnival Midway.

This event, originally called Riverfront Days, began in 1982 as a small, rather folksy three-day neighborhood event. It was first sponsored by the St. Paul Division of Parks and Recreation, the West Side Citizens' Organization (WESCO), and the St. Paul Yacht Club. WESCO was the prime mover behind the celebration. The original purpose of Riverfront Days was to increase the West Side neighborhood's and the city's awareness of the recreational potential of Harriet Island. A

sampling of the entertainments offered at the first Riverfront Days provides a hint of the scale of the event.

Thursday, June 24:

- 11:00 a.m. Gates Open
- 2:00 - 4:30 p.m. Como Zoo Animal Viewing
- 5:00 p.m. Bill Hames Midway Show Opens
- 5:00 - 7:30 p.m. Lowertown Jazz
- 7:30 - 9:30 p.m. Disc Jockey, Nick Lopez (Lopez was somewhat of a neighborhood celebrity.)

Friday, June 25:

- 11:00 a.m. Gates Open

- 2:00 - 4:00 p.m. University of Minnesota "Ultimate Frisbee Team" Demonstration
- 4:00 p.m. Bill Hames Midway Show Opens
- 5:00 - 6:00 University of Minnesota Gymnastics Club Demonstration (This was a conscious attempt to emulate the turn-of-the-century gymnastics demonstrations.)
- 6:00 - 9:00 p.m. Lewis Connection with Irwin Haas (This act was described as playing "junk music".)
- 8:00 - 12:00 p.m. Skunk Hollow (country & western music)
- 10:00 p.m. Fireworks

Compare this with the lineup of entertainment which appeared at the 1987 RiverFest on Harriet Island. The headline for Bob Protzman's music column in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch* read: "[Whitney] Houston Tops RiverFest Lineup. And Chicago, Heart, Starship and Survivor take it from there."

The 1987 festival also offered Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie. From a neighborhood celebration, Riverfront Days had developed into RiverFest, a professionally organized and managed ten-day music festival complete with Barnum & Bailey's



Lock and Dam Number 1. Pleasure boats lock through alongside commercial craft in this picture taken about 1929.

Thrill Show and Midway professional waterski show as well as other attractions.

The 1987 RiverFest drew more than 300,000 people to Harriet Island in ten days. If measured in terms of the number of visitors, size, reputation of performers and budget, the festival clearly has been a success. But at what cost?

The West Siders, the original movers behind the erstwhile Riverfront Days, are no longer involved in the planning and implementation of the professional festival. According to the present organizers, Festival Events, Inc., the event has simply outgrown the neighborhood. It is now a regional event.

But with the increase in size and popularity of RiverFest, complaints have increased each year. These are directed almost exclusively at the sound generated by the primary attractions, the rock bands and performers. The 1987 festival tried to address these complaints by starting and ending the concerts earlier in the evening, but the complaints continued.

RiverFest also attracted another problem. On July 13, 1988, the *Pioneer Press Dispatch* reported that "two youths made off with a sizable souvenir Sunday at RiverFest—several thousand dollars snatched from the ticket gate at Wabasha Street and Nagasaki Road." A footnote to this particular story is that the youths were captured before they were able to leave Harriet Island.

The Mississippi riverfront, then, is enjoying a renaissance as a center for recreation in St. Paul. The city government is developing plans for both banks of the river in the downtown area. The goal is to renovate and beautify the former industrial parts of the riverfront, develop a residential area, make parts of the riverfront more recreationally attractive and accessible to the public, and at the same time, encourage other types of economic development. A tall order.

*Thomas B. Mega, a former Ramsey County Historical Society staff member, is assistant professor of history at St. Thomas College, St. Paul. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota where he received his bachelors, masters and doctorate degrees in American history. He is a member of the Society's Board of Directors and its Editorial Board.*

## Lillie and Ida at the Fair

**W**e are safe in our room at last—have just arrived and oh so tired . . .," wrote Lillie Gibbs to her sister, Abbie, on June 6, 1893.

Lillie and her other sister, Ida, had just arrived in Chicago after a long train ride from St. Paul. Tired as she was, Lillie began that evening to chronicle their adventures as they attended the great World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the new world.

The two women were witnessing one of the major events of 19th century America, an exhibition that rivalled the 1876 American Centennial celebration in Philadelphia. Chicago had transformed more than 600 swampy acres along its downtown waterfront into a sparkling White City of lagoons, gondeliers, and buildings whose neoclassical style would influence American architecture for the next fifty years.

Seventy-seven nations participated; Buffalo Bill performed at the nearby Coliseum; George Washington Ferris erected a huge wheel and the marvels of electricity were demonstrated to the more than 27 million people who crowded into the grounds.

Among them were Lillie and Ida. Almost every day for a week, Lillie sent Abbie postcards crammed with the details of their adventure. For an adventure it was. For two weeks they traveled unescorted, at a time when most women, married or unmarried, did not travel frequently and especially not alone.

Both were unmarried (although Lillie married in September of that year), but they were neither young nor naive. Ida was a spinster of 41 and had spent most of her life as a hardworking farm woman on the family's farm in Ramsey County, north-east of St. Paul.

Lillie, my great grandmother, was 27. She was a portrait artist in St. Paul but she also had been busy helping her mother,

Jane Gibbs, and her brother, Frank, run the family marketing gardening business. Their home is now the Gibbs Farm Museum.

On June 7, Lillie sent the following postcard:

Dear Sister:

We started to the Fair at 8:30 this morning—it does not open til 9 AM . . . we first went to the Minn. Building and registered then went into the Woman's Building as it was the nearest. Saw so much to interest us we did not get out of it till noon. Then we went to the Fishery building and that was fine too. But they are all a marvel to look at on the outside even . . .

Lillie and Ida were both well-educated and reared in a household in which newspapers, concerts and lectures were important parts of the family life. Yet, they were dazzled by seeing "more flowers and fruit than we will see the rest of our lives . . ." in the Horticulture Building, and the exhibits in the Manufactures Building held them for an entire day.

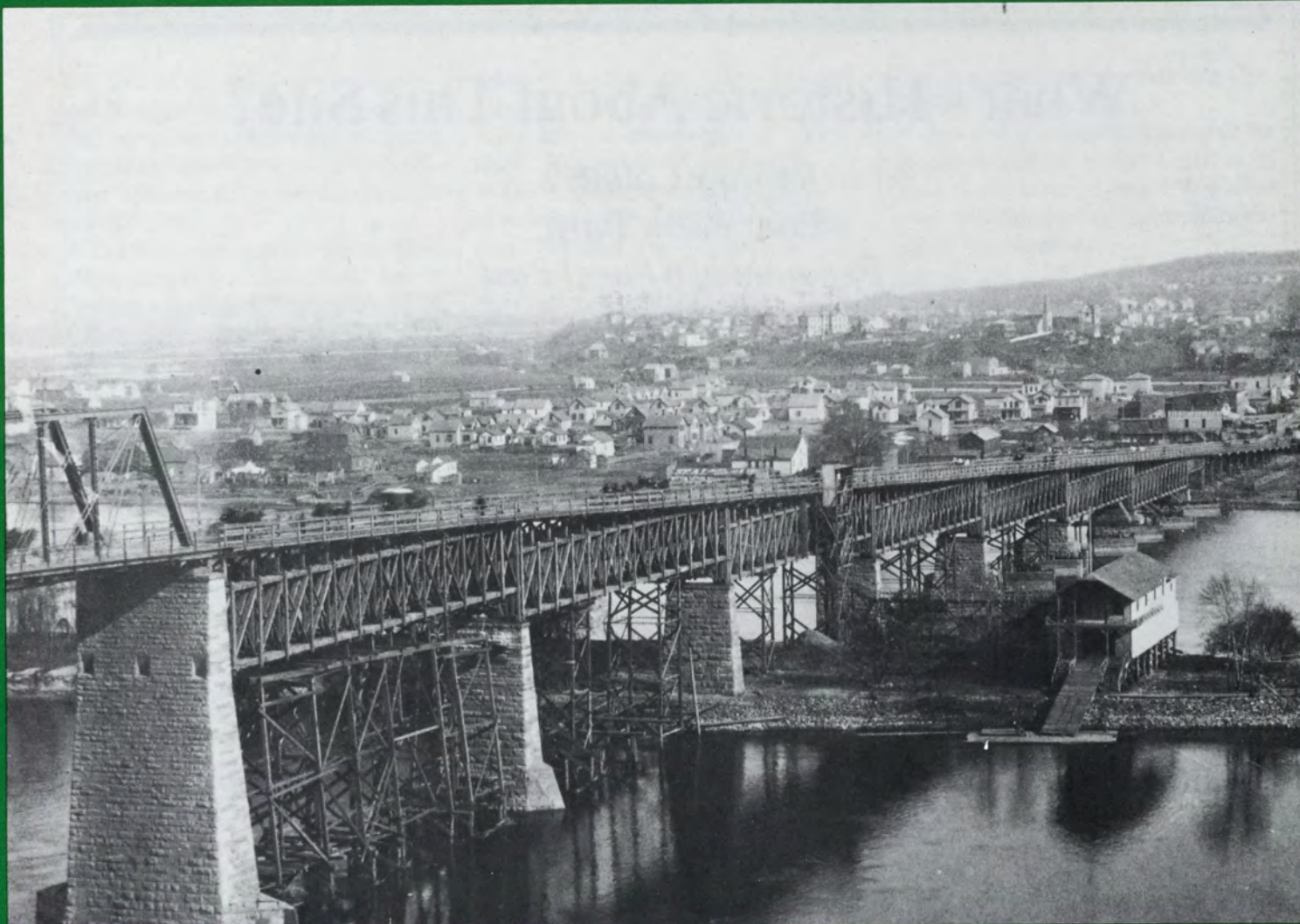
One of the highlights of their trip was bravely staying up late one night to see the grounds lighted up. As she wrote to Abbie,

We stayed till after dark tonight to see the fountains & the Electricity Bldg. looks best then and it is perfectly safe for us to come home. The Grounds look like fairy land in the evening. And there is music in some direction all day and concerts around the electric fountain in the evening.

The excitement Lillie and Ida must have felt as they gazed at the electric wonderland is perhaps difficult for us to capture today, surrounded as we are with modern technology that seems to hold few surprises. But for Lillie and Ida, the World's Columbian Exposition opened their eyes to new people, places and things.

At few other times during the rest of their lives would they again "see their eyes out" or experience the carefree vacation of 1893.

—Karen Bluhm



*The Minnesota Boat Club below the Wabasha Street bridge around 1890. The old clubhouse was replaced just before World War I and the island, once known as Raspberry Island, is now Navy Island. See story on Page 9.*

**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

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage  
PAID  
St. Paul MN  
Permit #3989