

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Members of the Junior League of St. Paul rehearsing for the 1936 Junior League Cabaret, one of the League's more entertaining fund raisers. Left to right are Mrs. John Driscoll, Molly Turner, Betty Evans, Betty Scandrett, Betty Fobes, Edith Shull, Clotilde Irvine, Mrs. Thomas Wheeler, Alice Bartles and Betty Rugg. See article on the Junior League's seventy-five years of service to the community beginning on page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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A Message from the Editorial Board

In the early 1960s, a few schools on the cutting edge of higher education began to give special attention to the issue of race relations, and the contributions of racial and ethnic groups in national and local history. By the early 1970s, the contributions of women and the lives of average citizens, aside from those in the labor movement, were also singled out as subfields deserving special focus in the curriculum. However, those fields have long been recognized by state and county historical societies as worthy of attention. When the Editorial Board set about to expand the size of *Ramsey County History* and enhance its scholarly depth and breadth, the magazine already had a tradition of articles in these fields, which we determined to continue.

This issue contains three articles which contribute to the field of women's and family history. Scheduled for future issues are two articles in the areas of minority and ethnic history: the contributions of the Mexican and Jewish American communities to the history of St. Paul, as well as an article on the High Bridge, that vital link to the West Side, a neighborhood that was home to both communities.

—Thomas C. Buckley, member of the Editorial Board

Hope Chests and Honeymoons – Marriages In America Still Wedded to Tradition

Tamara Truer

With this ring, I thee wed.” Most Americans have come to associate such vows with the long standing traditions surrounding marriage ceremonies. But if history teaches anything, it teaches that change is the one constant in the universe.

Traditionally, weddings united families and strengthened the bonds of the community. Ceremonies, whether elaborate or simple, were seen as part of the renewal of the community as a whole. These ceremonies often were shrouded in superstitions aimed at warding off evil influences. Surprisingly enough, many of these superstitions are still scrupulously adhered to, though often without any understanding of their sources.

An example is the tradition of the bridal veil; it was to protect the bride from being seen by evil spirits jealous of her beauty and good fortune. For much the same reason, the clothes of the bridesmaids and groomsmen were similar to those of the bride and groom to confuse the jealous demons.

Other traditions are rooted in more practical needs. The hope chest has for centuries been a vital part of a bride’s dowry, which refers to the money and/or property that she brought to her marriage. Customs have varied throughout time as to what this dowry was to be composed of, but in nineteenth century America it usually was limited to the linens, furnishings and housewares needed to set up in the home that the groom was responsible for supplying.

While the groom sought out a suitable dwelling, the bride’s mother and extended family helped her finish sewing her linens and quilts. Young girls often began to prepare for married life at the age of five or six. They were instructed in needlework, housework, and cooking. One tradition held that a girl should not marry until she



Fred and Mary Helininger Beer and their wedding attendants.

had completed at least thirteen quilts. She would have made the quilt tops during her childhood. As the wedding approached,

her female family members would hold a quilting bee, with women in the community gathering to help quilt the tops to the bat-

The wedding gown was not always the long, white satin dress now associated with weddings.



ting and backing.

In America, such preparations were of vital importance. Often the newly married couple would strike out for sparsely settled sections of the country. Until the late nineteenth century, few items, such as blankets and clothing, could be bought ready made. Usually, childbirth could be expected soon after marriage, creating a whole new set of responsibilities. Therefore, wise was the bride who entered her marriage with a full hope chest.

By the late nineteenth century, at least for the upper and middle classes, such elaborate preparations were unnecessary. While some traditional obligations continued, preparations centered around the trousseau, the special wardrobe the bride prepared for her wedding and the honeymoon trip.

The wedding gown was not always the long, white satin dress now associated with weddings. In earlier eras, it was fashionable to wear a "good dress," one that could be re-worn on special occasions. Clothes were expensive and for most people not to be wasted on a single event. An interesting twist on this can be found in the accompanying photo of Fred and Mary Helininger Beer. According to Beer's descendants, he wore his wedding jacket for years as it is seen in many photos of special family events. Mary, however, is never again shown wearing her wedding dress.

Even into the twentieth century, long dresses were not always the style. Instead, a short dress would be enhanced with an elaborate veil, although the dress might be worn only for the wedding.

In the nineteenth century, wedding ceremonies usually took place at the home of the bride's parents or closest relative. Church ceremonies were rare. As the September, 1894, edition of *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries* declared, "House



The wedding picture of Rudolph Fischer and Abigail Jane Gibbs—apparently the photograph Abbie's sister, Lillie, was expecting.

weddings are less fatiguing . . . Timid brides prefer that their nuptials shall be celebrated at home."

Still, home weddings could be elaborate, as can be seen in the photos of a circa late nineteenth century home decorated for a wedding that accompanies this article. Although we do not know whose home this was, these unusual photos offer a glimpse at some of the preparations undertaken to transform a home into the

proper setting for the marriage ritual. A temporary altar was created with flowers, greenery, and candles. Tables to receive gifts were carefully arranged. The organ for the wedding music was surrounded by the same kind of floral treatment provided the kneeling bench and altar. Following are a few brief descriptions of home wed-

Weddings to page 23

was \$1,000, and a 1941 Dodge Luxury Liner Sedan was listed at \$899. Rooms with board were \$8.50 a week, and an unfurnished house could be rented for \$26.50. For those who needed to travel, round trip bus fare to Chicago was \$11.90; to New York, \$32.40. This was at a time when wool sweaters cost \$2.19.

1967 25 YEARS AGO

► The build-up in southeast Asia continued. Premier Nguyen Cao of South Vietnam announced that an additional 600,000 United States troops would be needed to counter increased North Vietnamese insurgency. U. S. ground forces currently numbered 462,000.

► At the same time, half a dozen senators warned the Johnson administration that further increased military activity against North Vietnam might foreclose the last possibility of a peaceful settlement and bring Communist China and the Soviet Union into the war. Senator John Cooper was reported to believe that a reduction in bombing would serve as a new peace initiative.

► Back in the Twin Cities, more than 600 people staged a fifteen-minute protest against the cities' new rent controls.

► Lou Spadia, who joined the 49ers as an office boy in 1946, became president of the club as part of a realignment of duties in the organization.

► Mickey Mantle made a triumphant entrance into the exclusive 500 Club, whose membership so far had been limited to six. Ahead of Mantle was Mel Ott with 511, Ted Williams with 521, Jimmy Fox with 534, Willie Mays with 546 and Babe Ruth with 714.

► At the movies, George C. Scott and Peter O'Toole were starring in "The Bible"; Mary Tyler Moore, Carol Channing and James Fox in "Thoroughly Modern Millie"; Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in "The Taming of the Shrew."

Adapted from research compiled by Theresa Beskar, James Egan, Nancy Farrell, Kevin Herras, Robb Larsen, James Lehtola, Paul Nagel, Dean Severn, James J. Tschida, Angela Williams and James Young, history students of Professor Thomas C. Buckley at the University of Minnesota.



Wedding gifts set out for the guests' inspection. However, Godey's Lady's Book objected to such lavish displays.

Weddings from page 13

dings held in St. Paul in the early twentieth century:

1915 . . . The marriage of Miss Helen Aberle, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Aberle, and Fred Z. Salomon of St. Louis, Mo., took place at the home of the bride's parents at 7 p.m. yesterday. A small company of friends witnessed the ceremony, which was performed by Rabbi Isaac L. Rypins . . . The bride was married in her traveling suit of blue gabardine. She wore a small blue straw hat . . . Prior to the ceremony, the "Meditation from Thais" was played on the organ and violin. The processional was the wedding march from "Lohengrin." During the ceremony, Gounod's "Ave Marie" was played. The recessional was Mendelssohn's march . . . An improvised altar of palms, ferns, bridal wreath and vases of snapdragons, flanked on either side by a tall cathedral taper burning in a single candlestick, had been erected in the drawing room, and there the nuptial vows were spoken.

1921 . . . The home of Mr. and Mrs. Clifford J. Menz was the scene of a prettily appointed wedding Wednesday evening, when Mrs. Menz's sister, Miss Hazel Margaret Willis, was married to Harry Buell Fullmer. The ceremony was performed in the living room before the fireplace which was banked with palms and tall vases of peonies. Lighted tapers in silver candelabra and baskets of peonies tied with pink tulle adorned the mantle . . . Rev. Peter Clare of Minneapolis performed the ceremony in

the presence of relatives and immediate friends . . . The bride, who entered alone, wore a frock of imported white organdie over white satin . . . A pink color scheme was carried out in the dining room . . . Mr. and Mrs. Fullmer left for a trip on the Great Lakes and points in the east. The bride's traveling costume was a sport suit of heather mixture Jersey with which she is wearing an amber felt hat embroidered in Harding blue.

Whether a wedding was held at home, or, as the twentieth century progressed, more commonly in a church, the role of the wedding gifts was the greatest change. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, wedding guests usually were not expected to bring gifts, although some cultures did have a tradition of giving money to the couple. The families provided whatever help the couple needed for their new life, as evidenced by the hope chest. However, by the turn-of-the-century gift giving was not only expected, but was seen as a statement of the wealth of the giver and as a tribute to the bride and her family.

Gifts were seldom of a practical nature, but stressed luxury and leisure. They centered around kitchen or dining items for the bride's use in these exclusively feminine territories of entertaining in the home. One turn-of-the-century bride received, among other gifts, a chocolate pitcher, a cut glass berry dish, a pair of painted cologne bottles, silver sugar tongs and a bonbon spoon.

As can be seen by the photos, gifts were lavishly displayed during the wedding

reception, often with the card of the giver beside the gift. Guests could examine and compare each gift to see if it paid proper tribute to the bride.

However, not everyone approved of this conspicuous display of consumerism. *Godey's Lady's Book*, a popular nineteenth century source of etiquette rules and fashions, objected to both the displaying and receiving of gifts, but such objections did little to turn the tide. Weddings as a whole increasingly became testimonies to, and a public display of, a family's material success in the world.

The tradition of a honeymoon has varied sources, but generally referred to a time of isolation for the bride and groom before they set up their household and entered into the everyday activities of the community. In earlier times, American couples took this time to visit friends and relatives who lived at a distance. They took with them members of their own families and the trip often lasted for months.

Around 1900, it was more popular to honeymoon at an exotic tourist attraction, such as Niagara Falls, than to visit relatives. However, other couples usually were invited to accompany the newlyweds. Not until later in this century did couples routinely go on their honeymoons alone.

There are as many wedding stories as there are people who have married. The Gibbs family, whose farm is now owned and operated as a museum by the Ramsey County Historical Society, was no exception. We know some of their stories from letters Lillie Gibbs LeVesconte wrote to her sister, Abbie Gibbs. Unfortunately, Lillie did not save any of the letters Abbie wrote her.

Abigail Jane Gibbs was born in 1855 and lived on the family farm all of her life. After her father, Heman Gibbs, died she and her mother, Jane DeBow Gibbs, lived there alone. Abbie's brother, Frank, and, later, his daughter, Alice Gibbs Nelson and her family, lived across the street and helped with the farm. One sister, Ida, lived elsewhere and the other sister, Lillie, lived in Prior Lake raising her four children. At the age of forty-nine, Abbie was surprised, according to the following letter, to find herself being courted. A year later, when she was fifty, she became the bride of Ru-

dolph Fischer, a Swiss immigrant who had worked as a farm hand in the area, and probably for the Gibbs family, too. They were married for thirty-six years, until her death in 1941. The following letters from the archives of the Ramsey County Historical Society are all that is known of this part of their story:

"Prior Lake, Oct. 23, 1904

Dear Sister,

Your welcome letter was received all right and I wasn't surprised that somebody wanted you. If he just keeps on coming he may get you in spite of yourself. As for Mr. Fischer, it is mother's duty to meet him at the door sometime and say in a loud voice 'I want to know Sir, if you have *any intentions.*'"

A quick note on August 31, 1905, stated that Lillie expected to be in St. Paul on the next Saturday. She said, "we will be in for the chiveree."* She added a postscript, however, that stated that she was "not feeling well and *may* be too sick to come."

"Prior Lake, Sept. 8, 1905

Dear Sister,

I had a comfortable trip home. Myron Skinner was in the seat just back of me so he knows you are married. He said if you had got the right kind of a man twas a good thing. I told him that you had been *very* well acquainted for six or seven years so he said you ought to know each other. I did not mention Frank or his views. . . . I can't find your license in the paper, surely you gave [the] right names, and I'm not quite sure how to spell your new one so I'll send [this] in Mother's care."**

* *A chiveree or shiveree was an American custom, usually found in rural areas, where friends of the couple created as much noise and havoc on the wedding night as possible. Customs vary from kidnapping the bride to simply singing songs underneath the window. We do not know what was done for Abbie and Rudolph, but it appears that Lillie was able to attend the ceremony, though, again, we have no description of that event.*

** *It was some time before she did get the name correct because for months following the wedding the letters to Abbie were addressed to Mrs. Geo. Fischer and not to Mrs. Rudolph Fischer. However, like Lillie, we, too, were unable to find their wedding license in the paper.*

Whatever "Frank's views" were initially, he must have changed them somewhat because Fischer (as he was always called by the family) was remembered fondly by Frank's grandchildren as a gentle, quiet "little" man and a frequent visitor in their home. If the children were very good, he would take his great-nieces and nephews into the rarely used parlor and allow them to listen to his collection of Swiss music boxes.

"Prior Lake, Sept. 24, 1905

Dear Sister,

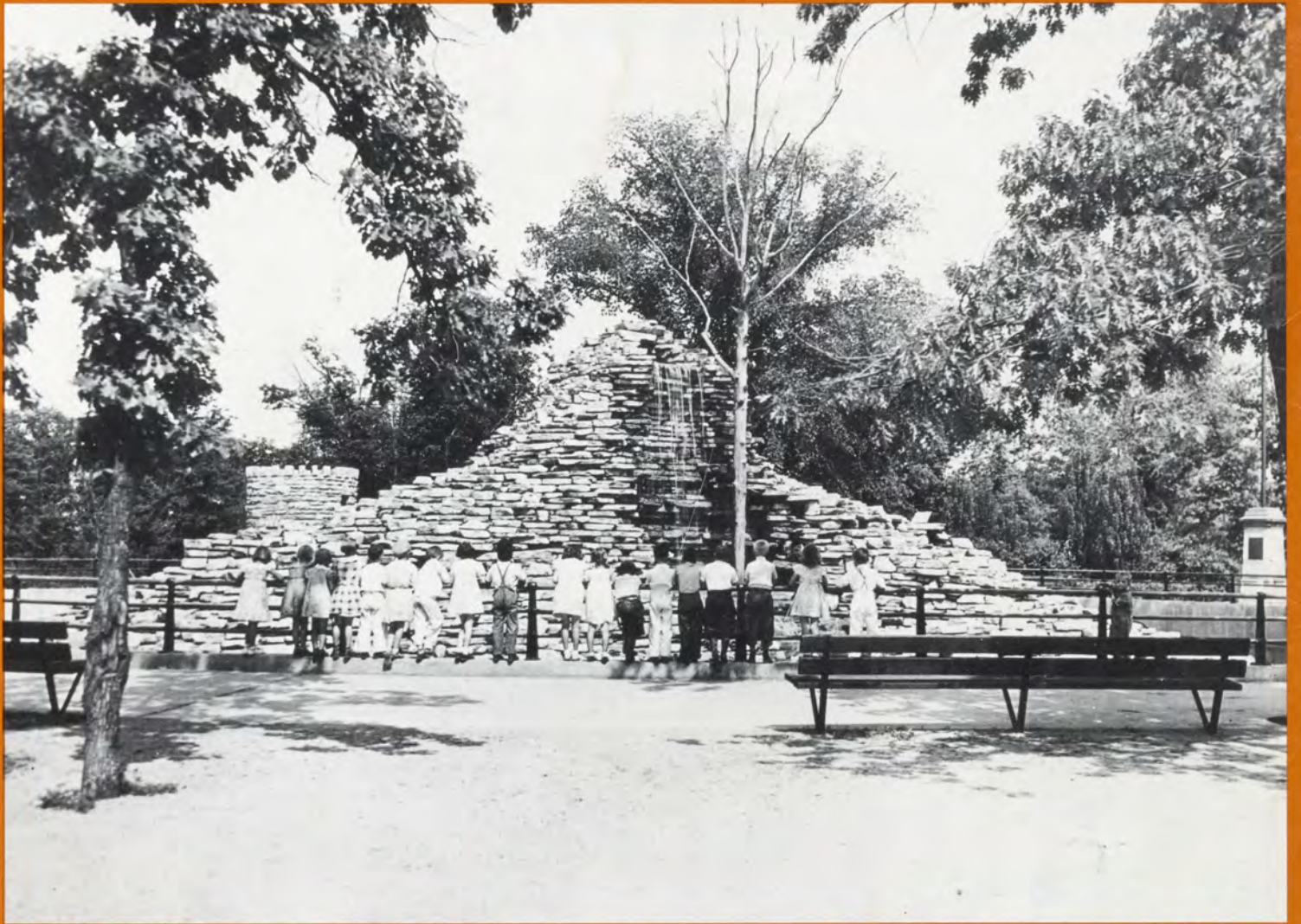
Has Mr. Fischer come home to stay yet? You ought to have a party now. I suppose you had as much of a wedding as Kate Bowman or the Hoyt girls but I wish you wouldn't write or say that 'I chased you up.' When you know in your heart that you chose your own time and place. I had other plans for that day but let them go and am not crying about it but don't like being counted as matchmaker.

with love from Lill"

The letter of September 24 also mentioned that Lillie expects "one of those pictures soon." Apparently she is referring to the wedding picture of Rudolph and Abbie that accompanies this article.

The Gibbs Farm Museum will stage a recreation of a 1920s home wedding at 1:30 p.m. on Sunday, August 23, followed by a small reception, complete with groom's cake and bridal cake. The house will be appropriately decorated and will include a display of wedding gowns and wedding ephemera, including the wedding coat of Fred Beers, referred to earlier in this article. The museum will be open from noon to 4 p.m. Admission is \$2.50 for adults, \$2 for senior citizens, and \$1 for children ages two through eighteen. Admission is free for members of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

Tamara Truer is manager of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Gibbs Farm Museum. She has a masters degree in history from Indiana State University at Terre Haute. This is her second article for Ramsey County History. Her account of the confrontation between James J. Hill and Eugene Debs during the 1894 Great Northern Railroad strike appeared in the Spring, 1990, issue.



Visitors lining the railing at Monkey Island, the Como Zoo's enduringly popular attraction. This photograph was taken around 1940. See the article on *Growing Up in St. Paul*, beginning on page 16.

R.C.H.S.
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