

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Summer, 1994

Volume 29, Number 2

Lafayette Park—
Vanished Home of
the Elite

Page 4



A Lafayette Park corner. This charming watercolor was painted by Frances James sometime during the 1880s.

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CONTENTS

3 Letters

4 Once Upon a Time—'Tasteful, Elegant' Lafayette Park and the Homes of the Elite *Marshall R. Hatfield*

14-15 'Aristocratic Woodward'

22 Growing Up in St. Paul— Harriet Island and the 'Fearless' Popper *William D. Bowell, Sr.*

25 How Good Were the 'Good Old Days?' *Tamara C. Truer*

27 Books, Etc.

Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr., and by a contribution from Reuel D. Harmon.

A Message from the Editorial Board

This Summer issue of *Ramsey County History* features Lafayette Park in St. Paul. Marshall Hatfield's article tells the story of the park, and the two watercolors by Frances Haynes James show how one artistically talented resident saw the park in the 1880s. Although Frances Haynes was born in New Hampshire in 1853, she and her family moved to St. Paul after the Civil War. She married Henry Clay James in 1874, and they lived, at the time she painted these watercolors, on the southwest corner of Lafayette and East Seventh streets. The watercolor on the front cover shows the horsecar tracks that ran along Lafayette in front of their home. The man in the foreground is her husband with their children. The painting on the back cover presents a different view looking west. Both paintings are reproduced here with the permission



Frances James, about 1874. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

of Clifford Sommers, grandson of Frances James.

John M. Lindley,
chairman, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

Harriet Island and the 'Fearless' Popper

William D. Bowell, Sr.

This is an effort to tell a little bit about how important Harriet Island has been to me for a good many years.

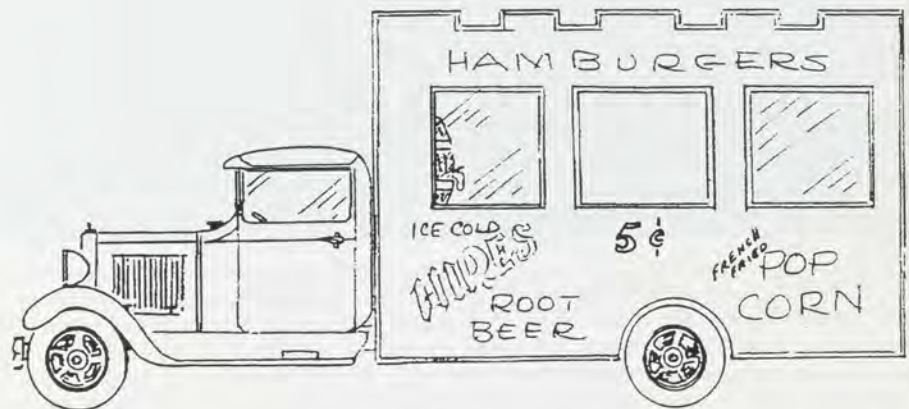
My mother, Leone Padelford Bowell, a West Sider, frequently told my brothers, sisters and me about the happiness she and her friends experienced on Harriet Island in her dating years. She remembered the public baths, the zoo and the crowds of people who went swimming in the river, all at Harriet Island.

My father told of fast boats, even one that set a record of 70 miles per hour between the Wabasha Street bridge and the High Bridge. There was a story, too, about the famed Speed Holman who flew under the Wabasha Street bridge with a petrified Julius Perlt (the former announcer at the Gopher Stadium) as unsuspecting passenger hanging on in terror. Holman did a barrel roll in his biplane, circled around, came back and repeated the feat going the other way.

In 1932 my father, Ralph R. Bowell, had recently gone out of business as a Ford dealer in Hastings, Minnesota. It seems that Henry Ford forced him out by requiring that he buy Ford tractor parts and Ferguson hitches, whether he needed them or not. Ford himself was having serious financial problems.

It was the beginning of the Great Depression. Our family was rather large, with twelve children (six boys, six girls) and I am sure my father was looking for ways to feed the family. He worked as an automobile salesman after losing his auto agency, but he was searching for other ways to make additional income.

My dad was a creative sort of a person. Necessity obviously kept him busy looking for ways to make a dollar. He bought a ton-and-a-half Ford Model A truck only a couple of years old and designed a rather neat structure that fit on



Ralph Bowell's popcorn wagon, sketched by the author's brother, Bob. Photographs used with this article are from the author.

the truck's frame. It was a popcorn wagon with a castle-like motif.

Dad was a nut for quality and insisted on having a beautifully varnished Hires Root Beer solid oak barrel as the center piece of the truck. It dispensed delicious root beer and you had your choice of clear or foamy at five cents per frosted glass. Popcorn, ice cream or hamburgers filled out the menu.

Somehow or other, Dad would book carnivals and county fairs, or sometimes just spot the wagon at busy places like Harriet Island or Lake Phalen. He would disappear for the day while we kids operated the business. Sometimes some irate public official would try to kick us out of the spot but Dad, being gone, we had no one to drive the truck. The official would be forced to let us stay.

No one in the family can remember (sixty some years later) whatever happened to the popcorn wagon. We were all very proud of it. Probably some finance company reclaimed it.

After the disappearance of the Model A popcorn wagon, somehow or other the older family members were put to work running a makeshift portable popcorn

concession on week-ends, primarily at Harriet Island. We moved from South St. Paul to Prescott Street on the West Side about that time, and Harriet Island was within walking distance. Harriet Island was really an island in those days. You had to cross a narrow, rickety old bridge to get to it. The river channel on the land side of the island was filled in quite a few years ago and the island is now part of the mainland, with the river only on one side.

Further west along the island in the old days, near the upper end, was a Victorian-type pavilion. I think it was built about 1900. It was the center of activity, with frequent dances and "Booyas." The pavilion itself was raised so that the dances were well above the ground level. Actually, it seemed that it was on stilts or pilings so as to be above the floods that inundated the island every few years.

Our popcorn stand was under the main floor nestled among the pilings. It kept us out of the rain and gave us easy access to the crowds that were there for the day's activities.

Our father was proud to be the owner of a new type of popcorn popper. The popper kettle had a round bottom but oth-



All the little Bowells in 1930. At left are Ralph and Leone Padelford Bowell with Jack, eleven weeks. Others are (left to right) Betty Jane, thirteen; Mary, twelve; Robert, ten; Billy, nine; Phyllis, eight; Tommy, six; Jimmy, five; Jean, four; Patty, fifteen months.

erwise looked like a cylinder that had two floppy hinged covers on top. It had a handle with a crank. The crank was geared to a center shaft that ran at right angles to the bottom of the kettle where it stirred the popcorn with a four pronged mixer inside the kettle.

The popper could be easily removed from the stand it sat in. The stand provided the gas flame and heat for the popper, which could be emptied and refilled. The advertising that came with the popper extolled the virtues of having the flavor popped inside each kernel. Supposedly, this was the first popper that used cooking oil, placed in the popper or pan, to pop the corn. As each kernel popped, it of course turned inside out, with the oil and flavor neatly contained in the inside of each kernel.

Attending our popcorn stand, we literally shouted to anyone who was a potential customer that ours was "french fried" popcorn. I believe my father coined the

term. He also came up with the phrase, "It sharpens your teeth and combs your hair and makes you feel like a millionaire" . . . "It's only a nickel, half a dime and keeps you eating all the time."

I remembered the name of the popper as "Peerless Popper," as did my brother Bob and sister Betty Jane. Of course, we are talking now about a period sixty-one years ago. For some unknown reason, all three of us vividly recalled our days on Harriet Island, and particularly the Peerless Popper. We also remembered the three-foot by two-foot galvanized tin container six inches deep with a screen on the bottom that our dad designed and had made. The popped corn was served from it. The "old maids," as we called the corn that didn't pop, would drop to the bottom through the screen.

We bought our popcorn from Midwest Feed on Seventh Street. They also sold Mazola Oil. Dad had an absolute fetish about how important it was to use Ma-



Bill Bowell (center) with his sister, Donna, and brother, Bob, about 1934.

zola Oil to get the right flavor and also the delicious smell that wafted through the air to entice the customers. Over the years, I had always hoped to find a Peerless Popper, just to own as a memento.

Recently I found a popper in an East Coast catalogue that looked like it operated on the same principle as the original Peerless Popper of sixty years ago. Of course I sent for it and was delighted to find that it pops popcorn just as the old Peerless Popper did. It has the same type of gear mechanism and a hand crank. It has been improved with a new type of floating mixer on the bottom of the kettle. The old flavor and ease of popping are still there. If you get the right popcorn and store it correctly, every kernel pops.

The name of this new popper is "Theater II" and it is made by the Felknor Company in Monon, Indiana. I found out later that I could have bought it here, and that it is now available in department stores throughout the country. In fact, Felknor can't make them fast enough.

As a curiosity, I called the Felknor Company and talked to its president, Bill Felknor. I was delighted to find how interested he was in my story about the Peerless Popper and its similarity to his popper. He was intrigued as I described the design of the original Peerless Popper. Then he searched his storage area and found that he had the exact popper that I had described. The name, however, was FEARLESS, not PEERLESS, and it was made in Des Moines, Iowa. Obviously my memory, and that of my brother and sister, erred . . . but we were close!

Bill Felknor sent the Fearless Popper to me so I could inspect and photograph it. Later he sold it to me, so now I am the proud possessor of an original "Fearless Popper."

My childhood experience in the popcorn business has stuck with me for most of my life. While attending Macalester College in the mid-1940s, I bought a small popcorn machine and it helped me earn my way through college by selling popcorn at all athletic events.

"Popcorn Pete" used to come on campus with his little popcorn wagon. I asked the college comptroller how much Pete paid the college for the privilege. I was surprised to find out that he paid nothing.



The "Fearless" Popper



The finished product.

I popped corn for two days, and was still popping at noon the day of the game. I had boxed popcorn nearly filling my room. As I worked feverishly, some kid walked up and asked me why I was making so much popcorn. "For the Homecoming game with St. Thomas," I answered. Then he dropped the bombshell. "Don't you know they called the game off?" he asked. I thought he was pulling my leg, but could see by the look on his face that he wasn't.

The day before, during our freshman team's game with St. Thomas, a Macalester player was injured and unfortunately he died. The campus was in shock, but no indication had been given that the varsity game would be called off.

At that moment I had crews on the football field filling huge stock tanks with ice and Coca-Colas in glass bottles. Over 500 cases in all! I had hotdogs boiling in ten-gallon milk cans on every hotplate on campus. I had a huge supply of buns for the hotdogs in big cardboard cartons. I was stunned. I had a dilemma, and I had to solve it.

Fortunately, Coca-Cola took back all their bottles without charge. I sold the hotdogs to the campus cafeteria. For two days I went from grocery store to grocery store selling the buns. All of them! I sold the popcorn in the various dormitories for the next thirty days at a reduced rate. When it was all over, I think I broke even. Financial disaster was averted.

This past year I finally bowed to the mess popcorn can make and allowed it to be served on all my boats. We bought four large commercial poppers. They have been surprisingly productive. People like popcorn. My crew (eighty young college students) does, too, which makes me wonder whether we are making any money on the deal.

Captain William D. Bowell, Sr., is owner of the Padelford Packet Boat Co., Inc., which has been running excursion and charter boats out of Harriet Island for the past twenty-five years.

I offered 10 percent of my take if the college would give me exclusive rights for all concessions on campus. They agreed.

From then on, I felt I was in big business. The football games were the most productive. There was one exception—the most important event of the year, the Homecoming game with St. Thomas at Macalester in 1948.



Another of Frances James's watercolors of a Lafayette Park scene in the 1880s. This view looks west from the James home, a double house at the southwest corner of East Seventh street and Lafayette. The tall steeple is First Baptist Church at Ninth and Wacouta. The cupola is on the Washington School at Ninth and Olive streets. See article beginning on page 4.

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

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