

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Lafayette Park—
Vanished Home of
the Elite

Page 4

Summer, 1994

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

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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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.

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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

How Good Were the 'Good Old Days' When Women's Work Was Rarely Done?

Tamara C. Truer

With farmers' markets filled to overflowing at this season, it is a time to look back at a little-known aspect of Ramsey County's history—the lives of the women who lived on the county's market garden farms of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

In Ramsey County, market garden farms—sometimes called truck farms—produced vegetables, fruit, ornamentals and flowers, eggs and dairy products for the nearby city's residents, restaurants, hotels and farmers' markets. Grain was grown on farms farther away from the city where land was less expensive and the grain could be hauled to a distant market without damage.

Farms nearer the city were smaller and the land more expensive so more specialized produce was grown, most of it for the market but some for home use. In 1890 there were 519 market garden farms in Ramsey County with an average of eighty-three acres each; by 1900 there were 923, averaging sixty-six acres.

Both St. Paul and Minneapolis had—and still have—farmers' markets where truck or market garden farmers sell their produce. Buyers were then and often still are primarily grocers, although families also shopped there, as they do today. While much of the labor that was needed to grow the food a century ago was supplied almost exclusively by the men of the family or hired laborers, women and even children worked in the fields when needed. Raising crops and selling them filled a man's days from sun-up to sun-down, though the nature of the work changed with the seasons.

For most of the women, however, their lives on turn-of-the-century farms were focused on the care of their family and their home. Their work was difficult, and they didn't often leave the farm for

visits to nearby St. Paul. According to the agricultural census schedules for 1910 and 1920 (those from 1890 and 1900 were destroyed), these women were white and most of them foreign-born. In 1910 only thirty women were listed as independent farmers; the rest lived with their husbands or families. However, records can reveal only certain things about past lives. Sometimes it is the questions they don't answer that make the most interesting story.

For example, although a sizable number of African Americans lived in St. Paul at that time, especially in the Rondo avenue neighborhood, why were there no non-white families listed as living outside the city limits? Was the census incorrect, or were there non-white farmers who didn't answer the questions?

However, foreign-born or native-born, white or non-white, many women shared some hard realities a century ago. Their lives were far more restricted than those of women today. Job opportunities outside of their homes often were limited to domestic or clerical work, although in the rural one-room schools where grades one through eight were taught together, the teachers usually were women. In the larger institutions and the high schools, the teachers were almost exclusively men.

For farmers' wives in Ramsey County, visits to the city were rare and shopping in the downtown stores infrequent. To understand why housework so filled a woman's life, one must look at the homes of the period.

During the Minnesota winters, fire was particularly trying. Houses, particularly in the rural areas, were poorly heated. Rooms were cold, there was no electricity, candles or kerosene lamps were used for lighting, and cooking was done over a wood-burning stove, some-

This article is adapted from information that accompanies a touring trunk available from the Ramsey County Historical Society for teachers of grades 2 through 8. Designed to serve schools and other organizations that are unable to make tours of the Society's Gibbs Farm Museum, the trunk's contents describe what life was like for women living on market garden farms (sometimes called truck farms) in Ramsey County around 1900.

To rent the trunk, contact Ted Lau at the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 West Fifth Street, St. Paul, Mn., 55102—(612) 222-0701. Cost is \$15 for a two-week rental.

times the only source of heat in the house. The fire had to be lighted early each morning and, since the stove was large, it would be some time before it was hot enough to cook breakfast.

There was no indoor plumbing and, consequently, no water faucets. Instead, water came from a pump at the sink or outside near the back door. The "facilities" also were outside in an unheated shed called an outhouse.

After breakfast, dishes were washed after pumping water again and heating it on the stove. Lye soap, made at home in the fall from lye and rendered animal fat, was used. Some outside chores also fell to the women, especially the care of the chickens and the kitchen garden, where food was grown for the family's use.

Food preparation was a big part of women's work. As food was harvested, housewives scrambled to can fruits and vegetables for the coming winter. Meanwhile, daily meals still had to be prepared. Some women followed a weekly schedule: bread baked on Wednesdays,

butter churned on Tuesdays and Saturdays, rooms dusted on Wednesdays, rugs beaten on Thursdays.

Washday usually fell on Monday, but the work actually began the night before when clothes were put to soak overnight in a tub or boiler with water and lye soap. The next morning they were boiled, then scrubbed on a washboard. Meanwhile, another tub of water was heated for rinsing the clothes. Then they were put through a wringer and hung up to dry. On cold winter days, washings were hung either in an unused part of the house (as in the summer kitchen in the Gibbs Farm Museum) or near the stove. By the late nineteenth century, washing machines in a variety of shapes and sizes were in use, but these were hand-operated and not all were very efficient. They still required that water be heated first on the stove.

Ironing could take an entire day. Summer and winter, the heavy irons were heated on the stove. Often purchased in a set of three, they fit easily on top of a stove lid. Some were "sad irons," which came with detachable handles and interchangeable irons. As one iron cooled, the housewife put it back on the stove to heat up again while she worked with another iron that was already heated. The stove had to be fed constantly to maintain heat—fine in January but not in July. Only Sunday was free of special tasks except for fixing a huge mid-day family meal.

There were several major differences between the work of farm women and those in the city. A farmer's wife often had hired hands to feed and do laundry for, in addition to her own family members, and she rarely did her own grocery shopping. It was easier for the farmer to buy supplies in town on his way home from the farmers' market.

Sewing for the family occupied much of a woman's time, both on the farm and in the city. While some clothes, such as coats and cloaks, shoes and boots, and men's overalls, were purchased ready made, women made most of the other clothes for the family, and they also made the quilts.

Women also were charged with raising the children. With limited birth control methods available, pregnancy was a



Farm women photographed by Dr. Emil King, Fulda, Minnesota. Women on Ramsey County's market garden farms a century ago were charged with the care of the chickens and the children. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

recurring event for many women. Large families were common, and the work load increased accordingly. However, as the children grew, they helped in the care of home and farm. Children made candles, cleaned kerosene lamps, churned butter, fed the chickens and worked in the fields with the men. For farm children, childhood a hundred years ago, was less a time of play and more a time of taking on more and more duties as they grew older.

Life, however, wasn't all work for farm families at that time. Church and school activities often filled a woman's free hours. When farm work permitted, children who lived close to St. Paul attended one-room schoolhouses until eighth grade when their education usually ended. Regular church attendance was common among these farmers. Since farms near the city were small, and the area far more populated than rural districts outside Ramsey County, neighbors

were close by and visited each other frequently. Card games, even square dances, enlivened the long winter months when farm work was less intense.

In the summer, family and friends from the cities were frequent Sunday visitors. Picnics and family gatherings were popular, although women still did the cooking and it is not clear how much "leisure" these leisure-time activities provided for them.

It seems clear that a century ago the old saying that women's work was never done, and that it remains debatable as to whether the "good old days" were really so good after all.

Tamara C. Truer is the former manager of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Gibbs Farm Museum at Cleveland and Larpenteur Avenues in Falcon Heights.



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.
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