

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Growing Up on
Crocus Hill
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Summer, 1995

Volume 30, Number 2

A Powerhouse of Vision, Vigor
Friends of the Library's 50 Years—Page 4



A little girl, seemingly overwhelmed by the riches a library offers, kneels beside her stack of books at an event organized by The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library. Beside her a future reader watches carefully. Photo from The Friends' files. For a history of The Friends' fifty years of service to the community, see the article beginning on page 4.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue of *Ramsey County History* provides an unusual look at a non-profit organization—The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library—that for more than fifty years has quietly served the cultural, intellectual, and public-spirited side of St. Paul and Ramsey County. As writer Virginia L. Martin tells us, The Friends began as what they themselves called a “tea and crumpets” society, but today is an initiator of change in the world of the local library. For example, in 1994 The Friends put more than a quarter of million dollars into various programs and activities designed to improve, expand, and upgrade the public library services that are available to all members of the community. Congratulations to The Friends.

John M. Lindley, chairman

Growing Up in St. Paul

Flexible Flyers, Trolleys to Wildwood

And the Wondrous Tree House on Grand Hill

Samuel H. Morgan

My earliest recollection of St. Paul is March 19, 1918, the date our family arrived by train from Duluth where I was born and spent the first seven years of my life. I was sitting in the front seat of the taxicab taking us all to 710 Linwood, which would be our family home for the next forty years. I saw ahead of us the steep and at that time very rocky Ramsey Hill. It terrified me to think we would even try to ascend it. At the last minute, we veered to the left and followed the streetcar line up the easier Oakland Avenue grade. No sooner had we arrived at 710 Linwood than I heard a steam locomotive puffing up the steep Milwaukee Road Short Line below the house and ran out to watch one of the many trains go by.

The period of these random recollections covers primarily the eleven years from arrival at age seven, until I left for Harvard in 1929. It was just before the great Wall Street stock market crash of October which ushered in the Great Depression that fully ended only with our entry into the Second World War in 1941.

Our family in those years included my younger siblings Ann and Henry, our parents George and Cornelia, her mother Cornelia Hollinshead, and last, but not least, our superb cook as well as maid and housekeeper, Amanda Flycht.

The Physical World of Crocus Hill

What was my St. Paul like those seventy and more years ago? The Crocus Hill neighborhood where I grew up and where I live today has changed remarkably little. The houses are the same except for those built later on the very few lots still vacant back in 1918, or occasionally to replace obsolete or abandoned homes of a previous era. Actually, many of those



The Morgans and friend photographed in an itinerant goat cart sometime early in the 1920s. Ann holds the reins; Sam, center, and Henry are in back. At right: best-friend and neighbor Sam Turner. All photos with this article are from the author, who points out that the goat cart belonged to a roving photographer.

large four-square solid Victorian "Swedish carpenter"-built homes so typical of Lincoln, Goodrich, Fairmount and Osceola Avenues, look better today than they did three-quarters of a century ago, thanks to the frequent use of contrasting colors to bring out the carvings and moldings on their facades.

The streets themselves are basically as they were those many years ago except for some of their surfaces. The Osceola Hill still has some of its old paving stones, although they all may be torn up for our current very disruptive storm sewer project. Still there and to be replaced following the sewer work is the brick paving of Kenwood Parkway. Long gone or covered up are the wooden block pavements, most of which were laid down in the early 1920s to replace the chuckhole-filled tarred streets which had

previously been usual in most of Crocus Hill. Of course, our arching elms are gone as a result of Dutch elm disease and have been replaced by maples and other species of trees on our boulevards. I can still remember the gaslights and the boy who came by each evening to light them.

It is in transportation that the greatest changes have occurred. First and foremost, I grew up in the streetcar era. By 1918 the horses and buggies had disappeared, though many old residences had and still have carriage houses facing the alleys behind them. But many of the more recently built homes, such as our 710 Linwood and those adjacent to it, had been built since about 1910 without either carriage houses or garages. Their owners relied on and expected forever after to rely entirely on our splendid big yellow cane-seated streetcars of Thomas

Lowry's Twin City Rapid Transit Company for all of their city travel needs. Until the trolley cars on most lines were converted to one-man operation, all had conductors at the rear who collected the fares, generally paid by tokens as the price of a ride gradually rose from a nickel toward a dime.

The Selby-Lake, Grand Avenue, Dale-Phalen, and St. Clair lines provided frequent service to downtown which was where everyone shopped and where most of the breadwinners worked. As the Dale Street crosstown line went only north from Grand, the Snelling Avenue crosstown line was the main connecting link for the east-west lines and there was special service for major events. I remember the long rows of cars lined up at the Twin City Lines State Fair terminal ready to carry passengers home from the Fair.

For recreation further afield, I recall the treat of being taken to Wildwood Amusement Park at White Bear Lake from whence the streetcar lines continued to White Bear Village, Mahtomedi, and Stillwater. Once a friend and I took our skis along on a winter day and skied from the end of the White Bear Village line through Dellwood to catch a car back to the city at the end of the Mahtomedi line. Besides our standard yellow cars with their open rear platforms where the men could smoke their pipes with often very foul smelling tobacco (there was never a woman there except, reputedly, Zelda Fitzgerald), there were the plush seated high speed cars of the St. Paul, Spring Lake, and Hastings electric line.

What a treat for me and my younger sister Ann was a trip on that line with our grandmother. Nostalgically, what a way to travel. No congestion, no pollution—the electricity was generated by water power at St. Anthony Falls. Nothing was more enjoyable than clicking along through the countryside on a trolley line's own right-of-way sitting by an open window enjoying the smells, not of exhaust and diesel fumes but of fall flowers and newmown hay.

Returning to Crocus Hill—the flip side of this relatively unmotorized world was the dray horse. I recall the horses hauling those heavy coal wagons up



710 Linwood, around 1930. The house is still standing, although somewhat altered.

Osceola Hill. Then, particularly at Grand and Dale on several occasions, I could see the poor horses who had been shot because of falling on slippery pavement and breaking their legs. All deliveries were made by wagon or sleigh. Early every winter my friends and I played a kind of game to see who could count the most runnered delivery vehicles. Soon they were too numerous to keep count.

Coal, ice, groceries, milk, express and department store packages were all delivered by the horse. The iceman and milkman were daily callers. We put a card in our window to show how many pounds of ice were needed. The iceman chipped a piece to the desired size, then carried it on a rubber "back apron" to our ice box. The milk, of course, came in bottles. If left outside, early on a winter morning there would be a frozen column of cream standing above the top of the bottle. Not only did wagons come by selling fresh vegetables in the summer, but for all of the children in the neighborhood, there was the popcorn wagon and the "hurdy-gurdy," a wagon-mounted organ on which a woman cranked tunes.

Not to be forgotten as a part of neighborhood entertainment was the colorful chimney sweep "Slunky Norton" who used to fascinate all of the children when he blew his bugle from the house tops. Then by way of street entertainment we

were occasionally visited by the organ grinder on foot with his monkey. So, today, though we no longer have the smell of horse manure in our neighborhoods, we have lost the color from our streets and the convenience of home delivery of everything we needed.

One other horse use which just might return to some of our neighborhoods was Policeman Mike on his horse. I well recall his once stopping me and a friend bicycling on the sidewalk. He said, "You boys know, don't you, that under the law, you should be in the street and not on the sidewalk. But you are safer on the sidewalk so I will let you go on riding there but just remember to get off your bikes when you met an old lady or a mother pushing a baby carriage." I don't know if there is anything in the federal government's 1994 crime bill for police horses, but it might not be a bad idea if they still patrolled some of our neighborhoods.

The automobile was just becoming part of daily lives. Our family was the first of those at the lower end of Linwood to have a car. So sometimes on a summer day we would crowd as many of the next-door Turner family as we could into our seven-passenger Reo touring car and head for a nearby beach, such as Lake Johanna. I still vividly remember when hot ashes from Epes Turner's pipe set fire to the back seat on one such excursion.

The Stringer family, at 696 Linwood, eventually bought a Model T Ford which Mrs. Stringer always started uphill with a roar loud enough to waken the entire block. Then there was the winter morning when the brakes gave way and Mrs. Hardenbergh's heavy electric rolled down Linwood Hill sending two other cars around one curve after another so that the Turners' touring car went right through a bowl of peaches on the billboard at Osceola and Pleasant. Through these growing up years, cars were still used largely for wives' errands and special trips. The men took the streetcar downtown to work. Only after World War II did the Twin Cities experience vast suburban sprawl encouraged by the interstate highway system and the norm become the two-car family.

In my earliest years in St. Paul, before we began spending summers on the St. Croix, the immediate neighborhood was our summer playground. Three families at our end of the block—on the south side of Linwood—the Morgans, Turners, and Stringers had a total of some fourteen children. We played the usual children's games, climbed in 710's great and still flourishing oak tree, explored the "witches' tunnel" through the thicket on the bluff below our houses and occasionally committed mischief such as climbing into the attic of an old recently abandoned house and knocking down the plaster of the second floor ceiling! Great fun! Luckily, we didn't kill ourselves.

Those long-remembered "old fashioned winters" were wonderful. The only things plowed at first were the sidewalks, cleared by horse-drawn plows, and the streetcar line arterial streets such as St. Clair which were kept clear of deep snow by the streetcar snowplows. On all other streets the snow was just packed down by traffic and left unsanded and unsalted, making fine surfaces for neighborhood sledding. These snow-packed streets were fine for the long bob-sled rides behind a team of strong horses that were a feature of the birthday parties of those of us fortunate enough to have mid-winter birthdays. Part of the fun was pushing each other off so often that we ended up doing more running than riding. Our longest hill was Osceola. You could start



The Morgan children in their back yard sometime during the early 1920s: Ann, Sam, Henry.

at the top, just east of Grotto, and after crossing Linwood, Pleasant and St. Clair shoot under the Short Line and coast a good part of the way to the intersection of Seventh and Randolph.

We Linwood kids had just our flexible flyer sleds, but the much older boys, living down in the Village, as we called the working class neighborhood below the bluff, built long, double-runner sleds with steering wheels that could carry six or more at a time and really travel at almost Olympic speed. None of us ever hit a streetcar; I guess they really didn't run that often. For a steeper but shorter slide, we had the "Twin Hills" in nearby Linwood Park. I remember how once I whizzed down lying flat on my stomach on my sled and crashed head-on at the bottom with a sledder doing the same thing, coming down the opposite slope. I went home with a very bloody lip. As we

got older we went straight down on our toe-strap skis. Now, alas, the "Twin Hills" have become a tree-filled jungle.

Skating was our other winter activity. While there was a very large sunken rink on the south side of Grand between Oxford and Lexington, my friends and I in our younger years skated on a rink on a smaller vacant neighborhood lot on Crocus Place. My strongest recollection of skating there is how cold it always was. I don't recall any "warming house."

The Social World of Crocus Hill

No story of growing up in St. Paul can adequately tell the story of what that was like in the 1920s in the established upper middle class affluent Crocus Hill neighborhood without giving a picture of the kind of families who lived there. When I say the Crocus Hill neighborhood, in this

context I really mean St. Paul Society, because practically all of the prominent members of the business and professional community did live in Crocus Hill and its easterly extension down Summit Avenue. There were a scattered few living along outer Summit, Lincoln, or Goodrich but the Mississippi River Boulevard south of the St. Paul Seminary at Summit was nothing but a wonderful woods where our mother and grandmother used to take us in the spring to study and pick the wild flowers.

Except for the great Crosby home known as Stonebridge, the early Riser's old stone farmhouse still standing, much modified, at Randolph and Woodlawn, and the notorious Hollyhocks, famous as a prohibition era gangster hideout, the south River Boulevard was unbuilt on.

Highland Park was open, undeveloped land. We freely roamed over it, except for the home of Dr. and Mrs. Colvin, the latter an ardent suffragette and Democrat, and the adjacent old Davern farmhouse then occupied practically in its original primitive condition by my parents' close friends, the Harvey Fullers, who made a modest living from their (then) little H. B. Fuller Company wallpaper paste business down on Third Street.

I do recall sometime in the early 1920s riding with my parents through a sea of mud to visit Pierce Butler, Jr., and his wife, Hilda, in their new home, the first to be built on Edgcombe Road. The only "St. Paulites" I can think of who lived outside the city were the Kleins on Dixie Slope (now the home of Olivia Dodge and the Dodge Nature Center) on Delaware Avenue out in the then mostly rural West St. Paul and the Albert Harmons on Lake Elmo. Harmon and Klein were the proprietors of Webb Publishing Company, publishers of *The Farmer* magazine.

Coming back to Crocus Hill, which basically was St. Paul in terms of business and the social life, the children my sister, my brother and I played with, went to school with and later danced with, were from the families of lawyers, doctors, and merchants. As to the latter, it is easy to recall names such as Gordon & Ferguson; Griggs Cooper; Finch, Van Slyke and McConville; Lindeke Warner;

G. Sommers; Farwell Ozman and Kirk; Noyes Brothers and Cutler; (wholesalers); Great Northern, Northern Pacific and Omaha; (railroads); St. Paul Fire & Marine Insurance Company; West Publishing Company; the Golden Rule, Emporium, Field-Schlick, Schuneman and Evans, Mannheimers; Kennedy Bros. Arms; Browning King; St. Paul Book & Stationery (retailers); the brewers, Schmidts and Hamms; Cushing and Driscoll and Cathcart & Maxwell, (real estate); Seeger Refrigerator, Bohm Refrigerator; Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company; Weyerhaeuser Timber. The owners and executives of these firms, along with many of the well-known doctors and lawyers in St. Paul, their wives and their children were the people who lived in and grew up together in Crocus Hill.

The mansions on Summit Avenue tended to be the homes of the business leaders. Lawyers and doctors, in those days of relatively modest professional incomes, resided largely south of Summit. For example, our block on Linwood included the homes of a number of lawyers and judges. The next block on Linwood was known as Pill Alley with the homes of several doctors in a row there.

For the younger generation, school was the way most of us in the Crocus Hill neighborhood were brought together. I began my St. Paul schooling at the 1884 Irving School at Grand and Grotto. How I envied those older Hosford girls who had their classes in "temporaries" where the ink in the wells was frozen when they arrived in the morning!

Beginning in the third grade at the old Junior Academy on Dale Street and continuing with prep through sixth form (sixth through twelfth grade) at the Country Day School at 1712 Randolph (really in the country then), my whole schooling was at St. Paul Academy (SPA) as was my younger brother's. My sister went through Summit School, which, with Royal Moore's Oak Hall School on Holly Avenue, gave an equivalent college preparation education to girls.

Now Summit and SPA have consolidated and Oak Hall is long gone. A few of our friends attended Central High School where, in fact, some of the teach-

ers compared more than favorably with some of the private school teachers of the same subjects. Then we would all, boys and girls, Central, Summit, SPA, sit together in the hot Summit gym for our three years of "old-plan" college boards.

So, I, like most of my Crocus Hill contemporaries, often recall the many homes, both older and newer, of this long-established familiar neighborhood. There was the fine colonial mansion of the McDonnell family at Summit and Lexington (replaced by the Greek Orthodox Church after the house burned), and the Irvine home (now the Governor's mansion). There were days spent on the third floor of the Ames house on Grand Hill (which with its comfortable, capacious "spread" reminded one of pictures of Queen Victoria at the time of her Diamond Jubilee); in summer we would climb to the top-most level of its wonderful tree house (described in one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's short stories). We had our dancing classes on the third floor ballroom in the then home of the Samuel Shepards on lower Summit Avenue.

The occupants of these mansions, of course, had several servants in that now seemingly distant time before the age of dishwashers, dryers, ready-to-cook food, natural gas and electric refrigerators. Even families of modest circumstance had at least one maid who did the cooking and much of the housework. And so all of the social and educational interrelations of this Crocus Hill Society made it seem, at least to those of us growing up there, to be one Society. Certainly I had my own personal problems, but I never had the feeling of being an outsider that Scott Fitzgerald seemed so often to have endured.

This society was, of course, a largely "WASP" society, but it also included Irish and German Catholics and Jews, whether practicing or "fallen away." In fact, I don't recall my being aware of the existence of any bias toward either the Catholics or the Jews until I went East to college. Recent articles have, in fact, pointed out that there had long been a tradition of tolerance in St. Paul that was, until very recently, lacking across the river.

We, of course, realized there were

worlds in St. Paul outside Crocus Hill. Immediately below the hill and across the tracks in the "Village," were working class families such as that of Vincent Bednar from Bohemia who daily trudged up the hill to tend the coal-fired furnaces of Crocus Hill families and then managed a college education for his children. But most of us did not fully realize until later in life how fortunate we were and how smug and, yes, sometimes snobbish, some were in that small world of long ago before diversity became the politically correct view of society.

As I think back, perhaps we grandchildren of (our grandmother), Cornelia Hollinshead, had a very special feeling of "being St. Paul" as we listened to her stories of our Hollinshead, Baker, and Sanborn ancestors and relatives and others who had been prominent citizens back in the later 1800s. Her recollections of the early Winter Carnivals gave us, I'm now sure, a special feeling of being part of St. Paul, which is still with some of us.

This St. Paul world I grew up in was still essentially the world of Scott Fitzgerald that he so eloquently described. Incidentally, Scott and I have several things in common, including having our first stories published in the "Now and Then" (the St. Paul Academy student paper). Scott, however, later had the benefit of having St. Paul Academy's headmaster, John DeQ Briggs, "critique" his first success, *This Side of Paradise*, when he was working on it at 599 Summit Avenue.

I can best describe my remembrance of my college-period St. Paul social life by adapting slightly Scott's oft read description in *The Great Gatsby* of his own return for the Christmas holidays here.

One of my most vivid memories is of coming back west from college at Christmas time. . . . I remember the girls returning from Smith or Vassar . . . as we caught sight of old acquaintances and the matching of invitations, "Are you going to the Ordways'? the Herseys'? the Schultzes'?" and the long green tickets clasped tight in our gloved hands. And last the murky yellow cars of the Chicago, Milwaukee, & St. Paul Railroad looking cheerful as Christmas itself on the tracks beside the gate.

When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules. That's my middle-west.

Because many of us growing up in Crocus Hill went off to Eastern colleges in that era, all the big dances and coming out parties were concentrated in the short, very cold and snowy Christmas holidays. So that Christmas return home was not only Scott Fitzgerald's. All of us who grew up in that society and in that era will always remember it as a special part of growing up in St. Paul.

Finally these very personal recollections of the small social world of Crocus Hill would not be complete without mentioning the Puritan influences in this city, often referred to as the "Boston of the West." Many of these families were of New England/Yankee descent and carried forward, even sometimes to their offspring, the concepts of hard work and social responsibility that were part of their New England heritage.

We had mentors to teach us these values and traditions. John DeQ Briggs, headmaster of the St. Paul Academy, was the son of LeBaron Russell Briggs, Harvard dean and professor of English, and sometime president of Radcliffe College. Briggs opened the day with the entire school joining in a short hymn and responsive reading, followed by Briggs reading from one of his favorite authors. The curriculum was limited to those subjects necessary for admission to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton. A certain number of demerits meant coming back on Saturday to chop wood. In later years I got to know John Briggs as a warm friend with many talents. His opposite number (Sarah Converse) at Summit School for girls ran an equally tight ship but, perhaps because of her Southern background, not only gave her students a somewhat more varied curriculum but also made a point of bringing to her school outside lecturers such as Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd of South Pole fame and Frank Lloyd Wright, the

founder of the Prairie School of domestic architecture. I well recall in my very early years in St. Paul going on a Summit Elementary School field trip and finding fossils of early sea life embedded in clay high above the Mississippi River at the Westside Brickworks, now part of Harriet Island-Lilydale Regional Park.

Then for many in the immediate circle of my family and their close friends there was Frederick May Eliot, minister of our Unitarian Church at Portland and Grotto. Frederick Eliot, a warm friend with a rare magnetic personality, brought many people to his church. He was far more than just a parish minister. He was a direct descendant of William Greenleaf Eliot, founder of Washington University in St. Louis; a cousin of T. S. Eliot, the poet, and a relative of Charles William Eliot, president of Harvard, who in forty years brought it from a small New England College to a world class university. Frederick Eliot was an active citizen, organizer of civic discussion groups, and seen by many as just the person who should be mayor of St. Paul.

Did not these "mentors" plant seeds of social responsibility that years later bore fruit in unforeseen ways? For example, two of the men most responsible for my own involvement in park activities, the late Thomas Cochran Savage and Reuel D. Harmon, both experienced John Briggs at SPA, and Frederick Eliot at Unity Church. Three of the seven members of the Metropolitan Park Reserve Board, a supporting organization to the Metropolitan Council in its early years, were members of Unity Church.

So, as I look back on my years of growing up in this Crocus Hill neighborhood, I have a feeling that it was a community in a way that all too few areas of sprawling suburbia are today. It will be tragic for our country if too many of us lose this sense of responsibility for the future of those who come after us.

Samuel H. Morgan is a retired St. Paul attorney. This is his second article for Ramsey County History. His history of the creation of the Fort Snelling State Park appeared in the Summer, 1993, issue of the magazine.



Mayor George Latimer and Garrison Keillor do their own inimitable thing during The Saint Paul Public Library's 100th anniversary celebration in 1982, an event which launched The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library on a new era of expansive growth. Keillor was chairman of the 100th Anniversary Honorary Committee. For a history of The Friends, see the article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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