

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

The Story of  
Yoerg's Final Decades,  
1933-1952

Page 16

Summer, 1996

Volume 31, Number 2

*St. Paul's Renowned Ensemble*

The Chamber Orchestra's First Ten Years

Page 4

SAINT PAUL  
CHAMBER ORCHESTRA  
Leopold Sipe, Conductor



BONGO DIVERTIMENTO  
GENE GUTCHE                      OPUS 35

A COMEDY CANTATA  
NOTHING BUT NATURE  
OGDEN NASH                      PAUL FETLER  
with the Hamline University Choir • Robert Holliday, Director

SYMPHONY IN D MAJOR  
JOSEPH HAYDN                      "THE HUNT"

HIGH FIDELITY

Jacket for The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's first recording on January 24, 1965. By that time the orchestra had taken root in the community. The recording was made to increase its national recognition, its touring, and its size as an ensemble. See article beginning on page 4.

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 31, Number 2

Summer, 1996

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

**S**t. Paul and Ramsey County have had a long tradition of support for the arts. Today, for example, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (SPCO) is world renowned, with a reputation and stature that reflects its musical excellence. However, as Glenn Perachio shows in his history of the SPCO's first ten years (1959-1970), which leads this issue, the orchestra definitely has had its ups and downs in coming to earn this respect and support. Our Summer issue also celebrates the 150th anniversary of the beginning of Swedish mass immigration to North America with John Larson's reminiscences about his grandfather, Joel, a Swedish immigrant who spent his working life in St. Paul. Rounding out this issue is Jim Bell's close-up look at the last years of the nearly forgotten Yoerg Brewery—a St. Paul landmark for much of the first half of this century.

*John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board*

## Growing Up in St. Paul

# Grandfather Joel Larson—Swedish Immigrant— That ‘Mysterious Stranger in Our Midst’

John W. Larson

When she died, my Grandmother Alma left behind several dozen scrap books and photo albums, along with several boxes of old correspondence to help in reconstructing her interests and fancies between her childhood in the 1880s and her death in 1965. When he died in 1947, Grandfather Joel left artifacts: his lunch pail, a pewter snuff box, his tools, including some enormous pipe wrenches, his copper cooker for distilling moonshine, and a time-worn billfold containing only the few papers he considered important. Then, too, there is my memory of him.

In my memory, grandfather seemed very much at home in the big white house on Jessamine Street. I now suspect that outside the family and when not with fellow workers at the Great Northern Railroad Shops at Dale and Minnehaha, he may have felt out of place. Except for his membership in the Railway Sheet Metal Workers Union, he was not a joiner and he did not seem to have a circle of friends. Since he hardly ever talked about himself or of his past, I now think of him as something of a mysterious stranger in our midst, someone I would have liked to have known better. I knew him best in the early years of the Great Depression.

I saw grandfather nearly every day during the Depression years because in April, 1933, we, my father Walter, my mother Vivian, and my nine-year-old self, moved into a small old house at the corner of Jessamine and Courtland Streets, next door to my grandparents. My mother called our house the “little house” to distinguish it from my grandparents’ larger and more modern home-stead next door. Our house had no central heating, no hot running water, and one could see into the basement through the cracks between the boards of the kitchen floor.



*The author with his Swedish grandfather, New Year's day, 1947. All photos in this article are from the author.*

The little house's rent was \$20 a month. Twenty dollars was a lot of cash during the Depression, but together, my grandparents' household and ours economized in a number of ways. We shared a newspaper, the *St. Paul Daily News*, with my grandparents, we shared grandmother's telephone (she needed one for her lodge work), and we frequently ate our evening meals together in grandmother's large kitchen with its big, black combination wood and gas burning range.

These were meat and potato meals, of course, supplemented in summer with whatever vegetables the garden produced, mostly carrots, corn, and fresh tomatoes, and in winter with carrots that had been stored in a bin of sand kept in the basement, and home-canned tomatoes. After a large meal, when the rest of us had finished eating, we waited while grandfather took one last piece of white bread, spread it thickly with grand-

mother's jelly, and while eating this, celebrated, I now know, a delicacy that was rare in the rural Sweden of his childhood. In those days, Swedish farm families saved wheat flour for baking on high holidays, whereas America was the land where one ate white bread every day of the year, even during the Depression.

I absorbed a good deal of random information at the supper table in grandmother's kitchen. As a youngster I wouldn't have known there was a Depression if grown-ups hadn't talked about it. Nor would I have learned the importance in the family chronicle of grandfather's participation in the railroad shopmen's strike of 1922.

After grandfather died in the spring of 1947, I was given his old billfold. There hadn't been much money in it for many years. There was an old driving permit, and a number of expired fishing licenses, but also his 1922 membership card in Local Union Number 154 of the Amalgamated Sheet Metal Worker's International Alliance, and an “Honor Card”, issued by the union, certifying that he had gone on strike on July 1, 1922, and that he had remained loyal until the strike's termination. Grandfather carried these cards with him for a quarter of a century. Along with his departure from Sweden for America in 1892 and his marriage to my grandmother in 1899, grandfather's participation in the shopmen's strike of 1922 was among the most decisive episodes in his life.

The railroad shopmen's strike of 1922 was nationwide, and perhaps the greatest strike of the decade. Across the country, on July 1, some 400,000 railroad shopcraft workers went out. Within weeks their numbers may have grown as high as 600,000. The strikers had a number of grievances, among them a demand for higher wages. Railroad shopcraft

wages were lower, strikers claimed, than those paid for comparable work in other industries. Strikers also wanted overtime pay for Sunday and holiday work.

In St. Paul the shopcraft unions enjoyed the public sympathy of a substantial segment of the general populace. Nevertheless, when it was over on September 11 the unions had lost the strike. The extent to which the Great Northern then followed a deliberate policy of weeding out what they considered undesirable workers is not known. Yet, when the strike was over, only a little better than one man in four returned to work at the Great Northern shops. Repentent strikers who were allowed to return to their crafts were denied seniority based on the years they had worked prior to the union walkout.\*

Grandfather was among those strikers who were permitted to return to work in September, 1922. He had gone on strike but was no agitator. But then, in 1932, with only a few weeks short of thirty years with the Great Northern, he was let go. Without the strike he would have been eligible, after thirty years, for a pension. He got nothing. Social Security did not yet exist and in the depths of the Great Depression there seemed no hope of his ever finding another job.

Eventually, in 1935, Grandfather Joel did find employment with the Works Progress Administration, the WPA. He worked six hours a day at 55 cents an hour, digging and laying stone rip-rap for a canal near Lake Vadnis, north of St. Paul, and related in some way to the city's water supply system.

In those days WPA work was the butt of numerous jokes, and was frequently looked on, even by working class people, as public charity for otherwise unemployed men who typically stood about, leaning on their shovels, and doing nothing. I don't know why it was so. Perhaps it was the novelty to that generation of a federal program for the unemployed.

Whatever other WPA workers might have done, grandfather was determined

\*For details see "The 1922 Shopmen's Strike in St. Paul and the Northwest" by Thomas White in the Spring, 1992, issue of Ramsey County History.

to earn his pay. Years afterwards I met an older man who had worked on the same Lake Vadnis project as my grandfather. He told me that Joel had had a reputation on the job for doing the work of half-a-dozen men. He said that Joel's friend and fellow worker, a Norwegian named John Lien, was also a hard worker but a greater talker, one who took every opportunity to spread a particularly radical brand of politics.

I remembered John Lien. In the mid-1930s he and my grandfather would sit in their shirt sleeves on long summer evenings on a bench at the back entrance to the big house and argue for hours. I could sense that it was all good humored and not alarming though it was unusual for grandfather to bring friends home and, though not morose, he was seldom so talkative.

My father explained to me that John Lien was probably a communist. Perhaps so, but I doubt it, and Joel, as I later discovered, was a paid up member of the Farmer-Labor Association, a uniquely Minnesota political party that, in the 1920s, had replaced the Democrats as Minnesota's principal opposition party. The railroad workers who had been defeated in the 1920s strike, and their sympathizers, became a significant part of the labor element in the Farmer-Labor equation. Joining the Farmer-Labor party was as radical as grandfather ever became.

Men like John Lien and Grandfather Joel left little behind with which to reconstruct their thoughts and measure their impact on the world around them. Joel's membership card in the Farmer-Labor Association survived by chance among my grandmother's things. More amusing, though, was the survival of two unsigned drawings, cartoons, in fact, of John Lien and Joel Larson, drawn, perhaps, for some local WPA publication and showing them in what must have been characteristic attitudes.

In one cartoon John Lien stands on a soap box addressing a small boy, about my age then, and a spotted dog, on the Constitution and the "whims and fancies of our representatives." In the second cartoon Joel Larson is so intent at shoveling in a ditch that he does not notice that water is rising around him and soon will

reach the level of his mustache. Crude documents, perhaps, of popular culture, the cartoons nevertheless preserve characteristics of these two friends as seen by their 1930s contemporaries.

Even with his WPA work grandfather had lots of time on his hands. I see him now, a big man with reddish hair, an open shirt and loose-fitting work trousers held up by broad suspenders, turning over the dirt near the apple tree at the back of the garden in order to bury the household garbage, perhaps, or in the barn, for the umpteenth time, rebuilding the motor of his Model A Ford.

Grandfather seldom bothered with the radio. On winter afternoons I would find him in his comfortable chair in the dining room alcove near the radiator and next to a bay window looking out on the yard and our little house next door. Most often, he would be reading a pulp western. At the time this seemed a perfectly natural thing for him to do. I read pulp westerns, too. Only later did I begin to wonder why he never read anything in Swedish.

I concluded that once grandfather was no longer able to get away to the familiar atmosphere of the shops and the companionship of the men he worked with, the westerns were an antidote to the enforced domesticity of his daily routine. I believe that grandfather returned to his youth in the westerns he read, not to his youth in Sweden, but to a youthful fantasy of masculine freedom that, as an eighteen-year-old, he had brought with him to the New World. This was not something he and I could have discussed, but I believe that as a boy I was beginning work on a similar fantasy, and that this created a bond of unspoken sympathy between us.

\* \* \*

Once a week during the summers of those early years of the Great Depression I climbed up into the passenger seat of grandfather's Model A Ford. He would adjust the spark and choke levers on the steering wheel, manipulate the three pedals on the floor, put the car in gear and we would slowly drive off, eastward on Jesamine, over the railroad tracks to Payne Avenue. There, at the Master Baking Company outlet near where the Salvation Army store is today, he bought day-old



Joel Larson at age fifty-six, May, 1929.

bread and the sweet rolls we both liked. I also accompanied him on trips to get ice at the railroad yards, and to a small piece of land north of the city that had been lent to him by a friend as a place to grow corn and vegetables.

Grandmother was nervous about Joel's expeditions in his Model A. Small as I was, she encouraged me to accompany him. I didn't know why. Then, as I grew older, I forgot about it and no longer spent much time with grandfather. In April, 1938, when I was nearly fifteen, he celebrated his sixty-fifth birthday. Sadly, I don't even remember the event but grandmother wrote about it to Aunt Maybelle who was living out west.

"Pa is kind of blue these days when one doesn't know where one is at. Some men get laid off on pension at 65 and others don't, so that's that." In a quaint blend of Swedish and English, grandfather added a few lines of his own. "Hallo Mable," he wrote, "I want to tank you for the nice birthday card and the two bucks. The big card was a Humdinger. I am 65 years old today." He signed it "Dad X X X X X". Of his children, Maybelle was grandfather's favorite.

After graduating from high school in June, 1941, I went on to college. I don't know what grandfather thought of this. It was a world he had never penetrated, even in his imagination. The war started that December but I was able to hold out at college until, in May of 1943, I was

drafted into the army for the duration of the war. No one knew then what "duration" might mean.

My father was proud to have a son in the service, and I sensed, because he had missed the First World War, a little jealous, too. He had wanted to enlist in the marines in 1918 when he was only seventeen but grandfather had refused to sign the papers that would have allowed him to join up. I don't know what grandfather thought about my going off to war but he was there when our troop train, loaded with draftees on their way to basic training, pulled away from a siding near Fort Snelling. In my memory, grandfather stands out as a silent witness to that event. I don't clearly remember who else was there to say goodbye.

While I was in the service, my mother regularly wrote of developments at home. Others in the family sent an occasional note, perhaps with a box of homemade cookies for birthdays and other special occasions. Only now do I remember that in one letter mother mentioned that grandfather had been sick. I was too preoccupied with my own circumstances in the army to write back and ask, "What do you mean 'sick'?", and she never volunteered to elaborate. I'm convinced now that he had had a stroke.

After I was mustered out of the army in 1946 I spent some time at home before going off to Pennsylvania to finish college on the G.I. Bill. Grandfather seemed unchanged. I was saddened, though, to learn that his Model A had been sold. Now he spent much more time in his chair next to the bay window in the dining room, but he wasn't feeble or anything like that. However, when I came home for Easter in the spring of 1947 I did sense a difference.

My mother and father no longer lived in the little house. They had moved into the big house with my grandparents. I stayed there, too, for the entire week and while my parents were away working at my father's shop, and grandmother was out, I was alone in the house with grandfather. As I moved about the house, if I walked through the dining room, grandfather watched me as though he had something in particular he wanted to tell me.

Then, late one afternoon as grandfather and I were standing in the kitchen and looking out of the window onto the back yard and the barn, he quietly said, "If I had known that the children would all leave home one day, I wouldn't have built such a large house." I was flattered. I had never experienced him speaking thus, in confidence, to anyone. But was that all? Was there something else he had wanted to say? I'll never know. Yet it was not so much this incident that moved me but something he did later, something that surprised the entire family.

Easter vacation over, I was about to take a bus down to the Union Depot to catch my train back East. My parents were busy with other things and could not see me off. No calamity, really, I was competent to manage on my own. But grandfather disapproved of such a casual leave-taking. He insisted on accompanying me to the station. We shuffled off, the two of us, and I noticed for the first time how slowly he walked. I don't remember what we talked about, but when we reached the depot, before sending him off to catch the bus back home, I had an impulse to kiss him, and did. This was no small matter in our Swedish family, quite out of character. I hadn't kissed grandfather since I was four years old. Then he turned and I watched him disappear up Fourth Street. Two weeks later he died of a heart attack.

I got the news in a telegram at college, a small but demanding place. One couldn't just disappear. I took leave of the Dean. I didn't ask him, I told him I was going home. Then, after the long train ride back to St. Paul, I was again at the Union Depot. I followed the route up Fourth Street that grandfather had taken two weeks earlier and caught the north bound bus at Jackson Street. I found the house on Jessamine filled with family. Aunt Maybelle had come home from out West. All necessary arrangements had been made.

There was a large crowd at the funeral home. I wouldn't have guessed it. Besides the Larson family, there was my mother's family, long-time neighbors, grandfather's fellow workers from the Dale Street Shops, and friends and associates of my father's. I stood to one side

when Grandmother Alma, alone and dry eyed, approached the open casket. She laid one hand on grandfather's lifeless hands and said but one word, "Pa." She stood there for a while with her hand on grandfather's, and then, without looking up, went back to her seat.

Grandfather was interred at St. Paul's largely Swedish Union Cemetery. The grave site was one of a plot of eight purchased by Alma's Swedish father, Martin Johnson, when his Swedish wife, grandmother's mother Hanna, died in 1892. Grandmother buried her father, the original "Pa", alongside Hanna in 1916. Now, Joel's burial brought to a close the immigrant phase of Larson family history.

After the graveside service, family and friends came to the house on Jesamine for coffee and such refreshments as the neighbors provided. A handful of newcomers arrived solemn and hushed. But as old timers, once close to one another through ties of blood or friendship, gathered in the bright, familiar rooms, something of the original spirit of the house prevailed. The hum of long remembered voices recalling events and retelling old stories was broken early on by an occasional chuckle. Before long chuckles gave way to outbursts of spontaneous laughter, reminiscent of the best times in the old house.

Since there was no one of my generation with whom I could share my feelings about grandfather's passing, I was free to follow random thoughts of my own. I went down into the basement, the area of the house most closely associated in my mind with grandfather. I recognized the familiar, damp odor of brewer's yeast and moonshine mash. I hesitated by the coal bin which was filled with the same carbo-coke briquette we burned in both our houses during the Depression years.

Indoors in the winter, grandfather kept the house warmer than grandmother preferred. To preclude complaints from her and to save on fuel, he sometimes used a hack saw to cut old tires into suitable lengths and tossed the pieces into the furnace at four in the morning, hoping that, at that hour, neighbors would not notice the black smoke belching from the chimney. The burning rubber made a horrible stench, I'm sure. But by the time grand-

mother and the neighbors were up, wind had usually dissipated the smoke. Inside the house, a hot water heating system kept radiators and grandfather toasty warm well into late morning. Grandfather had a roguish side.

The coal bin reminded me of yet another family story, one that reached back well before my time to the years preceding the First World War. In 1917 my father was a machinist apprentice in the Great Northern's Dale Street Shops and later told me how he and grandfather were paid in those days. On payday a special train, with rifle bearing guards on its roof, pulled up and parked on a siding next to the shops. At a whistle blast workers inside the shops came out and lined up next to the pay car.

Once inside the car each worker in turn gave his name and number to the paymaster who, after consulting his records, directed an assistant to fetch the appropriate sum from a large pile of gold coins at the back of the car. Pay was always rounded out in denominations of gold coins. Coins of smaller sums and baser metal than gold, were not used, nor was paper. The assistant counted out the worker's pay on the table in front of the seated paymaster, and the worker standing on the other side of the table picked up the gold coins and moved on.

Grandfather brought the gold coins home in a well-worn leather coin purse and went down into the basement. There, he shoveled coal around in the coal bin until he uncovered a heavy, black piece of iron pipe, about ten inches long, three inches in diameter, and closed at each threaded end with massive, screwed on covers. Once he had put the coins safely inside, he threw the pipe back into the bin and covered it with coal.

Grandfather had made this sturdy, improvised bank at the Dale Street Shops. Men employed at the shops commonly had small projects of their own which they, or a fellow worker with special skills, completed on railroad time with railroad materials. In this way grandfather had acquired his copper boiler for making moonshine. It was the beautifully executed work of a Danish coppersmith employed at the shops. Once the First World War started, clandestine projects

like this were commonly called "government work."

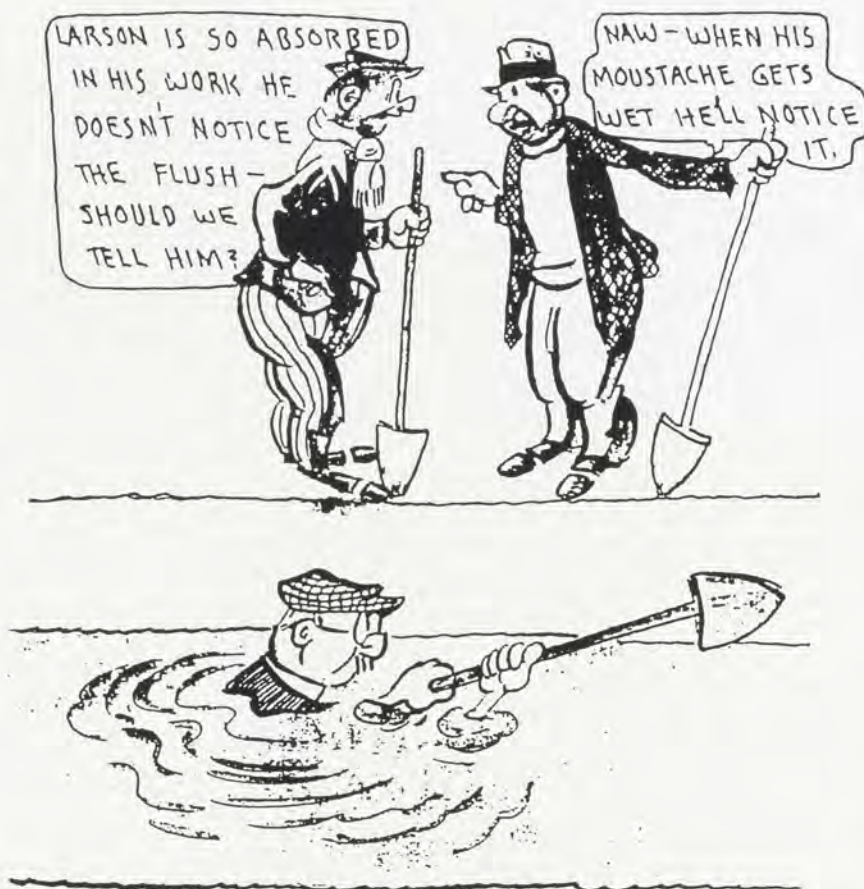
Even before the war, grandmother paid the household bills. Personal checking accounts were rare in working class families, credit cards unknown. She paid in person and in cash and to do so she made a special trip by trolley into the center of town. The night before, grandfather went down to the coal bin, located his iron pipe and extracted the sum grandmother required. Grandmother put the gold coins into a small, soft, yellow chamois bag with a black draw string which, before she left for town, she pinned inside her bodice.

The Great Northern Railroad stopped paying in gold and started to pay Dale Street Shops workers by check during the First World War. Some years later, in May of 1933, it simply became illegal to use gold to meet financial obligations, or even to own the coins. By the mid-1930s Grandfather's coal bin bank was already no more than a reminder of a by-gone era.

By-gone eras were on my mind as I reached the landing on my way up from the basement. Grandfather's work clothes hung there, a blue denim jacket, his baggy work trousers, a blue work shirt, just as he had hung them up after last wearing them. I resisted a temptation to smell them. I knew anyway that they would smell of Copenhagen Snuff. I ignored the straggling guests still talking in the dining room and went directly upstairs to grandfather's bedroom. It was remarkable for its spartan lack of any personal touch.

Some of grandfather's clothes still hung in the closet, new clothes, things that he had hardly ever worn. Grandfather's wallet lay ignored on his bureau. I opened it and sorted through its contents. There were the cards I've already mentioned, but also one that exposed a major family secret and drew me closer to the old man than I had ever been in his lifetime. On one of those cards normally provided in a newly bought billfold, grandfather had dutifully filled out lines for one's name and address. I recognized his hand writing, but then, at the bottom, in large letters, he had added. "I AM AN EPILEPTIC"

It was these words, particularly at that



A cartoon of Joel Larson. Where it appeared is not recorded, but he is shown in what must have been a characteristic attitude.

moment, that drew me closer to grandfather. For how many years, I wondered, had he been obliged to suffer, in secret, under the uncertainty of when he might experience an epileptic seizure? In secret, I suppose, because in those days ordinary people had little understanding of the causes of epilepsy, and by some the condition was associated with debauchery, depravity, and immorality generally.

Such thoughts added a new perspective, a near heroic stature, to grandfather. His epilepsy also explained why grandmother had been so eager for me to ac-

*John W. Larson of Taylors Falls is a retired public relations officer for the United States department of defense. His two earlier accounts of his Swedish immigrant ancestors appeared in the Winter and Spring, 1994, issues of Ramsey County History.*

company grandfather on our Model A expeditions in the early 1930s. She must have been desperate at the thought of grandfather driving alone about town, otherwise she might have considered how little help I would have been, and the effect on me, should grandfather have had a sudden epileptic seizure while driving.

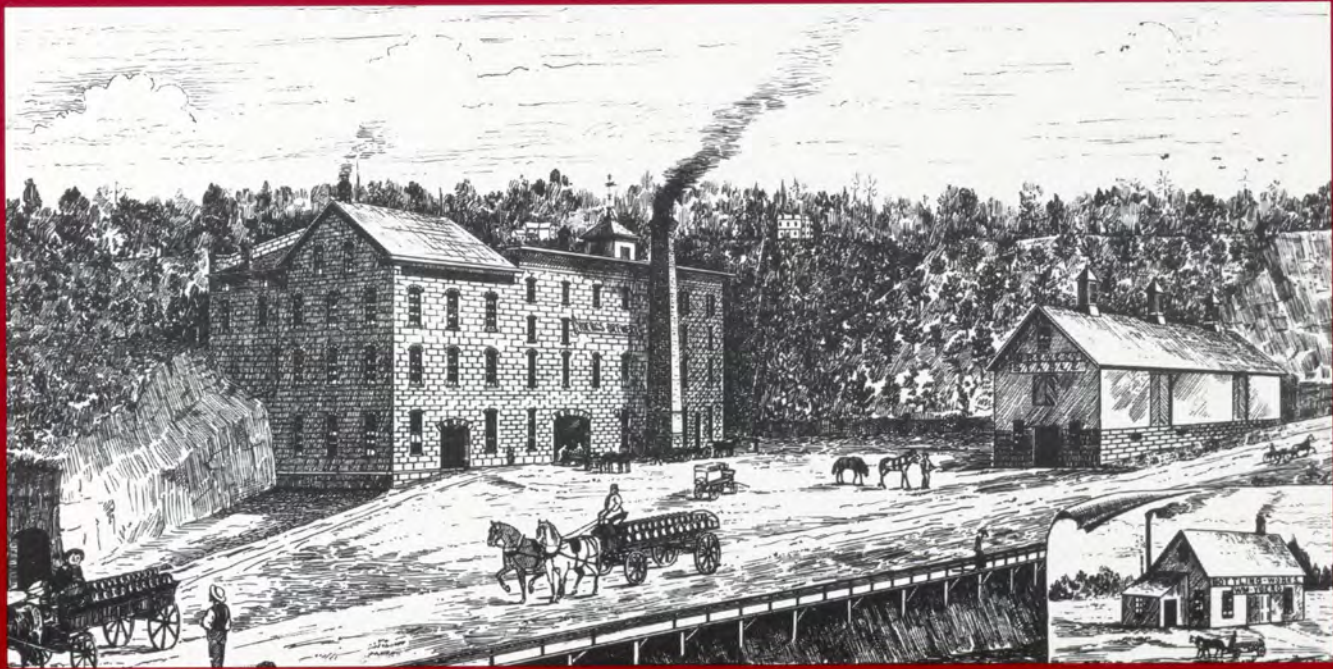
I also wondered what other family secrets had been kept from me, and whether a tendency to suppress unpleasant memories explained why grandfather never talked about his childhood and early youth in Sweden. On the train, on my way back East to college, thoughts of grandfather's epilepsy and other family secrets soon faded before concern for the classes I'd missed, for term papers due, and the need to get on with my own life. Still, the unanswered questions remained and over the years I returned to them again and again.

*Yoerg's from page 22*

1848 until Anthony Yoerg's death in 1896, was marked by the momentum and success unleashed by the founder. Doubtless the firm was propelled in large part by the substantial number of German immigrants who settled in St. Paul after 1850, a treasured reservoir of customers.

After Yoerg died, his son-in-law, John A. Seeger, and his sons in turn contributed to a strong second phase of the company's history, a period of vitality and profit from 1896 to 1920, which was brought to a close by the enactment of the Prohibition amendment to the Constitution. The third stage covers the years between 1920 and 1933 when the production and sale of alcoholic beverages were outlawed. The final era of the company's experience, the years between 1933 and 1952, were launched with the hope of somehow rekindling Yoerg's success as a brewery before 1920. Alas, the hope never met the reality; circumstances and tastes had changed. With the advantage of perfect hindsight, we know that Yoerg's, from its rebirth in 1933, was destined to fail along the way. New public tastes in beer consumption, more efficient means of production, and new styles of marketing products marked a distinctive change for Yoerg's from its experience before 1920. Under financed, caught without an adequate business plan and immune to adjusting to new conditions, the company drifted on turbulent but shallow waters for nearly twenty years. A bridge was never built between the firm's era of success before Prohibition and the years which followed the nation's social experiment. Its death was lingering and painful, but hardly unexpected on November 25, 1952.

*James B. Bell wrote the history of the Seeger Refrigerator Company which appeared in the Spring, 1995, issue of Ramsey County History, and the history of Norwest Bank, St. Paul, for the Fall, 1995, issue of the magazine. A St. Paul native, he teaches history at Princeton University in New Jersey and currently is on leave to teach at Oxford University, England.*



*Anthony Yoerg's brewery as it looked in 1886. From Northwest Magazine for November of that year. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See article beginning on page 16.*

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