

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

Life on the Farm:  
A Changing World With  
Changing Fortunes

Page 13

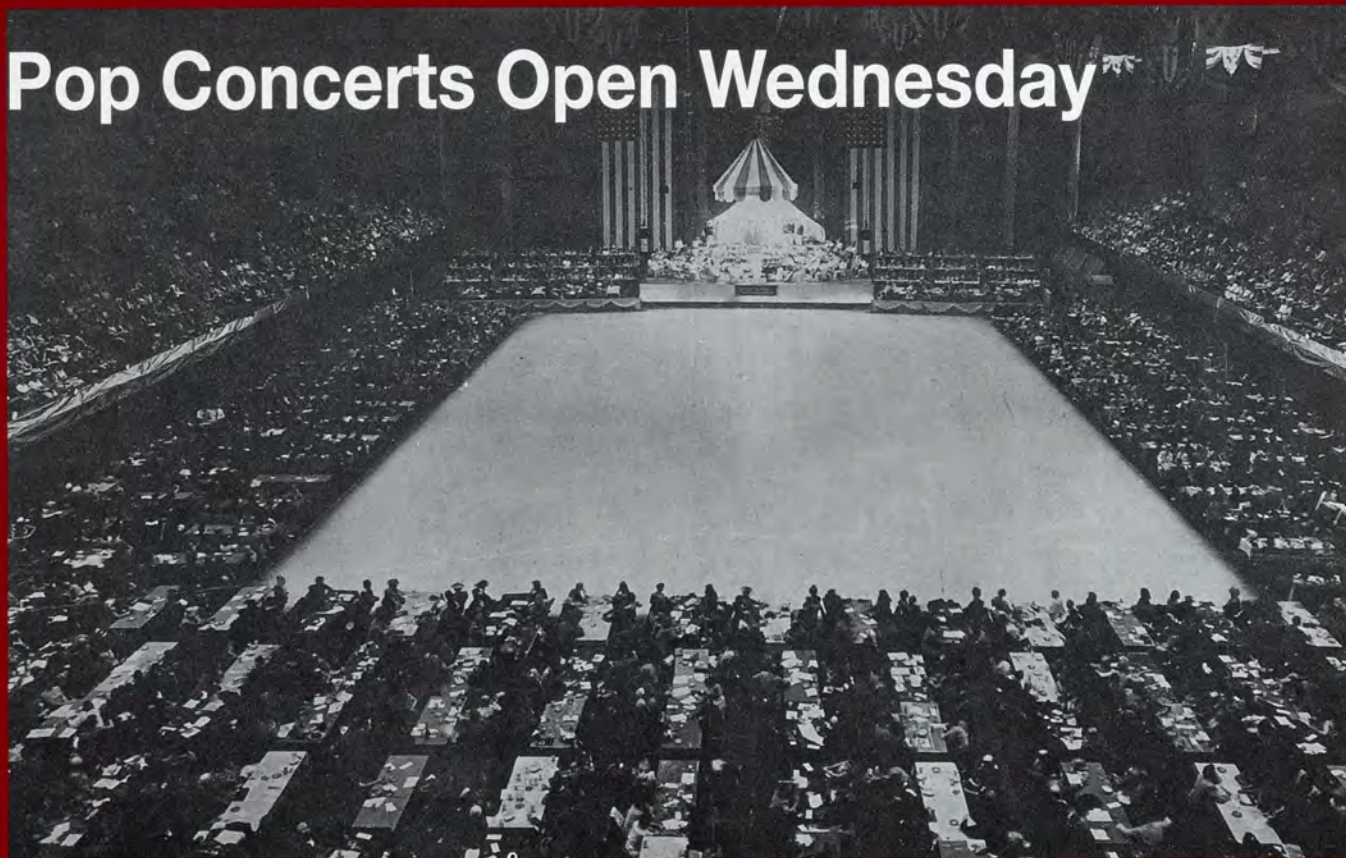
Summer, 1999

Volume 34, Number 2

*Escaping the Heat on a Hot Night*  
The St. Paul Figure Skating Club and  
Those Popular Summer Pop Concerts

—Page 4

**Pop Concerts Open Wednesday**



St. Paul's Pop Concerts were famous nationwide, the St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press noted in its rotogravure section for July 18, 1943. "Literally the only show of its kind in the world," the newspaper reported that the St. Paul Pops was a cooperative venture. St. Paul supplied the Auditorium arena, the Figure Skating Club the talent "for the spectacular ice shows," the Civic Opera provided the chorus, and the Musicians' Association the seventy-piece orchestra, many of them members of the Minneapolis Symphony." See article beginning on page 4.

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 34, Number 2

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## Message from Editorial Board

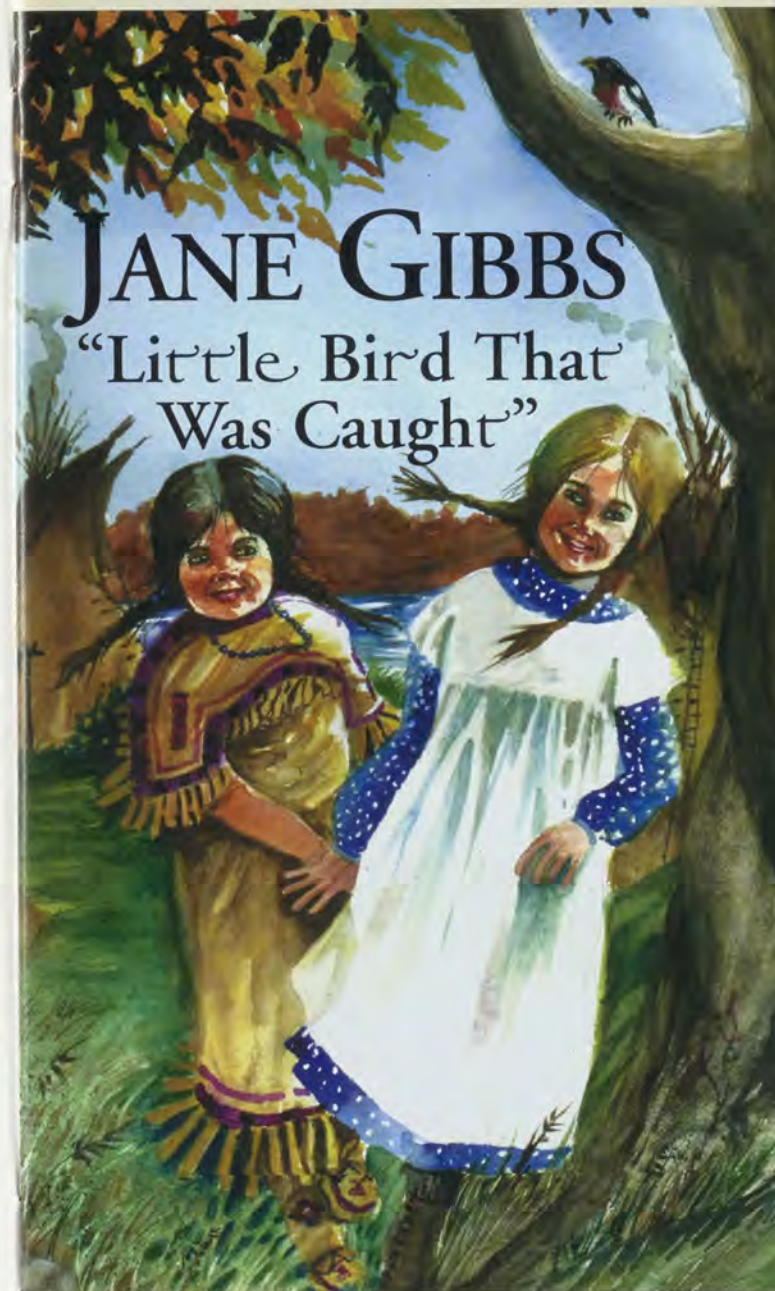
Given the record-setting heat that much of this area has experienced in the summer of 1999, this issue of *Ramsey County History* opens with Kathleen Ridder's history of the origins and early years of the St. Paul Figure Skating Club, which provides a verbal form of cool relief. With roots dating from the late 1920s and the efforts of St. Paul skating legends Eddie and Roy Shipstad and Oscar Johnson, the club got its legal start in 1936. It produced not only a number of regional and national skating champions, but also introduced the Summer Sessions and Pop Concerts that helped train young skaters.

Moving on from the Pop Concerts, authors Henry H. and Samuel H. Morgan share with us their careful research into their family history and Ramsey County real estate records. They trace what happened to the family farmstead which, in the 1880s, made up a substantial portion of the authors' great-grandfather's net worth in excess of \$600,000. The 160-acre farm, located on the western edge of Ramsey County was not the victim of corporate agribusiness at the turn of the century, but was, as they explain, more like the cherry orchard in Anton Chekhov's 1904 play of that name. What emerges from the Morgans' account is a cautionary tale about the uncertainties of the national economy earlier in this century. Next, two longtime practitioners of the art of governing, Thomas J. Kelley and Judge John T. Finley, record their memories of helping Ramsey County join the twentieth century.

Finally, the Ramsey County Historical Society has been saddened to learn of the recent death of Faith LeVesconte, the wife of the late Lester LeVesconte who was the grandson of Jane and Heman Gibbs. Faith LeVesconte was a longtime friend and supporter of the Gibbs Farm Museum, established by Lester LeVesconte's grandparents in 1849 and now maintained by the Ramsey County Historical Society.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

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HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## *Escaping the Heat on a Hot Summer Night*

# The St. Paul Figure Skating Club and Those Popular

*Kathleen C. Ridder*

Minnesota's national image is a land of 10,000 lakes and bitter winters, settled by hardy Scandinavians, never mind that the greatest number of immigrants came from Germany. The cold winters froze the lakes, ponds, and rivers that have provided winter recreation for its citizens. From the frozen surfaces came skaters (speed skaters, long bladers, spinners and jumpers) who brought fame to the state. One of the most popular outdoor winter sports areas was St. Paul's Lake Como, and from that glistening ice came some of the state's most famous figure skaters.

First to appear in the 1920s were two brothers, Eddie and Roy Shipstad, and Eddie's partner, Oscar Johnson. They chose the professional route to fame, originating the Ice Follies in 1936, the first professional traveling ice show. In the 1930s, Robin Lee achieved national fame in the amateur ranks.

Eddie, the older of the two Shipstads, and Roy lived in a two-story house on St. Albans Street. Oscar's home was nearby on Front Street. Dorothy Lewis, a skater in the original Ice Follies, remembered that "Eddie and Oscar taught themselves on Lake Como. It could be 30 below out and they would be there skating all the time. They didn't care." The boys learned by trial and error. Eddie was the first to exhibit his talents at age twelve between periods of a hockey game. Harry Frost, the manager of the Lexington Ice rink located next to the ballpark, had taken a shine to the boy and wanted to help him. He paid \$2.50 to rent a Little Lord Fauntleroy outfit from Geisen's Costume Shop for him to perform in, but Eddie skated for free, even though he could have used the money.

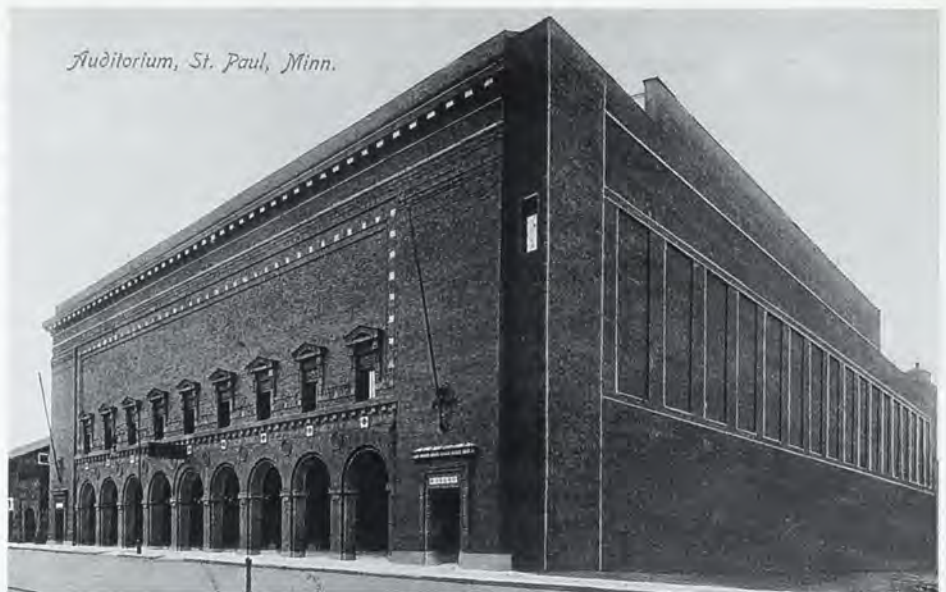
There were nine children in the Shipstad family who eventually worked for the Follies in some capacity. Performing so increased Eddie's desire to skate that to earn money he swept the ice, cut hot dog buns, and squeezed lemons and oranges. Meanwhile, Oscar had started his career on the ice with a pair of 4-runner

blades, a birthday present from his father on his sixth birthday. When he gained greater skating proficiency, he switched to 15-inch racing blades, and in his teens he was attracting crowds at Lake Como with his crazy turns and jumps, doing hops over various obstacles. Sometimes the weight of the spectators threatened the safety of the ice and the park police came along to break up the crowd. Oscar would just move to another spot on the lake.

While doing his stunts at the indoor Hippodrome rink, located on the State

Fairgrounds, he was asked on short notice by Art Ellis, an officer of the Hippodrome Skating Club, to take part in their 1923 carnival. Oscar hesitated because he had no costume or music, but Ellis agreed to arrange for everything. Dressed in a matador's garb, his program of skating tricks went beautifully until the climax when he did his "flying cartwheel." Outdoors he might use a park bench to fly over, but this time chairs were used. He was nervous so he laid the chairs down on the ice instead of upright and he missed. Determined to succeed, he stood them upright and with a mighty leap cleared them to the "hysterical delight of the audience."

Eddie's and Oscar's skating reputations inevitably brought them together and they formed a partnership. Using their combined talents, they created a couple of comedy acts entitled Spike McDugall and Gas House Annie, and Spark Plug, the first two-man animal act



*The St. Paul Auditorium where the summer Pop Concerts were held, as it looked in 1908. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

## Summer Pop Concerts

ever to appear on ice. They performed at club carnivals and then were hired to perform between periods of hockey games in St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Duluth. Sometimes they received the staggering sum of \$5 or \$10. In 1926, a major break came when they skated between the periods of a Rangers game in New York City's Madison Square Garden. Because they had to pay all their expenses, the three figures they earned were just sufficient to get them home but the *Daily Variety* labeled them "Socko—Terrific." They now realized that audiences wanted to see their type of entertainment.

Meanwhile, Eddie's younger brother, Roy, was gaining a skating reputation. A.C. Bennett, a fan of figure skating, took Roy, who had unusual athletic ability and determination to excel, under his wing. With Bennett's help and the tutelage of professional Julius Nelson, Roy qualified to skate in the 1927 Junior Nationals that took place in two venues, first in New Haven, then New York. At first he thought he had placed second in the competition, only to end up third. George Shipstad remembers that Roy returned home so disgusted with the judging that he gave up amateur skating and turned to perfecting what was to be his professional skating trademark, his whirling spins. He made his debut on February 19, 1931, at Madison Square Garden in an intermission between hockey periods with a program entitled the "Human Top."

### Their Own Show

Roy joined Eddie and Oscar as they skated at one hockey event after another and performed at club carnivals, a forerunner of the professional ice shows, that the public paid to attend. European champions were invited to perform along with United States and Canadian skaters;



*Speed skaters on Lake Como around 1930. This is where the Shipstad brothers and Oscar Johnson learned to skate. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

this added glamor to the shows, increasing the ticket sales. Finally, in the winter of 1933 they produced their own show, but despite public enthusiasm, it was a financial disaster because the national Bank Holiday cut off all funds. Their next venture, the first annual Midsummer Ice Carnival that took place in the St. Paul Auditorium on August 2, 1933, was a huge success. Eddie and Oscar, the directors and producers of the show, had among the "glittering assembly of ice stars" Evelyn Chandler, called by the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* the feminine professional figure skating champion of the world, and amateurs Connie and Bud Wilson of Toronto, Robin Lee, and the veteran of them all, C.I. Christenson. The skating, comprised of sixty amateurs and professionals, was presented in the form of a vaudeville program with athletic

numbers such as the women's 200-yard speed skating race. The fans liked the show so well that it was repeated two nights later.

The following March, a contract was signed by Eddie and Oscar and a Children's Hospital committee for two appearances of an Ice Follies in the St. Paul auditorium on April 14, 1934. According to a newspaper article, "the committee is making use of a novel means of raising funds for the Children's Hospital, the only institution of its kind in the Northwest." The "two blade impresarios" promised a spectacular show with the return engagement of Evelyn Chandler and numerous national skaters, plus local participants in the group numbers. More than sixty skaters took part in a program with twenty-three acts. Roy Shipstad appeared in the Snow Man number as the



Roy Shipstad, left, Oscar Johnson, and Eddie Shipstad, creators in 1936 of the "Ice Follies," the first professional traveling ice show. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs with this article are from private collections

lead skater accompanied by eleven-year Dorothy Snell and six little snowmen—Barbara Brooke, Rosamond Smith, Shirley Bowman, and Edward, Arthur and Gene Leary. The *Pioneer Press* headline read "More than 10,500 Persons Cheer Spectacular Ice Follies Here," ensuring a huge financial success from ticket sales led by the hospital board and the St. Paul Junior League.

The next year the benefit show occurred at the end of March with Josephine McCormack chairing the Chil-

dren's Hospital Committee which included, among others, Alice O'Brien, Mrs. Archibald Jackson, Mrs. Frederick Weyerhaeuser, E.B. Ober, George Lindsay, and Martin Kelly. The show was presented on "an oval of colorfully designed ice against an illuminated ice palace." The first act was a pair done by Roy Shipstad and Evelyn Chandler. It was followed by a burlesque of the Gay Nineties called "the Man on the Flying Trapeze" featuring the Shipstads and scores of skaters forming the skating cho-

rus. Heinie Brock presented a new comedy act, a take-off of Sonia Henie's famous "Dance of the Dying Swans." Heinie was another local talent who joined the Ice Follies.

While directing, producing, and performing intermittently in various shows, the "boys" had jobs that provided a steady income. Johnson had worked since 1918 as a chemist in a coke plant, the Koppers Company, Eddie sold typewriters and Roy, when he wasn't teaching, was parking cars at a Minneapolis hotel garage. This all changed in May, 1935, when they played a sixteen-month run at the College Inn in Chicago's Sherman Hotel. The run was engineered by Ed Malke who became so intrigued with the Shipstads' plans for a giant touring ice show that he joined them and became a partner. A show was assembled in St. Paul in September with skaters, costumes, scenery, and long rehearsals that brought the acts up to professional standards. With six weeks of advance bookings, they chartered a Greyhound bus and took off on November 3 for Tulsa, Oklahoma. And so began the thirty-year saga of probably the most successful ice show of all time. The Shipstad family and the show moved to southern California in 1939, bringing an end to their association with St. Paul. However, they continued to recruit skaters from the area for the revue.

Even though the majority of national titles were won by skaters from the East, in 1926 Chris I. Christenson, at the age of fifty, brought the Men's Senior National title back to the Twin City Figure Skating Club. Besides competing, C.I. also judged three events, including the Ladies Seniors. To have competitors as judges was not an uncommon practice at that time. He served as vice president of the United States Figure Skating Association from 1924-1925, and a member of the board from 1928-36. His election to these positions affirmed the importance that the USFSA attached to having representation from the area on its governing boards.

### A Rising New Star

The first Midwestern Championships took place in 1933 and who was one of



*Children's Hospital Association Ice Follies benefit show at the St. Paul Auditorium arena in April, 1934. Eddie Shipstad and Oscar Johnson directed the Twin City Figure Skating Club in producing the show. Kenneth M. Wright photo, Minnesota Historical Society.*

the three judges at the St. Louis competition but Christenson. In the Twin Cities, after he retired from the USFSA board, he continued judging and avidly boosting the sport, coaching many young skaters, including Roy Shipstad. Christenson worked at the Northern Pacific Railroad and he introduced Aynar R. Lee, a fellow worker who was a telegraph operator, to figure skating. Lee accompanied Christenson to the Nationals in Philadelphia in 1924, skating in the Junior Men's competition and placing ninth.

Lee also was the father of the rising new star, Robin H. Lee, who was to dominate men's amateur figure skating in the 1930s. The young Lee was one of those excellent spinners and jumpers who arose from the frozen ponds, rivers, and lakes on which were reared so many of the early Twin City skaters. Lee had a meteoric climb to success. At the age of twelve he won the Junior Nationals and then went on to the Worlds in Montreal, placing third much to everyone's surprise. Throughout Robin's early career, he was a teenager competing against men in their mid-to-late twenties. Because of his slight build, his figure tracings sometimes were difficult for the judges to mark. Nevertheless, the youngster was the pioneer who broke the ground for the future generations of young skaters. Among the competitors in that first Mid-

western Championship was Robin, who at the age of thirteen won the Senior Men's title, then was second in the men's nationals in 1934. In 1935, he won for the first time his string of five national Senior Men's titles. This is an accomplishment that no other figure skater from St. Paul has achieved, and Robin Lee must be recognized as the area's most outstanding amateur skater.

Robin grew up at 1564 St. Anthony



*Robin H. Lee when he was about twelve years old.*

Avenue. He lost his mother at the age of seven and he and his father developed a close relationship. "Pappy" introduced him around age six to figure skating for Aynar was a well-known skater and a professional teacher. Besides his job at the railroad, Aynar was connected with the Olympiad Skate Company where he became involved in the design of blades and the sale of skates. The teaching professionals received a commission from the skate companies and Aynar did not hesitate to write to various pros about Olympiads when his son became known in the skating world. There is a letter among the family memorabilia from Willi Boekl, Robin's teacher, who informs "Pappy" that if Boekl is to sell his blades he wants a bigger commission, otherwise he will stay with his present arrangement. At the bottom of the letter are two sketches illustrating Boekl's idea about the construction of a new blade.

Robin must have been a receptive pupil because he is quoted in the newspaper as saying, "I really enjoy skating but it is a lot of work. I was not exactly comfortable in my first tournament, but I'm pretty used to it now." This newspaper quote came in February, 1933, after he had placed third in the North American Senior Men's division and had just returned from a skating meet in the Chicago Stadium. Both speed skating

aces and figure skating exhibitions entertained the spectators at these meets. The youthful Robin brought down the crowd of 12,000 with his grace, jumps, and spins.

Before Lee won the national Men's Senior Title, he moved to New York to skate at the Skating Club of New York. Several sponsors underwrote his expenses in order for Lee to attain his full potential and to see that eastern professionals were of a higher caliber than those in St. Paul. He attended New York Public School 95 and lived with his uncle, Arthur Lee, on Waverly Place in lower Manhattan. (Arthur Lee, a sculptor, has a piece, "Volupte," in New York's Guggenheim museum.) Later Robin moved to 2526 Church Street in Brooklyn to stay with his aunt, Mrs. J.P. Risque, and attend Erasmus High School. Lee's talents didn't go unnoticed. In the March, 1934, issue of the *Literary Digest* he is featured in an article, "Figure Skating, Ballet of the Ice." It said that "One of the ablest teachers of the art, Norval Bap-tie paid young Lee as generous a tribute as ever master paid pupil: 'I have taught Robin a few things as most of the instructors have. But today he can teach us. Among all the Americans he is the one who might one day win the world's championship.'" Lee's win at his young age of the National Senior Men Title brought such national publicity that he was asked to be on the Kate Smith radio show. The singer introduced him saying "he has that odd but romantic name of Robin." He responded, "It seems to me that the way you sing, so nicely, your name should be 'Robin' instead of mine."

Lee's United States success was not repeated in international events. In the North American Championships held in the off years between the United States and Canada, men's figure skating was dominated by Montgomery "Bud" Wilson of Toronto who won Men's Seniors six times beginning in 1929 through 1939. However, Robin had an auspicious beginning placing third in Men's Seniors at the 1933 Worlds in Montreal after winning the U.S. Men's Juniors in 1932, followed the next year by a third in North Americans. Wilson beat him in 1935; he



Janette "Dede" Ahrens in performance. She began her career on the outdoor rink in Mounds Park.

was injured in 1937, and Bud beat him again in 1939. In 1936, he had hoped to place well in both the Olympics in Garmisch, Germany, and Worlds in Paris. Unluckily, he drew last place to skate his Olympic free program. All events were skated on outdoor ice and the men's programs took place in a snow storm. Inhibited by the weather, Robin placed no better than twelfth and in Paris he placed a disappointing seventh.

In that Olympic year (1936) the St. Paul Figure Skating Club became a member of the United States Figure Association. The USFSA had been organized in New York City on April 4, 1921, at a meeting of the "Eastern figure skaters." Among the seven charter members was the Twin City Figure Skating Club. The Hippodrome Skating Club became a member in 1923 and then in 1929 the Figure Skating Club of Minneapolis was established. Mary Louise Premer Wright remembers that the organizational meeting for the St. Paul Club took place in Edith and Arthur Preusch's living-room in the spring of 1935. In attendance were Roy McDaniel, Carl Gandy, A. R. Lee, and Fred Premer plus Walter Powell of the USFSA who presented the rules for USFSA club membership and at the same time ascertained whether the group could fulfill the requirements. The home ice for

the new club was to be the St. Paul Auditorium and the club would replace the Auditorium organization that was little more than a "paper" club with weak leadership.

### Drill on Ice

Fred Premer became the first president. With his previous experience as president of the Hippodrome Club, he and the club were able to shoulder the many challenges that lay ahead. First among them was to stage the April, 1936, ice show for the Children's Hospital. Fortunately for the hospital after Shipstad and Johnson's Ice Follies left on tour, the St. Paul Figure Skating Club was able to step in and produce the third carnival. There were twenty-four acts in the show that began with Marie Walker, the Queen of the Snows, dressed in a great white coat and a white fur hat, arriving on the ice in a dogsled pulled by eighteen white huskies. Eleanor O'Meara, the Canadian champion, closed the revue skating as the daughter of the regiment while students from St. Thomas Academy performed a drill on the ice. Josephine McCormack chaired the event again and from the report in the *Pioneer Press*, she was the driving force behind the scenes in arranging for all show details. Giesen's did the costumes for the performance.

Shortly after this success, the club began its most significant civic contribution to the enrichment of St. Paul summers—the Pop Concerts. The Auditorium had artificial ice and in those summers before air conditioning, the perfect escape on a hot evening was to sit at tables that surrounded the ice, listen to music, and watch an ice show, with pop or beer. A July 18, 1945, *St. Paul Dispatch* article credits Ed Furni, manager of the Auditorium, with the development of “the idea of combining the talents of the St. Paul Figure Skating club, the Civic Opera Association, the taxpayer’s building, and symphony musicians who ordinarily are idle in the summer months for the Pop concerts.” Of course Furni knew from previous successes what a draw ice shows were and the figure skating board was delighted to have the seasonal revenue to defray expenses.

However, the board assumed a large responsibility in that professionals had to be hired who not only could teach but produce a show, often skate in it, create and make costumes, schedule rehearsals, and negotiate for the club’s share of the profits. Without the Summer Pops there would have been no summer ice, which provided another source of revenue from the club’s Summer Ice Sessions that usually lasted from the end of June to mid-August. St Paul, Sun Valley, and Lake Placid were the only facilities that early on held summer sessions. Tests were scheduled during the summer, necessitating the need to bring high test judges from other parts of the country. This was an added expense for the club, even though a charge was made. In addition to the Pop Concerts, St. Paul participated in the carnivals of other clubs by supplying solo talent and group numbers. When the club skaters took part, there always was the question of whether the host club’s show had been sanctioned by the USFSA. Amateurs could not skate in a show with a preponderance of pros or when the pros controlled the show. The club could be paid from \$100 to \$1,000, depending upon the number of performers.

The contract with the Children’s Hospital continued until 1939 with a different theme each year. Evelyn Chandler starred as the Queen of the Sea in the 1937 “Sea



*Evelyn Chandler with Bruce Mapes in April, 1936. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

Going” Ice Follies. The ice was painted to represent the ocean and the revue took the audience on a worldwide tour. The club performed three group numbers: the

“Captains Ball,” “A Doll in Every Port,” and the “Sailor’s Horn Pipe.” Eric Waite skated his tumble-down comedy routine dressed as Grandma who was learning to skate. The show was directed by Orin Markhus, another local St. Paul “boy,” who was a favorite in London and on the continental skating circle.

Evelyn Chandler returned to enthrall the crowd with her spins, leaps and abrupt stops in the 1938 show entitled, “Variety Show on Ice.” Among the list of performers were Robin Lee and Earl Reiter. Reiter won the National Junior championships in 1935 and was runner-up to Lee in the 1936 and 1937 Seniors. The last skating benefit for the Children’s Hospital was held in 1939. The show stopper that year was the comedy team of Frick and Frack who were brought back for one encore after another. Maribel Vinson, the former Ladies Senior Champion, directed the show. The club contin-



*The St. Paul Four who won not only the North American cup but also the Connaught cup in 1941. Left to right: Robert Uppgren, Dede Ahrens, Mary Louise Premer, and Lyman Wakefield.*



ued to produce shows for the St. Paul Winter Carnival "Ice Cavalcades" in 1939, 1940, and 1942.

When the club was officially incorporated in May, 1938, Lyman Wakefield was elected president, Roger Cudworth and Dr. Arnold Naegeli were vice-presidents, Angie Knapp, secretary and William Gratz, treasurer. The young St. Paul Club held the National Championship in 1939 and Robin Lee won his fifth U.S. title, skating the first time for the St. Paul Club. He had represented the New York Club when winning his first three titles. By the time of his fourth win, he was taking lessons from Karl Schafer in Chicago and represented that club. When it looked as if the 1940 Olympics would be canceled because of World War II, Robin decided to turn pro, taught in Winnipeg for a season, and joined the Ice Follies until March, 1942. He then enlisted in the Navy. In the early fifties he returned to Minneapolis where he taught until he retired around 1991. Two years before he died in the fall of 1997, he was inducted into the United States Figure Skating Hall of Fame, a fitting reward for his life-long devotion to the sport.

The city's reputation for producing national champions continued when the "St. Paul Four," Janette "Dede" Ahrens DeCoster Buckbee, Mary Louise Premer Wright, Robert Uppgren, and Lyman Wakefield, won the 1940 National Four title in Cleveland. There were no Four competitions during the war years. Each member of the Four made impressive contributions to the sport either as competitors, judges, or in its organization. Wakefield had begun skating on Lake Harriet in Minneapolis and around the age of eleven he persuaded his father to give him \$3.50 to buy a pair of figure blades that attached to the shoe so that he could wiggle a way through the crowds on the ice.

Soon after the Minneapolis Ice Arena opened, Orin Markus, the Arena pro, saw the young skater's potential and suggested that he teach him. Wakefield began his skating career with a book of ten lessons for \$15. Attached to the Boston Naval Air Station during World War II, he skated at the Boston Club, the hub of figure skating. His contact there



*Dede Ahrens with Robert Uppgren*

with Theresa Blanchard, head of the USFSA's Professional Committee, aided immeasurably in St. Paul's ability to bring in excellent pros to teach. "Bud" Wilson, Maribel Vinson, Andree and Pierre Brunet (French World Champion Pairs), and Vivi-Anne Hulten (World medalist from Sweden) came to teach in the early years. (Hulten at the age of ninety is continuing to teach the very young.) Wakefield competed in nearly all competition classes and became a National and International judge, plus an Association officer. For more than fifty years, Mary Louise Premer Wright has judged world and national competitions and all levels of Figure and Dance tests. Because of Wright's and Wakefield's commitment to the sport, club skaters were the recipients of their expertise that helped greatly in their development

### **Hours of Practice**

Janette "Dede" Ahrens achieved the greatest national recognition among the St. Paul Figure Skating Club's women

competitors. A versatile performer she won medals in singles, pairs, and fours. She began her career wearing hockey skates on the outdoor rink in Mounds Park near the family home at 193 Maria Avenue. Her father, a long bladder, promised her a pair of white figure skates if she could do a sitz-spin on her hockey blades. Performing such a spin on hockey skates forecast Dede's ability to be an outstanding performer of the free skating program, an element of the competition mark.

One must remember that a competitive mark then was based two-thirds on figures and one-third on free skating; today figures have been eliminated from competitions. To achieve high figure marks, a competitor would spend hours practicing round circles on which were executed perfectly placed threes, loops, rockers, and brackets. Ahrens's first teacher was Aynar Lee, followed by Orin Markus, and Bud Wilson. Wilson remained her primary coach for all of her skating years while Stanley Judson assisted with the free skating programs. Women's classes in comparison with men's usually had twice as many contests and to arrive at Nationals from Regionals was an accomplishment for a budding young skater.

Ahrens was seventh in National Novice, her first national competition which was held in St. Paul, and second the next year. Having medaled, she moved up to Juniors where she was fourth her first appearance and second in 1942. After her initial appearance in 1943 in Senior Ladies, she medaled every year until her retirement in 1947.

The first time that the Oscar L. Richards Trophy for the most artistic free skating performance was awarded, it went to Ahrens for her free skating in the 1945 nationals. The non-skating judges were an artist, a sculptor, and a musician, of national reputation. Her program, skated to music from Gershwin and Victor Hubert, was a combination of dance steps, both single and double jumps, spins, and spirals. Ahrens was a strong athletic skater but her athleticism was tempered by free flowing edges and ballet positions. She also mastered the technique used in skating lifts and with her



*St. Paul Figure Skating Club members and winners in 1947 of the Harned Trophy, presented at the U. S. National Figure Championships to the club with the most points. Left to right: Marlyn Thomsen, Marilyn Thomsen, John Lettengarver, Dede Ahrens, Harriet Sutton, John Nightingale, and Janet Gerhauser.*

partner, Bob Uppgren, placed second two years in a row—1942, 1943—in Senior Pairs. With her talent and national recognition, Dede was a star in the Pops and thoroughly enjoyed participating, whether in singles, pairs, fours or the chorus.

The St. Paul Four won not only the North American's in 1941 but the Connaught cup which went to the four from the same club who placed highest in the event. The North American's resumed in 1945 after the war and Dede placed third in Senior Ladies, with another St. Paul skater, Margaret Grant, in fourth. Two years later, Ahrens attended the first post-war Worlds in Stockholm. Dede remem-

bers that the weather was unbelievably cold, even by Minnesota standards, and that competing on outdoor ice in a snowstorm was a challenging experience. "It was so cold in the hotel rooms that we slept in our clothes," she said, adding that "I had a bodyguard who was enormous, wore a fur hat and fur boots, and looked as if he had stepped out of a fairy tale."

Although asked to participate in the 1948 Olympics, Dede chose to retire after nine years of competition. She had married in the fall of 1947. Numerous people who saw her final free skating performance in the 1947 Nationals thought that finally she had beaten Gretchen Merrill, the longtime cham-

pion, for the Senior Ladies title. Gretchen's figure marks were always so high that unless a challenger skated a near-perfect free skating program it was impossible to overtake her. This time Dede felt that she deserved to be declared the winner and her disappointment contributed to her decision to quit.

Drawn by the high caliber of the professionals and the opportunity to perform in the Pop Concerts, skaters from all parts of the United States and Canada joined with the local members to make the summer sessions an exciting time. Skaters did stay in the homes of local members. Three or four Canadians often stayed in the Ahrens home for short periods of

time. In the very early forties, Stanley Judson, formerly of the famed British Saddlers-Wells Ballet, started his long tenure as designer and director of the Pops. Skillfully he combined skaters with varying levels of talent into precision lines, groups of eight, four, and pairs—pairs combining girls with girls and girls with boys. He gave ballet lessons on the stage of the Auditorium theater that molded gangly young arms, feet, and legs into graceful skating positions. Giving a free skating lesson, he shuffled around on the ice as he trailed a pupil, for he never really learned to skate himself.

Pop audiences often numbered 7,000 or more, and performing challenged the young skaters to execute a program without a fall and built their confidence, a trait that was necessary in competition. Competitors welcomed every opportunity to be featured in the Pop presentations. However, Margaret Grant, a medalist in the 1942 Junior Nationals, said that many loved to be in the Pops because they loved to show off and please the crowd. Crowd pleasers were not necessarily good competitors because they tensed up when appearing before judges. Grant remembers that Judson made performing fun and encouraged the young while he directed his adaptations of ballets for ice.

### Change in Focus

A banner year for the club came in 1947. Its competitors won the Harned Cup that was awarded to the club winning the most points in the national competition. The St. Paul Four (Marilyn Thomsen, Marlyn Thomsen, Janet Gerhauser, and John Nightingale) won the National Fours; in Senior Ladies, Dede Ahrens was second; John Lettengarver was second in Senior Men's; Junior Pairs Champions were Harriet Sutton and Lettengarver, and Marlyn Thomsen won Novice Men's title. The Four won two titles in 1948 and 1950. Ahrens, Lettengarver, Gerhauser, and Nightingale went on to skate in Worlds and Olympics; Ahrens was sixth in 1947; Lettengarver fourth in 1948 Worlds and Olympics; the pair of Gerhauser and Nightingale was sixth in 1952 Olympics and fifth at Worlds.

Judson suggested that Janet Gerhauser

and John Nightingale skate as a pair in the Pops. The St. Paul Four was another group of skaters that he brought together. Janet Gerhauser Allen remembered that "It was always exciting to read the bulletin board and see who was performing the next week. Seeing as I did singles, pairs and fours, as well as chorus, I was pretty busy! No question, it was great experience. Stanley Judson was a genius and way before his time. I think that other clubs were jealous of our unique opportunity." Today Janet is a World and Olympic Judge.

After 1952, no skaters represented the St. Paul Club in international competition. Members competed in regionals and nationals, some winning medals but no titles. Nevertheless, the skaters continued to captivate the Pop audiences with their performances, and the skaters were thrilled to skate to a symphony orchestra. Performing to live music enhanced a skater's exhibition because the orchestra's tempo corresponded to the skater's ability. Lyman Wakefield skated to a sixty-piece orchestra playing the "Blue Danube" and said that he was propelled across the ice by the music.

One of the stars of the 1960s Pops was Bobby Mecay who was second in the Men's Novice in 1960. The *Pioneer Press* reported in an April 7, 1960 article, entitled "Skate-O-Ram," that "the highlight of the evening was a stunning performance by Bobby Mecay, a fourteen-year-old whose exciting spins and jumps left the audience breathless. His interpretation of Elvis Presley left the younger set limp from squealing." Another skater was Patsy Ann Buck whose athleticism and verve brought forth sustained applause after her number. Margaret Grant, who starred in many of the group numbers, never failed to please the crowd. Through the years some in the USFSA criticized the participation of the young skaters in the Pops, a money-making venture, as exploitation of the young skaters. No formal complaint was made and the USFSA sanctioned the Pops year after year.

By the late 1960s, the Club's focus had changed from being centered around the St. Paul Auditorium and the Pops and Summer Session. The expansion of the

suburbs brought with it the demand for each community to have its own indoor ice surface to satisfy, primarily, the needs of youth ice hockey. Figure skating piggy-backed on this expansion. The club provided ice time for its members at the Wakota Arena in South St. Paul and the Aldrich Arena in Maplewood. The crowds at Pop concerts had steadily declined, homes now had air-conditioning, professional hockey was played in the new Civic Center, professional baseball and football had arrived, and all were competing for the entertainment dollar.

Other rinks in the Twin Cities held summer sessions and drew people away from the St. Paul Club, and throughout the country there was a proliferation of summer ice so that well-known professionals who previously came to this area were in demand in other places. The number of Pop Revues in 1966 had been reduced from three evenings to two. Max Metzger recalled that the last Pop Concert he conducted was in 1969. His family had a long association with the Pops; his mother, Mady Zielger Metzger sang, his wife was a member of the Opera chorus, and before he conducted he played in the orchestra. In the succeeding years, revues were organized for special events but by the late 1970s the numbers had petered out. The St. Paul Figure Skating Club, now located at the Augsburg Ice Arena in Minneapolis, still preserves its mission of fostering the sport of figure skating. Its members compete in regional events and do well. Where once there were only the St. Paul and Minneapolis Clubs in the Twin Cities, there now are twelve Twin City clubs that are members of the USFSA. The transition of figure skating from the frozen rivers, lakes and ponds to indoor ice appears to be complete and the future of figure skating is in indoor arenas.

*Kathleen C. Ridder, a frequent contributor to this magazine, last wrote "Ramsey County's Women Athletes and Their History of Success" for the Summer, 1998, issue of Ramsey County History. She is the author of a memoir of her long commitment to the women's movement.*



*Three generations at the farm, circa 1903: Cornelia Baker Hollinshead, center, with Ellen Rice Hollinshead, left, D. A. J. Baker, right, Nora and Cornelia kneeling. Billy Hollinshead took this picture. See article beginning on page 13.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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