

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

A Roof Over Their Heads:
The Ramsey County Home

Page 13

Summer, 2000

Volume 35, Number 2

Dilettante, Renaissance Man, Intelligence Officer
Jerome Hill and His 'Dearest Mother' Letters

—Page 4



James J. Hill, II (Jerome Hill) in Air Corps uniform, photographed around 1942, probably at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. See article beginning on Page 4.

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Message from the Editorial Board

Because the more recent issues of *Ramsey County History* have concentrated on the mid-nineteenth century and the area's pioneer heritage, this issue shifts to the mid-twentieth century with the wartime experiences of Jerome Hill, grandson and namesake of the Empire Builder, James J. Hill. Historian and author G. Richard Slade uses Jerome Hill's letters to his mother while Hill was serving as an Army Air Forces intelligence officer in France in the summer of 1944 as a window on southern France and Paris immediately following liberation by the Allies. Jerome Hill's reports of what he saw allow the reader to glimpse Paris through the eyes of an observer who knew it well before the German army overran it in 1940. We then turn to a subject close at hand—the story of the Ramsey County "Poor Farm" and its adjacent cemetery in Maplewood. Authors Pete Boulay and Robert C. Vogel both make a strong case for the value and usefulness of local history in current policy-making decisions. Rounding out this issue is Tom Kelley's account of the 1962 gubernatorial election recount. Although the recount itself is a familiar story in Minnesota politics, Kelley provides the perspective of an insider who participated in the process as the state's first Election Procedures Advisor. His reminiscences remind us that balloting in elections is a serious business that is sometimes overlooked in the heat of a campaign.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

A Roof Over Their Heads

The History of the Old Ramsey County 'Poor Farm'

Pete Boulay

The Ramsey County Home was already trying to shake the "Poor Farm" name when the institution appeared in nationwide newspapers on October 25, 1935. A quirk in geography was noted in the popular "Ripley's Believe it or Not" feature. The caption said: "Prosperity Avenue leads to the County Poor Farm . . . St. Paul, MN." Ripley was telling the truth. In 1935,

Prosperity Avenue did lead to the Poor Farm. At that time, dairy cows from the farm grazed in the pasture along the dirt road called Prosperity that wound around Wakefield Lake. The stone tunnel the cows used to pass under Prosperity Avenue is still there 100 years later. The old Poor Farm is still there, too, although it has evolved into "The Ramsey County Campus," with a nursing home, a homeless shelter, offices for Ramsey

County Parks and Recreation, Goodrich Golf Course, Aldrich Arena, and other county services.

Society and terminology has changed greatly since the first building was erected for the poor in Ramsey County 150 years ago. In the nineteenth century those poor living at the farm were called "paupers." Those arriving at the newly built homeless shelter were called "clients." One thing hasn't changed, though; the poor



A 1916 gathering at the Ramsey County Home, once known as the "poor farm," in Maplewood. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

still need a roof over their heads.

Minnesota Territory was less than a year old in January 1850, when Ramsey County chose its first overseer of the poor. *St. Paul Pioneer* editor James Goodhue was awarded the job at \$20 per annum. Caring for the poor became more difficult when immigration to Minnesota increased after 1851. In the midst of the land speculation in 1854, Ramsey County purchased the first poor farm in Minnesota. This 282 acres in Mounds View Township was the beginning of a series of land purchases. By 1859, Ramsey County had land fever, acquiring these poor farms, one in Mounds View and two in the Pig's Eye area on the Mississippi River. The first semi-permanent poor house was built in 1859. This two-story frame building had a grand total of ten beds. The cost of the 36 by 40-foot structure was \$200, relatively inexpensive for a building, even in 1859 dollars.

In 1872, the main poor farm was re-located on what is now the Minnesota State Fairgrounds at Como and Snelling Avenues in St. Paul. Some buildings were erected there, but their use for the poor farm was short lived. In 1885 the decision to bring the state fair to its present location forced the poor farm to move.

A "distant" location on White Bear and Frost Avenue in today's Maplewood was chosen, and would become the final home of Ramsey County's Poor Farm. It was a good choice. Land was cheap, and the new 160-acre farm was located on high land, visible for miles around. As an additional bonus, the land proved to be excellent for farming.

A Dozen Buildings

In 1885, acres of farm fields dotted the region. The poor farm could be reached only by dirt roads (White Bear Avenue would not be paved for years), but buildings at the new site were erected on a grander scale than at the former site. More than a dozen buildings for farm operations were built in the first two years.

The main building had three stories, with accommodations for 135 residents. It sat at the top of the hill, facing south. A triple porch ran along the south side. The first floor was divided into east and west wings. The superintendent of the poor



J. E. McMahon, left, superintendent of the Ramsey County Poor Farm in the 1920s. Here he meets with other county officials. St. Paul Dispatch photograph, Minnesota Historical Society.

farm and his wife and family lived between these two wings on the second floor. The superintendent's home totaled six rooms: two sitting rooms, a parlor, two bedrooms and a bathroom.

There was a desire to keep men and women separate. The men's wing was the east side, and the women's on the west. The third floor was divided into rooms with between three and nine beds each. The facility had some single rooms for residents, as well as for some of the help. Because there was no transit service to St. Paul, rooms for the workers were necessary. A room with an oak door and barred windows was set up for unruly or mentally ill patients. There was also a laundry and a well-stocked kitchen. A library doubled as a chapel.

The Ramsey County Poor farm was meant to be self-sufficient and a money-maker for the county. It was primarily a dairy farm, and milk would be transported each day to the county hospital. The large cellar underneath the main building stored vegetables raised on the farm. They became part of the menu.

Great care was taken for protection from fire and many cisterns were installed in the large cellar in case of fire. In addition, a smoking room was set aside since smoking was forbidden anywhere else in the main building. The following list of rules, which would remain in effect for many years, was posted at a central location so all the residents could

see them:

Rules and Regulations to be Observed by all Persons Admitted to the Ramsey County Almshouse — Ramsey County Board of Control November 8, 1883.

1.) No person shall be allowed to enter the Almshouse as an inmate except by special direction of some member of the Board of Controls.

2.) A person upon their admission shall be examined to ascertain whether they are clean and free from foul distemper; such as shall be found not clean shall be instantly washed and such as have any infection or foul disorder shall be excluded from the inmates until the physician has examined the case.

3.) Each and every person shall be obligated to keep themselves washed and combed and their clothes neat and to change the linen once a week.

4.) All persons who are capable of work shall be employed and must do the work assigned them by the superintendent, and thereby contributing something to their support.

5.) All inmates are under the direct supervision of the superintendent and matron, and must at times comply with their direction.

6.) No improper or profane language will be tolerated either between inmates



The cattle barn at the Ramsey County and a landmark since 1918. Now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the barn, designed by St. Paul architects Buechner and Orth, replaced a frame structure built on the site in 1885. Cost for the pressed red brick structure was \$56,198. Designed to hold seventy-five dairy cows, the barn is one of the largest of its kind in Ramsey County. Farming operations ceased in 1956 and the barn is now occupied by the Minnesota Extension Service. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

or their supervisors.

7.) No intoxicating liquor shall be allowed on the premises except as ordered by the physician in charge.

8.) Reading material is provided by the board to those who avail themselves of it, but no book or paper of indecent character will be allowed.

9.) No smoking will be allowed in the sitting room or dormitory, and those who wish to smoke must go to the room assigned for that purpose by the superintendent.

10.) Whenever the physician calls, four rings of the gong will be given, and all who are in the house will immediately take their places in their respective sitting rooms in an orderly manner, and the men will see that their hats are removed from their heads and assume a decent position,

and remain in their place until examined by the physician.

11.) All who are well must rise when the gong rings at 5:30 am, and dress as rapidly as possible, and when all are dressed, march in order to the wash room. When through, wait in the sitting room the announcement for breakfast.

12.) Meals will be as follows: Breakfast 6:00 A.M., dinner 12:00 P.M., supper 6:00 P.M. The bell will be rung fifteen minutes before meals in order that all might prepare themselves.

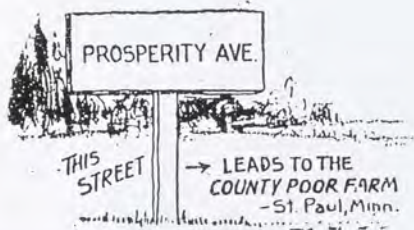
13.) No talking is allowed in the dining room, and all must take and leave their place at the table in an orderly manner.

14.) All must retire at 8:00 P.M., and all lights must be turned out at that hour.

No games permitted during religious services. (Rule Added 1938)

The area around the Ramsey County Poor Farm changed shortly after the buildings were completed. In 1886, the industrial town of Gladstone was founded just down the long hill from the front door. On a larger scale, North St. Paul was established about a mile to the northeast. The Panic of 1890 halted the growth of these two fledgling towns; the surrounding land around the poor farm remained pasture and farming activities continued. A large stone barn was erected to assist in farming activities in the late 1880s.

Life at the poor house in the 1880s was usually depicted in a positive manner by area newspapers. The following appeared in a February edition of the *North*



The Poor Farm's appearance in Ripley's "Believe It or Not!" on October 25, 1935.

St. Paul Sentinel:

"There are accommodations for 140 persons. At present 61 are enjoying its hospitality, 6 being women. Some have been here since 1865. . . The meal is full and plenty. For breakfast, meat is provided three times a week, potatoes and bread are in abundance. Dinner—vegetables, meat four times a week, fish once, salt meat twice and milk, coffee or tea. Supper—bread, syrup, applesauce, prunes and two or three times a week doughnuts, gingerbread, and cake; tea every evening. . .

"Off from the dining room is the lavatory with porcelain washbowls, and adjoining it is the toilet and bathrooms. The women have separate dining rooms and conveniences similar to the men. The building is large, being 50x100 feet. Back of the dining room is the kitchen and laundry with ample cooking ranges, well supplied with all culinary devices and managed by stout girls, who cook, wash and act as dining room maids in a very satisfactory matter. The system of ventilation is so perfect that none of the obnoxious odors incidental to ill-arranged kitchens are noticeable, and the atmosphere of the place is pure."

Just how a person would come to be admitted to the poor house was also explained in the *Sentinel* news article: "No person is admitted without being first recommended by the board of control, which scrutinizes the circumstances of each applicant. If it is not a case of absolute destitution, without friends to furnish sustenance or ability to earn a living, the applicant is rejected." A form was filled out with this and other information, including the applicant's known relatives.

The farming operations in the 1880s proved to be a success. The land was good soil for growing crops. A description of the farming activities was also included in the *Sentinel* article. "There are 160 acres of land in the poor farm that [are] worked by the inmates with the assistance of two hired teamsters to take charge of the horses. A harvest of ice is now being garnered. In the icehouse a refrigerator preserves the meat and other perishables in the summer. In the cattle barn, a fine frame building, are a fine assortment of Holsteins, Durhams, and Shorthorns. No scrubs need apply. Over the cattle quarters is the hay barn, well filled. Near to this is a fine horse barn in which are some well kept farm stock. There is also a hennery and a piggery, with abundance of chicken or hogs. The institution furnishes its own meat, eggs, butter, and milk."

The farm quickly became well-known for its quality cattle. It probably helped that the State Agricultural College was located at the University of Minnesota, a few miles to the west. It's interesting to note that the University still has a connection through the same poor farm site

since the old poor farm barns currently house the University's Extension Services. The purebred cattle at the Ramsey County Poor Farm were well-known throughout the state. In 1918, a much larger barn was built for the cattle. The cost for the pressed red brick barn was \$56,198, quite a hefty sum for a barn. This barn replaced a frame structure built on the same site in 1885. The massive new barn was one of the largest of its kind in Ramsey County. It was large enough to hold seventy-five dairy cows and it still stands today as the most vivid reminder of the Ramsey County Poor Farm.

The Cemetery

Another interesting aspect of the poor farm is still there in the twenty-first century—the old Ramsey County Cemetery. Care for the poor at the White Bear Avenue site proved to be quite expensive. At a meeting in 1894, the Ramsey County Board of Control was looking for ways to save money. Those present noted that it cost the county several hundred dollars a year to bury paupers at a cemetery off-site. On April 2, 1894, they decided to



The women's ward at the Ramsey County Home as it looked between 1930–1939. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.



Ramsey County Poor Farm residents playing pool in 1932. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

set aside a potters' field cemetery north of the main buildings, near the Wisconsin Central Railroad tracks and White Bear Avenue. For the next thirty years, people were buried there if no one claimed the body. A road was graded so the horse-drawn hearse could get through the hilly pasture. The road the hearse took is still visible in the shadow of the massive brick barn. Graves were dug by hand and marked with wooden stakes. The dead were not buried during the winter because of the frozen ground. Instead they were stored in a cave-like area near the piggery to mask the smell when the spring thaw came. Nearly 3,000 people from all over Ramsey County were buried there. Their names have been transcribed and published through a joint effort of the Maplewood Area Historical Society and Park Genealogical Books.

The county stopped using the cemetery in December, 1923, and the old potters' field was quickly forgotten, except for one grave. Conrad Samuelson cared for the grave of his friend, John Dahl, who died in 1924. This was the only marked grave in the cemetery and a makeshift

memorial, two spruce trees surrounded by flowers and old bricks, has been erected. When Conrad died, one of his wishes was that he could be buried next to his friend. He wasn't. He was buried on June 29, 1936, at Elmhurst Cemetery at Dale and Larpenteur Avenue.

The birth and death records of New Canada Township shed some light on the kind of people buried there. Death took its toll on the farm, especially during the hot summer months when some people died of exhaustion. Most of the causes of death were either "old age" or "senility." Occasionally, some poor farm deaths were mentioned in the *North St. Paul Sentinel*. For example, sixty-six-year-old Conrad Kohler was killed while walking along the Wisconsin Central Railroad tracks. He was making his Sunday mile-long hike from the poor farm to church in North St. Paul. A train was speeding to fix a burned out bridge and hit him from behind. He was deaf and didn't hear the train coming.

According to the report in the *Sentinel* "... none of the trainmen were aware of the mishap until the head of the unfortu-

nate pedestrian rolled from between the wheels of the engine to the side of the road-bed." Another unusual death was George Moore's. According to the records he died on February 19, 1915, when he fell from a third-story window at the farm. The *Sentinel* reported his death, too, but said that: "he was subject to heart disease and it is supposed to have caused his death."

The old cemetery seems to turn up whenever a project disturbs the ground at the site. When the Ramsey County Horse-shoe Courts improved their grounds, human remains were found. When the Williams pipeline was dug along the railroad tracks, bones were found and caused great excitement among the workers. They were disappointed to learn that they had just uncovered the northern fringe of the potters' field.

Care Slowly Changes

The residents of nearby Gladstone had little trouble with the poor farm or the cemetery. However, a plan to cure tuberculosis patients at the Ramsey County Home backfired. In the 1890s, Dr. K. H. Longstreet Taylor provided tents to accommodate a few persons during the summer months. Not surprisingly, this was not popular in the neighborhood and in order to prevent the tents from being pitched the following summer, local residents had the field plowed in the spring and quickly planted potatoes.

As the twentieth century dawned, care for the poor slowly began to change. County institutions across Minnesota compared notes and discussed ways to improve the care at these homes. At a meeting of the State Conference of Charities in 1900, thirty-four counties got together to discuss the poor. The opening paper was by Mrs. J. L. Hendry, matron of the Ramsey County Home. She discussed the rules set down for the home and stated that "inmates were not allowed to occupy their rooms during the day." Hendry also shed some light on the living conditions and the duties expected of the poor. She noted that straw ticks were more sanitary than quilts or mattresses. Inmates were also required to bathe once a week, even if they refused. Hendry noted that some old people "would rather



A resident weeds a row of carrots at the Ramsey County Home farm in 1940. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

leave and try their luck elsewhere rather than wash."

Men were required to work on the farm, sorting vegetables in the root cellar and doing light work around the home. The women in the home at this time seemed to be in worse health than the men, as Mrs. Hendry noted that "they are [for] the most part feeble and have poor eyesight, with all sorts of imaginary diseases; so they mend and patch for themselves, as their sewing is not satisfactory to me." Some free time was granted the inmates and they were given a plug or a sack of tobacco a week. Residents also were given the privilege of raising some tobacco for themselves. More labor went into tobacco raising, Hendry observed, than into any "necessary work."

With the stock market crash in 1929 and the Great Depression that followed, the ranks of the poor began to swell everywhere including the Ramsey County Home. By 1937, residency had increased to 357. The average age of the residents was also on the increase, as well as the amount of care needed. The Ramsey County Home slowly evolved into a nursing home. Social Security programs were created and the more able-bodied

people were able to live on their own much longer. Thus, there were fewer able-bodied men to work on the farm.

Other factors besides Social Security led to the downfall of the farming operations. Newborn calves from the prized cattle began to disappear in the night, and other charges of graft within the Ramsey County Home began to surface. This

peaked with the 1920s investigation of J. E. McMahon, superintendent of the Poor Farm. McMahon and other officials were making money on the poor farm and the county workhouse. The headlines were splashed on the front pages of the Twin Cities newspapers. In 1929, McMahon was found guilty of presenting eighteen fake payroll checks for \$99 dollars each to the Board of Control for a road built on the county home grounds by inmates of the workhouse. The superintendent of the workhouse, George Bowlin, was also indicted. McMahon was sentenced to up to seven years of hard labor at the twine factory.

Welfare in the 1930s

Farming operations began to change with James E. Keating as the supervisor. The cattle were sold off, but residents still helped grow food on the farm through the 1940s. Some farmland and the large brick barn were leased to the Minnesota Artificial Breeders' Association. During World War II, the land was leased to area farmers. There were discussions of turning the large brick barns into a city and county workhouse, but these plans failed. At least some of the old farmland was used for agricultural purposes right up to the 1950s when the sports facilities and golf course were built.

The new welfare policies of the 1930s



The Barber Shop of the Ramsey County Home in 1937. Note the cuspidor. A.F. Raymond photograph, Minnesota Historical Society.



The superintendent's house at the Ramsey County Home, 2000 White Bear Avenue, Maplewood, March 19, 1958. St. Paul Dispatch-Pioneer Press photograph, Minnesota Historical Society.

changed the population of the Ramsey County Home. Since work from the residents was no longer needed on the farm, more disabled patients were transferred from Ancker Hospital. By 1967, there were 114 beds for boarding care patients, many of whom were discharged from mental hospitals and there were 105 beds for people who required constant care, much like the nursing homes of today. By the late 1960s there was also a charge for patients at the county home that ranged from \$180 a month for boarding care, \$270 a month for nursing care, and \$300 a month for intensive care.

There were more recreational activities for the residents beginning in the 1930s. Picnics were part of the Ramsey County Home's program from the start. Pool tables were brought into the basement of the main building and many men played cards. Crafts were made at the home and sold so the residents could have a little extra money. This tradition lives on with the Ramsey County Home's Annual Fall Bazaar. Beginning in the 1930s, free weekly movies were a big hit with the residents. These were loaned by

the producers and included recent hits. The children of the neighborhood sometimes would be invited to watch these movies, and they were seen as a real treat.

The residents of Gladstone had mainly positive interactions with the poor farm residents. They remembered their faces and nicknames, but never their real names. One man who lived there was nicknamed "the barber" because he was a barber in Northfield when Jesse James and his gang robbed the bank. He would delight the youngsters with tales of that day. Another man would walk down the long hill to Nelson's Grocery Store in Gladstone carrying a small suitcase. He would buy four beers and put three of them into the suitcase. When asked why he would keep the fourth out he said: "The fellows give me money to buy beer for them and they pay me money for one myself, so I get to drink that one on the walk back." George Rossbach remembered his paper route in the 1930s and some residents of the poor farm who were regular receivers of the daily paper.

The land around the old poor farm changed with the booming of suburbia in

the 1950s. The old farmland was developed piece by piece and became a hub of sports activity. The Goodrich Golf Course and the Ramsey County Horseshoe Courts were developed. In 1959, the \$750,000 Aldrich Arena was built. In the mid-1950s the Ramsey County Fair was moved from its White Bear Lake site to its present location. The Ramsey County Home was renamed the Ramsey County Nursing Home.

The biggest visible change in the last fifty years was in April of 1980 when the old main building was replaced with a modern 180-bed two-story building. This new building looks much like other elderly care facilities in the Twin Cities. It was painted with attractive colors; in 1991 a solarium was built.

Care for the elderly has changed quite a bit for the good over a hundred years. The meals have more variety and residents no longer have to grow their food. In 1995, the Ramsey County Home celebrated its 110th year of operation with a community get-together. A video called "Roots in the Past . . . Vision for the Future" was created about the growth of the nursing home from its farming heritage. To cap off the day there was a balloon launch.

The old familiar brick barns still stand and look much as they did when they were built during World War I. When the last of the livestock left in 1956, the southern part of the barn was remodeled into offices for the Ramsey County Extension Service. In the 1980s, the barns underwent a major restoration costing \$285,315. It is the only building in Maplewood listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Many counties that had poor farms have tried to "bury the past" and demolish the buildings. It is fortunate that people today can at least glimpse what a poor farm was like as they drive by the massive brick barns on White Bear Avenue.

Pete Boulay grew up on Frost Avenue in Maplewood, just down the road from the Ramsey County Home and still lives in Maplewood with his family. He is president of the Maplewood Area Historical Society and author of the book, the Lost City of Gladstone: A History of Maplewood from Its Beginnings. The book, Ramsey County's Forgotten Cemetery, is still



Dairy herd at the Ramsey County Home in Maplewood in 1923. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See Pete Boulay's history of the Ramsey County "Poor Farm" beginning on page 13.

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

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