

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

Essay by Richard Moe:  
'Landmarks Reborn:  
Channeling Past Into Present'

Page 4

Summer, 2001

Volume 36, Number 2

*Can History Come Alive?*

A Nation Finds Its Roots In Its Historic Sites

—Page 5



Watercolor "Landmark Center," painted by artist Lou Roman, formerly of St. Paul, in 1988 and reproduced with her permission.  
See article beginning on page 5.



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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 36, Number 2

Summer, 2001

## CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 Landmarks Reborn: Channeling the Past Into the Present  
*Richard Moe,*  
*President, The National Trust for Historic Preservation*
- 5 Can History Come Alive?  
A Nation Finds Its Roots In Its Historic Sites  
*Former Governor Elmer L. Andersen*
- 10 St. Paul's Stately Old Buildings  
—Going, Going, Almost Gone  
*Georgia Ray DeCoster*
- 16 Old Federal Courts Building—Beautiful, Unique—  
Its Style of Architecture Facing Extinction  
*Eileen Michels*
- 21 Preservation Before the Preservationists  
The Beginnings of Preservation in St. Paul  
*Charles W. Nelson*
- 25 Books

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

In 2002 Landmark Center will be 100 years old. Because the Ramsey County Historical Society has been in the forefront of efforts to preserve historic sites in St. Paul and Ramsey County since the 1960s, the Editorial Board decided to honor Landmark Center by devoting this issue to the topic of historic preservation.

Your Society helped to establish St. Paul's Historic Preservation Commission in the 1970s and has been represented on the Commission since its inception. RCHS played a leading role in creating the Irvine Park Historic District and contributed to the work of many to preserve the Old Federal Courts Building, today's Landmark Center. Although the Ramsey County Historical Society was not alone in these efforts, few of us today understand or may remember how difficult it was to make a case for historic preservation in the face of the federal, state, and local governmental programs of the 1960s and '70s that supported a "tear-it-down" approach to urban renewal.

Richard Moe, a Minnesota native and president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has written a brief introduction that gives a national perspective to historic preservation. Moe's message—how far our nation has come since the 1960s in its acceptance of the goals of historic preservation—sets the tone for the four articles that follow, the first three of which were previously published in this magazine. Writing in 1965, former Governor Elmer L. Andersen sets out the local issues of historic preservation as he saw them then and the need for a "sense of urgency" in addressing them. In the next essay, Georgia Ray DeCoster stresses the importance of historic preservation in the revitalization of St. Paul and its economic value to the city. Eileen Michels follows with a specific example of how this might work in a 1972 article about the need to preserve the Old Federal Courts Building. Charles W. Nelson concludes the discussion with an account of his experiences in the early 1970s with the efforts to create the Irvine Park and Historic Summit Hill National Historic Districts.

The Editorial Board hopes that readers of our magazine will enjoy learning more about the work of the many people and organizations that have made historic preservation a vital and guiding part of civic planning in St. Paul and Ramsey County.

*John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board*



# Books

## *Villard: The Life and Times of an American Titan*

Alexandra Villard de Borchgrave  
and John Cullen

New York: Doubleday, 2001  
407 pages; hardcover; \$30

Reviewed by John M. Lindley

In describing railroad building in the United States in the last third of the nineteenth century, railroad historian Carlos Schwantes wrote that “the decade after 1875 could accurately be described as the age of Henry Villard.” Yet today Villard’s name is much less known than those of railroad builders such as James J. Hill, Jay Cooke, Jay Gould, Colis Huntington, Leland Stanford, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Edward Harriman, and others. Fortunately, Alexandra Villard de Borchgrave, who is the great-granddaughter of Villard, and John Cullen have written an insightful, lively, and much-needed biography of this nineteenth-century journalist, railroad entrepreneur, and financier that touches on an important part of the history of St. Paul and Ramsey County.

Born in Speyer, Germany, as Heinrich Hilgard, the future Henry Villard (1835–1900) migrated to the United States at the age of eighteen without his parents’ knowledge or support (he’d had a falling out with his father). He arrived in New York City in October 1853 speaking almost no English, with no employable skills other than a solid educational background, and knowing no one in Manhattan. At the time, New York was the third-largest German-speaking city in the world, so the confident German took on the name of Henry Villard, a somewhat anglicized version of his birth name, and expected he would be able to make his way there.

Villard soon found, however, he was



just another poor immigrant in New York, and he moved on to Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, and Wisconsin working at all sorts of low-paying jobs seeking to keep himself going as he slowly learned English and struggled to find an identity. His goal was to establish his independence and to prove himself. In the summer of 1856 the local Republican political committee in Racine, Wisconsin, hired Villard to edit its paper, the *Volksblatt* (“People’s Paper”). This short-lived job started Villard on his first career as a journalist. It also convinced him that he needed to become fluent in English as both a speaker and a writer.

This biography of Henry Villard holds special interest for readers of *Ramsey County History* because Villard was more than just another immigrant who by dint of hard work, perseverance, and a little luck managed to gain great wealth in nineteenth-century America. In 1857 the *New York Tribune* sent him to St. Paul to report on the controversy over the drafting of the future state constitution, but the local Democ-

rats and Republicans settled their differences and agreed to a constitution shortly after Villard reached Minnesota. Ever resourceful, Villard traveled around the territory filing reports about this frontier land and fighting off attacks of mosquitoes before the *Tribune* cancelled his assignment. A new assignment from the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, the nation’s leading German newspaper, took Villard back to Illinois in 1858, where he covered the debates between Democratic Senator Stephen Douglas and his challenger, Republican Abraham Lincoln.

Following the Confederacy’s assault on Fort Sumter in April 1861, Villard became a war correspondent for the *New York Herald*. Villard’s accurate reporting of the early battles of the Civil War earned him the trust and friendship of President Lincoln and conveyed to readers the gruesome casualties that often resulted from inept Union generalship. When the war ended in 1865, Villard was one of the country’s leading journalists, but his many months in the field covering the conflict had taken its toll on his health. So Villard, who was by then a naturalized citizen of the United States, returned to Germany in the fall of 1864 for the first time since his departure.

In 1866 Villard married Fanny Garrison, daughter of the famous abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, and became a foreign correspondent reporting on events in Europe. According to the authors, Villard’s “meteoric rise in the Civil War” “flattened out” in 1867 because writing about European politics and affairs didn’t pay very well. While he was in Germany, Villard’s father died, leaving his only son an inheritance that allowed him to pay his debts and live comfortably, but undercutting Villard’s later efforts to present himself as an entirely self-made man.



Returning to the United States, Villard was elected secretary of the American Social Science Association and took on responsibility for editing the *Journal of Social Science*. He also began to study economics and finance while looking for ways in which he could be a middleman between European investors and American enterprises, such as railroads, that needed investment capital. Villard had no formal training for business.

In 1870 this self-taught neophyte financier sailed for Germany to seek treatment for his failing health and to scout for opportunities involving European investment in America. Prior to his departure, Jay Cooke, a major investor in the Northern Pacific Railroad (NP), had sought Villard's advice on how to increase German immigration to lands that the NP owned and the Wisconsin Central Railroad, which was seeking to sell its bonds to German investors, asked Villard to serve as its agent.

In February 1873, while Villard was recovering from a stroke, German bondholders of the Oregon & California Railroad (O&C) consulted with Villard about the railroad's financial problems, and he soon agreed to represent them in the United States. Shortly thereafter, Villard also agreed to represent German bondholders of the Kansas Pacific Railroad. Villard returned to the United States in April, 1874 and went to Oregon to investigate the financial condition of the O&C. His tour of Oregon so captured his imagination that he became a promoter of Oregon railroads and Oregon immigration.

Villard's work in Oregon resulted in a steady and growing stream of income. By the fall of 1877, he had settled his family in New York City. When in 1879 the German bondholders decided to sell their investments in the O&C, Villard formed a syndicate of American and British investors and bought the Germans out. In 1879 Villard also became a friend, adviser, and investor in the work of Thomas Edison and the Edison Electric Light Company (the predecessor of today's General Electric Company).

Villard was elected president of the O&C in 1880. When the NP raised new

capital and began to build westward from Duluth to the Pacific Ocean, Villard perceived that the NP, which had been chartered by the Congress in 1864, was a threat to his growing transportation empire in Oregon. Thus in 1880-81 Villard began buying shares in the NP. He formed the famous "blind pool" in the spring of 1881 that raised \$20 million and allowed him to take control of the road. In July of 1881 Villard also bought the *New York Evening Post*, a daily newspaper. By this time he was a very rich man.

In September, 1881 Villard was elected president of the NP, and he vigorously began a building program from east and west to complete the NP's transcontinental route. Costs exceeded the budget by more than \$14 million. Villard spent about \$300,000 on the events that celebrated the completion of the railroad from Lake Superior to the Pacific. This extravagant tour and celebration began in St. Paul and proceeded on four long, "double first class," trains to Gold Creek, Montana, for the driving of the last spike on September 8, 1883. The authors' account of this lavish and exhausting series of parties shows that Villard was as much a master of spending money as he was of raising it. When Villard was at the pinnacle of his career in 1883, the NP was only the second transcontinental railroad, and ten years would pass before James J. Hill's Great Northern would complete laying tracks for its transcontinental route.

The celebration of the driving of the last spike quickly turned to despair. The NP was in serious financial straits due to its cost overruns and was near bankruptcy. Villard resigned in early 1884 from his various railroad positions, having lost about \$5 million of his own money. Again he went to Europe. He briefly returned to railroading in 1887, but the country's financial problems that led to the Panic of 1893 soon ended his involvement in railroading, and he retired. Villard died at the family home of Thorwood, north of New York City, on November 12, 1900.

Anyone who is interested in railroad history, especially as it applies to St. Paul, will want to read this biography.

Although it is about half the length of Albro Martin's 1976 classic biography of James J. Hill, *Villard* is based on extensive research in the Villard papers and Villard's own autobiographical writings. In addition the authors of *Villard* provide a clear summary of how Villard gained control of the NP in 1881 and became a Hill rival.

Although the authors of *Villard* don't cite any sources found in the voluminous NP records held by the Minnesota Historical Society for their account of Villard's presidency of the NP, they do provide an insightful explanation of how railroad entrepreneurs depended heavily upon British, German, and other European investors in raising the great sums of money necessary to build their roads in the last third of the nineteenth century. These foreign capitalists were well aware of the considerable financial risks associated with American railroads, but they chose to back Villard, Hill, and others because the potential return on their money greatly exceeded what they typically could receive from other comparable investments in their native lands.

In 1980 Louis Tuck Renz published a history of the Northern Pacific, but that book is now out of print. In addition, it is primarily an institutional history of the railroad that necessarily pays little attention to Villard's winning personality and his ability to persuade investors to trust him with their money. Unlike Hill, who was closely involved in all aspects of his railroad's operations, Villard was not. Instead he was a visionary who had the contacts with rich and powerful men, the skill to communicate what the future might be in the Northwest, and the unflagging energy, despite all his health problems, to persevere in his efforts to realize his dream.

Today the era of railroad building in Minnesota and elsewhere seems long gone, but thanks to biographers such as de Borchgrave and Cullen, its excitement, follies, and grandeur live on.

*John M. Lindley is a freelance editor and writer and chairman of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Editorial Board.*



## Lost Minnesota

Jack El-Hai  
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota  
Press, 2000.  
203 pages, index, \$19.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Elizabeth Doermann

Jack El-Hai notes in his preface that his new book, *Lost Minnesota*, "is for readers who seek inspiration—as well as entertainment and edification—from the past. It's also for people who believe that buildings can tell stories, and for those who want to listen."

He has selected eighty-nine properties and places around the state that have been lost. He tells their stories with photographs and pithy narrative, the stories of buildings, bridges, parks, islands, trails, some familiar and many unsung, all now gone from the Minnesota landscape. Within the book is the story of the bridge that was built in 1895 to connect travelers from Wisconsin with the very center of Hastings, Minnesota. It was used, loved, and oft romanced until its structural deterioration made demolition in 1951 inevitable.

Bridges are essential to modern transportation systems, but, he notes, their lives often are endangered through age or obsolescence. Some are rebuilt; some find new uses; some are replaced. Other bridges described in this book are the Smith Avenue High Bridge and the Wabasha bridge in St. Paul.

He includes stories of depots, hotels, theaters, hospitals, post offices, city halls, and county courthouses all across Minnesota. Farm buildings, vacation houses, and park sites in rural areas contribute to the narrative, as do flour mills, roller mills, grain elevators, waterworks, and railroads. Some of the places are familiar, others largely unknown. Among the well-known landmarks are:

The Metropolitan Building in Minneapolis, built in 1890 and demolished in 1962 to make room for urban renewal;

The Wilder Baths and Pool (1914–1992), which served thousands of St. Paul's citizens as their place to bathe and clean up in an era when few had indoor bathrooms in their homes;

Indian burial mounds on the bluff above the Mississippi, east of downtown St. Paul and a

special and sacred place for many Native American people;

The Metropolitan stadium in Bloomington, loved and missed by many who now frequent the Metrodome.

A few exotic structures were selected as examples of imaginative adaptive reuse. They include the fuselage of a B-29 bomber as a home for a student family after World War II, and a hotel in Glencoe, Minnesota, that spent its final years as a chicken hatchery.

An underlying message of this book is concern for historic preservation. In the preface, again, the author writes that "... lost opportunities force me to pay attention to the buildings, bridges, and other built properties that make up the world surrounding me and my family. These, too, will vanish someday, and maybe I can play a role in saving the ones that mean the most of me."

Jack El-Hai is a journalist and columnist for *Architecture Minnesota* magazine. He lives in Minneapolis and is the author of *Minnesota Collects* (1992) and, with Barbara Degroot, of *The Insiders' Guide to the Twin Cities* (1995).

Elizabeth Doermann is the former manager of the James J. Hill House and the St. Anthony Falls project.

### R.I.P. 37E

Bob Garland  
iUniverse.com  
224 pages, \$12.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Virginia Brainard Kunz

This is a great read, a mystery set in an Everyman's upper midwest metropolis where forces, good, evil, or simply greedy struggle over a proposed highway that will disrupt a neighborhood and the sinister forces behind it all.

Garland, a retired St. Paul financial executive and author of two earlier "Humboldt Prior" mysteries, insists that "technically," his "City by the River" is not St. Paul. However, readers certainly will note some similarities: "Hilltop" sounds like Summit Avenue; "Dulcine Place" like Irvine Place; the fight over "37"E might have been that over 35E but mercifully was not; and both Christ Episcopal Church and the People's Church did burn down.

The setting is the 1970s. Humboldt Prior, an executive with an eastern computer company, arrives in his native City by the River to meet with the district sales staff. During a week-end of free time, he strolls about the city, seeking out a favorite childhood haunt, only to find that Dulcine Place has disappeared from the landscape. "Why? What happened to it?" he asks rather loudly at a subsequent art museum reception hosted by a powerful banker Prior knew as a boy. When Prior innocently questions him about Dulcine Place, the banker's joviality turns to angry menace, and it's all downhill from there. Prior is set upon and beaten and a nosy reporter is shot at and killed.

A trucking company, the state highway department and its beautiful commissioner, protesting citizens, a determinedly hostile lobby of business interests, and a brooding Hilltop mansion with a sealed-off cellar containing who knows what are stirred into the mix. Then there is the mystery of the mansion's tunnel and the fire that destroyed the church and took the life of the highway commissioner's father, the pastor there. The real-life struggle over 35E, though long-drawn-out, wasn't nearly as fascinating as Garland's take on this clash of interests driven toward venality.

Virginia Brainard Kunz is editor of Ramsey County History.

### Also in Print

*A Postcard Journey Back to Old St. Louis and the 1904 World's Fair*, published by Octavo Press, Springfield, Illinois, is Robert Stumm's second book based on his extensive collection of old postcards. Since much of pioneer St. Paul was linked to St. Louis and the fur traders who established agencies, businesses, and families here, this second volume should be of interest to anyone familiar with St. Paul's earliest days, as well as to collectors and others fascinated with old postcards.

More than a third of almost 180 images are in color, and thirty-two of those are especially interesting in their recording of the extravagantly elaborate buildings erected for the World's Fair that was held in St. Louis. An extensive bibliography should be of help to other collectors.





*The restored Irvine Park with its gazebo, as it looked about 1989. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See article beginning on page 21.*

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

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