

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

A Lynching in St. Paul?  
Almost—in 1895, an Era  
of ‘Vigilante Justice’

Page 11

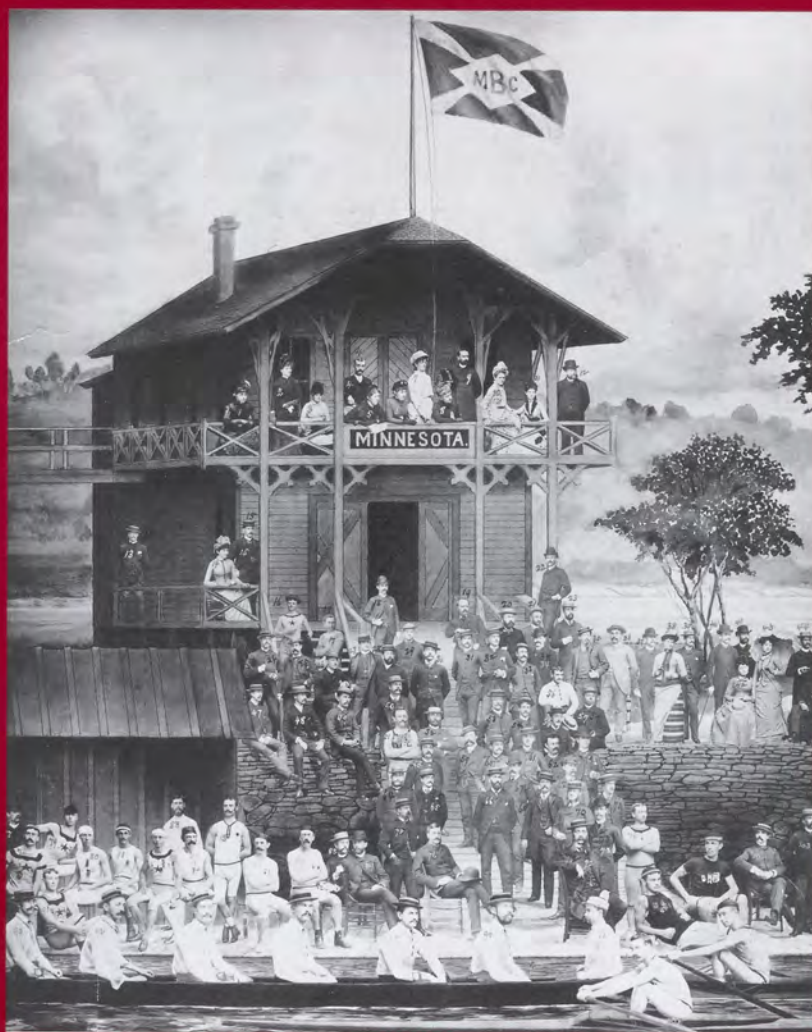
Summer, 2002

Volume 37, Number 2

*Life on the Mississippi:*

Singles, Doubles and Pairs, Fours and Quads—  
The Minnesota Boat Club’s 132 Years

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The home of the Minnesota Boat Club, circa 1880s. This photograph by C. A. Zimmerman “was one of the most remarkable pieces of photography ever accomplished,” according to an article in a 1903 issue of *The Razoo*, a Boat Club publication, adding that it “and has been commented upon by photographers all over the country. . . . In order to get it, Mr. Zimmerman had to keep a sketch of the boat-house in his mind while he took photographs of the members and the ladies. These he afterward arranged in groups so that they appear in the completed picture to be all posing together.” From the Minnesota Historical Society archives. See article on the Minnesota Boat Club’s history beginning on page 4.



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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 37, Number 2

Summer, 2002

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

Given this summer's 90-degree temperatures, Jim Miller's history of the Minnesota Boat Club provides a refreshing glimpse of an early St. Paul athletic enterprise. Founded in 1870 by a number of the city's leading men, rowing at the MBC was strictly for amateurs. It also afforded an opportunity to attend social events on the Club's yearly calendar. In addition, Miller's research greatly increases our understanding of the value of Raspberry Island, where the MBC is located, to the city's cultural heritage and riverfront beauty.

In contrast, Paul Nelson's account of the near lynching of an African American, Houston Osborne, in St. Paul in 1895 is tense and suspenseful. Nelson not only explains what happened in 1895, he also shares the steps through which he went in uncovering this shameful and forgotten piece of the city's history. Unlike the Houston Osborne saga, the existence of the Selby Tunnel is well known today. What's less well known is its origin and how its construction changed the neighborhood around it. With words and photos, Virginia Brainard Kunz provides a brief history of this St. Paul landmark. "Growing Up in St. Paul," about boxer Johnny Salvator, is written by an avid promoter of St. Paul boxing history, Paul R. Gold. After Minnesota legalized boxing in 1915, St. Paul became the second largest center for training and supporting boxers in the United States. Johnny Salvator was one of the many St. Paul boxers who contributed to the city's athletic prominence in the first third of the twentieth century.

*John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board*



## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

### Manager, Fight Promoter, Minnesota Game Warden— Johnny Salvator and His Impact on Boxing in St. Paul

*Paul R. Gold*

Johnny Salvator was a man who had a great impact on boxing in St. Paul. Not only was he famous as a St. Paul welterweight, but he also became a boxing manager, a fight promoter, a midget-car racing promoter, and a Minnesota game warden and conservationist.

Salvator was born in 1891 of German parentage on a farm in Serbia. The youngest of seven children, his name actually was Johann Salwetter, but in years to come, sportswriters began to refer to him as "Salvator," also the name of a famous race horse, and the name stuck. Eventually he adopted it legally.

When Salvator reached the age of sixteen, his widowed mother feared he would be drafted into the Serbian army. His older brother had inherited the family farm and she thought Johnny Salvator would fare better by emigrating to the United States. He arrived at Ellis Island in 1907 alone.

After short stays in Ohio, Kentucky, and Illinois, he arrived in St. Paul. A series of menial jobs led him into contact with Mike and Tommy Gibbons, who trained at Big Marine Lake, and with Billy Miske who, according to legend, Salvator met while working as a clerk in a grocery store. It is scarcely surprising, then, that Salvator became interested in boxing.

Boxing was illegal in Minnesota when Salvator was in his early teens, so he fought matches elsewhere in the country, particularly in Missouri where he became a favorite of fans there. One of his business cards heralded him as the "Welterweight Champion of the Great American Northwest." According to one sports writer, Salvator was not a great boxer but when he fought he was "a bloody battler." Years later his wife remembered that he often was so badly injured in his fights that she was unable even to reach out to touch him on their way home from a match.

He had met his wife Bertha at a barn



*Johnny Salvator as a young man. All photographs with this article are from the collection of his son, John Salvator of St. Paul.*

dance on her uncle's farm—a barn that later became the clubhouse for the Southview County Club in West St. Paul. The two eloped to Pine City, but that weekend an imposter tore up a tavern during a brawl in St. Paul, and Salvator was blamed for the incident. He proved his innocence with an iron-clad alibi—he was off in Pine City being married at the time. Newspaper headlines announced that "It Wasn't Johnny Salvator After All."

During World War I, Salvator was not yet an American citizen but, patriotically, he became a "dollar-a-year man," a box-

ing instructor for soldiers training for the battlefields of France. He also taught calisthenics and tennis. A newspaper photograph shows him standing on a podium in front of a group of draftees at Training Detachment Camp Number 1 on the University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus. He is instructing the men in how to deliver a left jab.

A brief stint with a movie theater followed the war. It was a family operation. His wife played the piano for the films—silent, in those days; his brother-in-law was the projectionist; his sister-in-law took the tickets. Boxing, however, had been legalized in Minnesota in 1915 and St. Paul had become the second greatest boxing mecca in the United States, surpassed only by New York City. Salvator returned to boxing as a manager. He bought the Rose Room Gym, which was located in the basement of the Hamm Building on St. Peter Street in downtown St. Paul. The top boxers of the Twin Cities worked out there, and such national boxing greats as Lew Tindler sparred there as well. By the early 1920s, boxing had become so popular that Salvator charged spectators \$1 each to watch the action. Matches would draw up to a thousand fans who eagerly paid for their admission to the poorly ventilated basement. (One newspaper claimed that Salvator was "making money hand-over-fist," and that he would need it since he had "a new baby boy.")

In the early to mid-1920s, more than 500 boxers (professional and amateur) were fighting in St. Paul. Often there were three boxing nights a week—both weekday evenings and weekends. Two other venues competed with the Rose Room: the Empress Theater on nearby Wabasha Street and the National Guard Armory near Seven Corners where Mike Gibbons scheduled his regular productions.





*The Rose Room Gym in the basement of the Hamm building on St. Peter Street in downtown St. Paul.*

As a successful manager, Salvator handled Italian Joe Gans, Al van Ryan, Chuck Lambert, Rusty Jones, and Johnny O'Donnell. His two most famous fighters were My Sullivan and Billy Light, both nationally ranked welterweights. Because he spent quite a bit of time touring with his fighters, he soon sold his interest in the Rose Room Gym to devote more time to them. He also operated a boxing camp at his summer home on Big Sandy Lake north of McGregor. There he entertained promoters, managers, fighters, even several movie stars during the 1920s and 1930s.

When the St. Paul boxing club franchise became available in 1930, Salvator purchased it as his next step up the boxing ladder. He brought such world-famous heavyweights to St. Paul as Jack Dempsey, Primo Carnera, Max Baer, and Art Lasky. On December 10, 1931, he presented a show at the City Auditorium. The building had not yet been completed, but his Jack Dempsey-Art Lasky card drew the largest crowd ever assembled in Minnesota up to that time. The \$23,000 gate might sound paltry today, but it was significant for the Great Depression.

Dempsey and Salvator were great friends and fond of playing practical jokes on one another, Salvator's son John remembered. When Dempsey was in St. Paul, he would stay with the Salvators. It was only later in life, young John once said, that he fully appreciated the

significance of that friendship. Another friend was the famous sports columnist Ring Lardner, but Salvator's closest friend in the boxing business was the noted manager and promoter Jack Hurley. John Salvator remembered that his parents would drive to Duluth and to



*Johnny Salvator as a welterweight boxer.*



*Salvator, right, perhaps with his manager.*





*Johnny Salvator at age of seventy-two looking over his scrapbook with his wife Bertha. He had just retired after thirty years of service as a Minnesota game warden.*

Chicago to play bridge with Hurley and his wife Rachel. In later years, Hurley brought in fighters for boxing cards presented by Jack Raleigh, another of Salvator's closest friends.

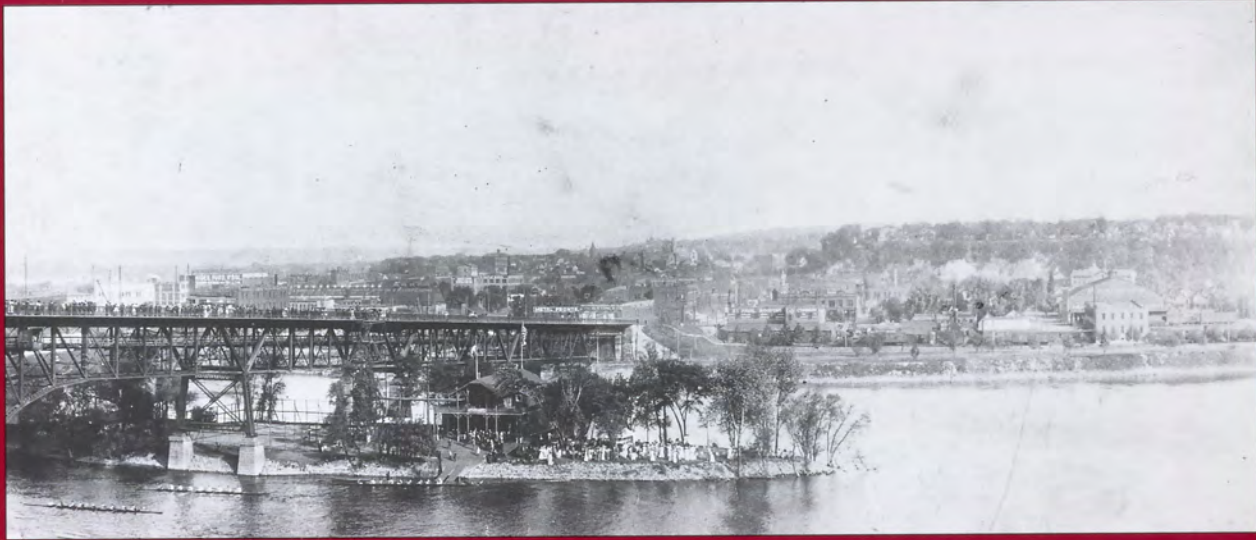
During the height of the Great Depression, Salvator's boxing shows suffered at both the Hippodrome and the City Auditorium. John Salvator remembered his father telling his mother that "It looks like we've lost something like \$4,000 tonight." In 1934 Bertha Salvator went to work in the State Office Building's banking department to help support the family. They had lost everything, including their showplace at Big Sandy Lake. Salvator tried to promote midget-car racing at the Hippodrome, but it was a financial disaster.

In 1935 Governor Floyd B. Olson, hearing that his good friend Johnny Salvator was desperate, offered him a job. The governor had intended to appoint him to an executive position and was shocked when Salvator told him he would like to be a game warden. He passed all tests for the position, despite a 10-point deduction for speaking with a foreign accent. His personality, however, rated a full 100 points. He became one of two "Flying Wardens" who were called to any point in the state where the local wardens needed help. In 1938 he was sent to Pine City as game warden supervisor of the area from Forest City to Duluth. There he spent four years. He returned to St. Paul and served as Ramsey County's game warden for twenty-five years.

Johnny Salvator passed away in 1973 at the age of eighty-two, fondly remembered in the boxing world, the conservation world, and his son John.

*Paul R. Gold, a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History, is a professor at Capella University, an online university based in Minneapolis. He also is a leading force in electronically preserving St. Paul's boxing past through his Lost St. Paul Boxers project. His web address is [www.loststpaulboxers.com](http://www.loststpaulboxers.com). He regularly meets with families of former St. Paul boxers to view their family photos and scrapbooks, and record their stories. Families are encouraged to contact him at 651-291-0621.*





*The Minnesota Boat Club on Raspberry Island below the Wabash Street bridge in 1908. Across the river: St. Paul's west side. See article beginning on page 4.*

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

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