

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

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

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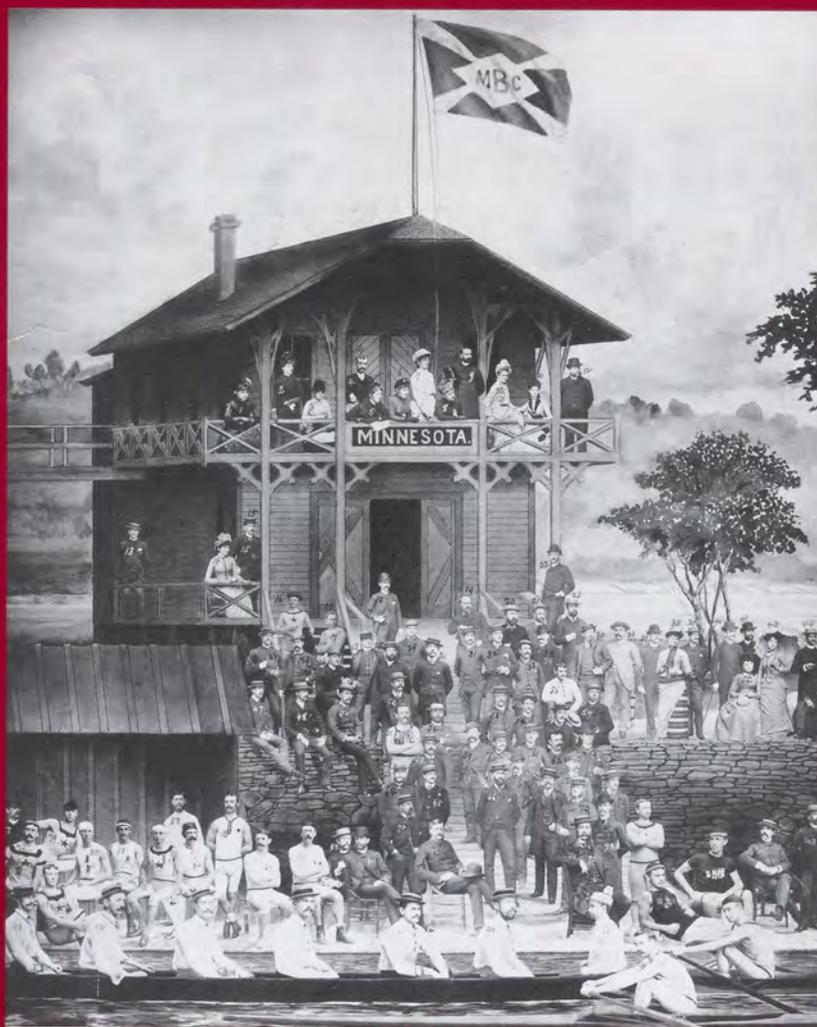
Summer, 2002

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 is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 2002, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Fax 651-223-8539; e-mail address admin@rchs.com.; web site address www.rchs.com

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Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

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

The Road to the Selby Tunnel, Or How To Make It Up the St. Anthony Hill

Virginia Brainard Kunz

Disruption of a neighborhood to clear the way for progress is nothing new for American cities, including St. Paul. The photographs on the following pages recall what happened to the old intersection where Selby Avenue met West Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard) in the early years of the twentieth century.

For the city's nascent and still-primitive transportation system, the problem was how to ascend the city's many hills, and specifically the St. Anthony Hill, which dropped almost 100 feet from Summit Avenue, where many of the city's leaders lived, to the downtown district where most of them worked. After many tries with cable cars and newly electrified streetcars, nothing seemed to work. The solution, finally, was the Selby Avenue tunnel.

The road to the tunnel, however, began more than thirty years earlier when fifteen of those community leaders met on May 8, 1872 to organize the St. Paul Street Railway Company. They included J. C. Burbank, president; John Wann, vice president; H. L. Carver, secretary; and William Dawson, treasurer. The list of their fellow organizers rings with the names of the city's movers and shakers: Horace Thompson, Elias Drake, George Culver, W. S. Wright, H. L. Carver, A. H. Wilder, John Merriam, P. F. McQuillan, Peter Berkey, William Lee, Bartlett Presley, and William F. Davidson.

Their first contract was for two miles of track that would carry six horsecars operated by fourteen men and thirty horses and mules. The tracks, however, could not tackle that St. Anthony Hill at Selby Avenue, so it was the Laurel Avenue line that served Summit Avenue, running out West Fourth Street to Wabasha, to Tenth Street, to Rice, to Rondo, to Farrington, to Laurel, and then to its terminus at Dale Street, where there was a turntable for the driver to use in turning his car around.

Unfortunately, in 1877 a group of New York bondholders foreclosed on the

company. By that time the lines had been expanded to almost four miles. The company's list of assets reflected a transportation system based on horse power: fifteen cars, thirty-four horses, six mules twenty horse collars, fourteen bridles, sixteen horse blankets, four buffalo robes, three pitchforks, nine coal stoves for the cars, three monkey wrenches, and two mouth rasps for the horses' teeth.

The horsecars themselves were small, with seats running lengthwise on each side and accomodating not more than twenty-five to thirty passengers. A driver, working twelve to fourteen hours a day with twenty minutes off for dinner, was paid \$35 a month, considered fair wages in those days. He was expected to watch for passengers, collect fares and make change, guide his horse and wash his car once a day. After dark an evil-smelling oil lamp provided some light, a layer of straw on the floor and a small stove some warmth in winter. He stood on an outdoor platform at the front of the car in every imaginable kind of weather, including winter when he was swaddled in a heavy coat with fur cap and mittens and wore felt-lined boots.

Along the side of each car was a small chute sloping to the front with several slots in which passengers were expected to drop their nickel fares. Those who forgot could be embarrassed by the driver calling out: "Will the passenger who got on at Western Avenue please deposit the fare?"

"The new owners were destined for a painful experience in the streetcar business," Goodrich Lowry wrote in *Street-*

car Man, a biography of his grandfather, Tom Lowry, father of the Twin City Rapid Transit Company. The owners' resident manager was James R. Walsh, and their attempt to raise the fare from five to six cents was a disaster:

Soon thereafter a woman who had only a nickel was thrown off a car by an overzealous driver, and she promptly filed suit for \$1,500. A few months later the suit was settled for \$200 and the directors reluctantly concurred in Walsh's plea to return the fare to five cents.

In 1878 the company was reorganized under the name of the St. Paul City Railway Company and the lines were extended again. In 1887 there were more than forty-five miles of tracks, with 113 cars, 742 horses, and 200 mules. Hills still presented such a problem that circuitous routes were needed to find grades gradual enough for a horse or mule to pull a loaded car up a hill.

Cable cars seemed to be the answer. The St. Paul City Railway Company, perhaps drawing on San Francisco's experience, built a cable line in 1887 in the first attempt to conquer the Selby Avenue's formidable St. Anthony Hill. The Selby Avenue Cable Line's first route ran two-and-half miles westward from Broadway, along Third and Fourth Streets to Selby, up St. Anthony Hill and westward along Selby to St. Albans and later to Merriam Park. The cable cars operated from a steam powerhouse at the corner of Selby and Dale Street. Twelve cable motors and sixteen passenger coaches were used. In 1889 the line was expanded to run eastward from the powerhouse along Selby to Third Street at Seven Corners and then along Fourth Street to its eastern terminus at Broadway.

Cable cars consisted of two cars: a grip car and a trailer. The grip car was



The lower entrance to the Selby tunnel was still there when this picture was taken in 1982, although the tunnel itself had been abandoned. Ramsey County Historical Society photograph.

equipped with a device that enabled it to grasp or "grip" the cable moving on pulleys in a small tunnel beneath the tracks and thus be drawn along by the cable. Cost to install the double-track system was around \$100,000 a mile.

In the meantime, the New York investors had discovered that the St. Paul transit system was not the lucrative investment they had expected, Lowry wrote. Although they had put up a new building on St. Peter Street to house horses and staff, they had turned the St. Paul City Railway Company over to new owners in 1882: Francis B. Clarke, president of the Northwestern Manufacturing and Car Company and president of the new group; Herman Greve, a real estate dealer and the group's vice president; Ansel Oppenheim, an investment broker; William R. Merriam, vice president of Merchants National Bank and a future governor of Minnesota, secretary-treasurer; and Tom Lowry, who was authorized to negotiate a first mortgage loan of \$200,000. But, Goodrich Lowry wrote,

The St. Paul stockholders soon lost interest in their new investment, which seemed to be worth what they had paid for it—i.e.

nothing. In July 1883, Clark, Greve, and Oppenheim resigned from the board and were replaced by Lowry's brother-in-law, C. G. Goodrich, and [Lowry's] old friend, Clinton Morrison.

When Lowry surfaced as president and dominant stockholder in the St. Paul City Railway Company in 1883, rivalry and hostility between Minneapolis and St. Paul had reached a new high, and the St. Paul business community was shocked. "Years later, in an article that recalled Lowry's personality" Goodrich Lowry wrote, "the *St. Paul Dispatch* gave the following account:"

The idea of a Minneapolis man having us at his mercy when it came to street cars was so repugnant to many of our people that J. W. McClung, a leading real estate dealer, called an indignation meeting at the Chamber of Commerce. That was precisely what the assemblage was to be—"mad clear through"—notwithstanding the circumstance that Tom Lowry was expected to attend in person and defend himself, were self-defense possible, which was doubted seriously. Mr. McClung was primed for an oration of the most scorching and withering type, with the street railway magnate as the cowering, totally silenced victim. That a Philistine, an arch-enemy of St. Paul as every Minneapolitan must be perforce, should gobble our street railroad franchises and privileges, was an outrage.

Mr. Lowry duly appeared upon the scene and laid aside the inevitable plug hat which so accentuated his six feet two. He faced that angry audience and smiled. Half the anger vanished forthwith. Tom kept on facing the audience and smiling and then he talked a little while. He presented a full exposition of his plans and desires regarding the St. Paul street car system.

And then what happened? Nothing, except that J. W. McClung got on his legs and started eulogizing that terrible Tom Lowry! Applause began to ripple forth as he went on. The acclaim gathered force and swelled until it made the old building tremble and the captive, turned captor, received a tumultuous ovation whose like is seldom witnessed except perhaps in a political meeting during a heated campaign.

Tom Lowry had won another victory. Those who came to curse remained to bless and went away to respect and love. He had tapped the hearts of the St. Paulites as deftly as he had tapped the strongboxes of Wall Street.

Soon a new technology opened up a new era for the streetcar system. Electricity arrived. In June, 1890, Archbishop John Ireland and Thomas Cochran, a real estate developer, negotiated an agreement with Tom Lowry and the St. Paul City Railway Company to build, equip, and operate two electric streetcar lines. The Grand Avenue line was first; the University line followed, linking the downtowns of both of the twin cities.

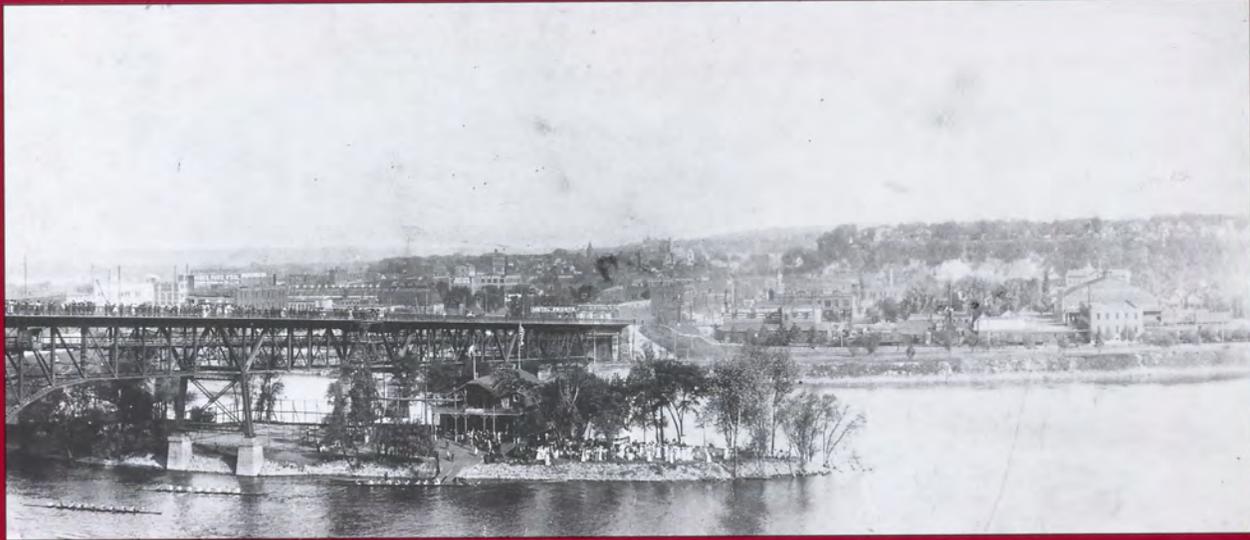
"The introduction of electric power was accomplished by an immense outlay of capital and energy during [a] period of financial stringency," Henry A. Castle wrote in his *History of St. Paul and Vicinity* published in 1912.

Selby Avenue's St. Anthony Hill, however, still resisted conquering. The hill was too steep to be ascended safely, even by cars powered by electricity. The problem was solved by installation of a counterweight car running on a parallel track to offset the weight of the electric car. As the streetcar descended the hill, it pulled the counterweight up the hill. As the streetcar ascended the hill, the counterweight running downhill helped the car ascend.

This system remained in place for more than fifteen years. In 1906 construction began on a tunnel that would run under Summit Avenue, from Nina to Third Street and reduce the grade of the hill to the point where the electric streetcars could operate safely. The Selby Tunnel was completed in 1907 at a cost of \$415,000. For almost fifty years, riders on the Selby streetcar line would experience the exciting rush as their streetcar topped the brink of the hill and hurtled toward the bottom.

The tunnel is still there, buried deep under Summit Avenue, its upper entrance closed off. Its lower, eastern entrance, however, remains visible, secured by a gate to keep out the curious.

Virginia Brainard Kunz is editor of Ramsey County History.



*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

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

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