

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

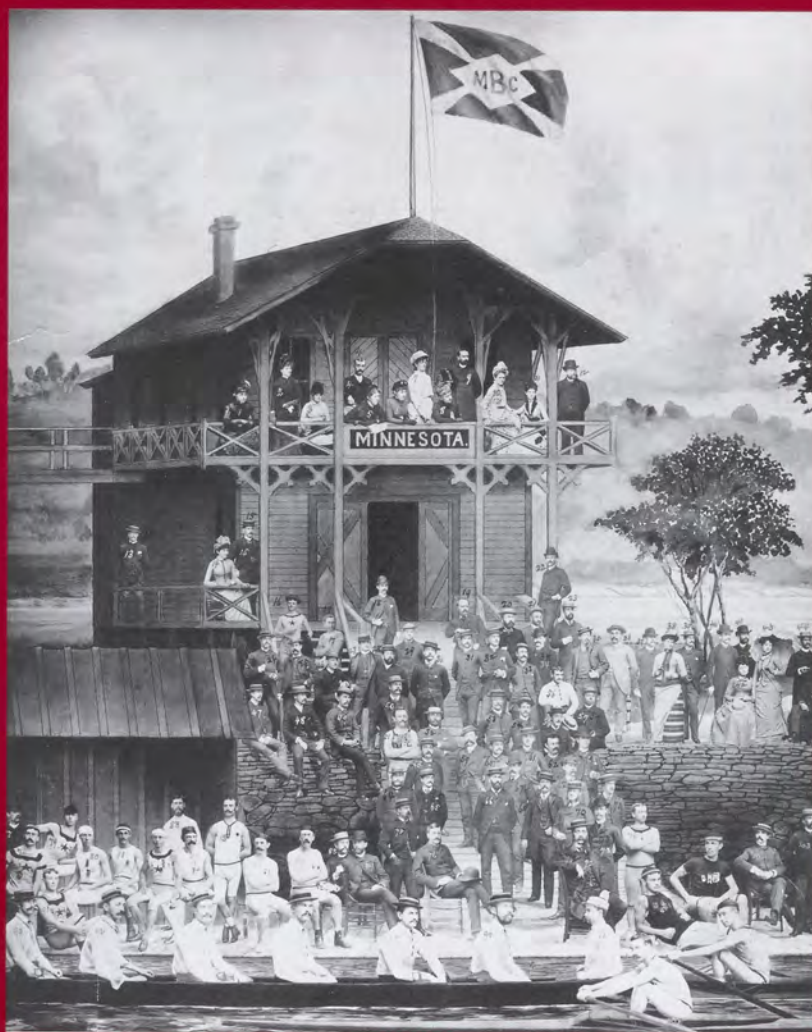
Summer, 2002

Volume 37, Number 2

Life on the Mississippi:

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

—Page 4



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

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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

Singles, Doubles and Pairs, Fours and Quads— Life on the Mississippi: The 132 Years of the Minnesota Boat Club and Its Rich History

Jim Miller

The Minnesota Boat Club (MBC) is the oldest athletic organization in Minnesota. Founded in 1870, it has, while promoting fitness, encouraged rowers for over 132 years to explore the beauty of the natural environment in the heart of a city along the Mississippi River. It is fundamentally a rowing club, in the tradition of clubs found on rivers in England and on the Eastern seaboard of the United States. Oarsmen and women skillfully exercise in a variety of rowing shells, including singles, doubles and pairs, fours and quads, and eights. The rowers are an important contribution to the ambiance of what is often referred to as the Central River Corridor in St. Paul.

The MBC has an extraordinarily rich history. In its early years, it played an integral role in the social and cultural life of St. Paul. It survived two World Wars, when Club rosters declined as its members joined the armed services. The present boathouse, built in 1910, survived severe flooding in the 1960s and 1990s. Today, the MBC is central to St. Paul's efforts to revitalize the Mississippi riverfront.

Located on Raspberry Island, just below the Wabasha Street bridge, the MBC's boathouse enjoys a panoramic view of downtown St. Paul on the Mississippi's east bank and the redevelopment occurring on Harriet Island and the West Side flats on the river's west bank. The name of the island was changed to Navy Island during World War II, when it was used as the headquarters for the Navy auxiliary. The city changed the name back to Raspberry Island in the 1980s to reflect its historic origins. The Mississippi River has one of its narrowest stretches along Raspberry Island, with fast and churning water. This makes it difficult to row in the spring and it remains challenging throughout the season to row downriver below the Robert Street bridge.

* * *

The Minnesota Boat Club is at the epicenter of the history of St. Paul. Zebuleon

Mississippi River, a factor that led to the substantial growth of St. Paul in the nineteenth century.

Other factors influencing St. Paul's history and economy, including the geology of the Mississippi River bed, the Louisiana Purchase, and the building of the Panama Canal, are relevant to this location. Ten thousand years ago, the Falls of St. Anthony, now located in downtown Minneapolis, were near Raspberry Island. As the Mississippi River bed, comprised of sandstone with a limestone shelf, eroded over time, the falls slowly moved up the river to their present location. Settlers arriving in the nineteenth century located near the falls to exploit them for lumbering and grain milling. Had the river bed been granite, the falls would have remained near downtown St. Paul, and it is likely that St. Paul would have emerged as a major commercial center in the twentieth century, relegating Minneapolis to a residential suburb comparable to Coon Rapids.



Minnesota Boat Club members in the 1880s. All photographs with this article are from the Minnesota Historical Society archives.



The Minnesota Boat Club's 1897 Winning Senior Four: C. M. Bend, N. P. Langford, G. Langford, and P. Houghton.

Although the Treaty of Paris in 1783 fixed the western-most boundary of the United States at the Mississippi River, the region that now includes Minnesota did not become part of the United States until the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Had our nation's founders been content to halt our territorial expansion at the Mississippi, St. Paul might have become a major international city bordering western plains claimed by the French and Spanish. Finally, before 1913, St. Paul was at the heart of the nation's distribution system. Rail was the fastest way to ship goods from one coast to the other; St. Paul was the headquarters for three national and seven regional railroads. After the Panama Canal opened, the advantage went to ocean shipping, and the decline of St. Paul as a center for manufacturing and distribution began. But for an adverse geology, a misplaced sense of Manifest Destiny, and an inter-oceanic ditch on an isthmus, St. Paul would be a different city today.

* * *

St. Paul was a frontier town in 1868 when John W. L. Corning launched the first single-man rowing shell on the Mississippi River early one morning in March of that year. Observing him, a small group of spectators wondered "as to how

he kept the durned thing right-side up."¹ His rowing shell was made of paper and kept in one of the warehouses at the foot of Jackson Street. He had transported his shell to St. Paul by ocean and river vessels from New York by way of New Orleans. (It would have been shorter to ship the shell by rail; however, it was a common belief at the time that paper boats were more likely to be damaged if shipped by rail.) Corning was president of the Chaska Mercantile Co. and later became the Seventh Ward's representative to the St. Paul City Council.

Inspired by Corning, rowing caught on in St. Paul. The Minnesota Boat Club was founded on March 1, 1870, by Corning and nine other men: Chas. T. Corning, J. Dock Dean, Geo S. Acker, Norman Wright, Chas. P. Noyes, Ed. H. Cutler, Stanford Newel, J. Perry Gribben, and E. W. Johnson. The first Club officers were Norman Wright, president; Stanford Newel, vice-president; and John Corning, secretary and treasurer. The second, third, and fourth presidents of the Club were, respectively: Charles T. Corning, H. A. Boardman Jr., and W. R. Merriam. Elected in 1872, Merriam took office in 1873, the year the Club was incorporated.

The year of its founding, 1870, the Boat Club occupied its first quarters in an

old, roofed-over scow anchored at the foot of Robert Street. This facility was evidently a crude affair, for it often leaked and threatened to sink. It caused the members, often the most recent initiates, "many a backache at the pumps to keep their house above the waves of 'Old Mississippi.'"²

Aspiring to the permanence of their organization, the members built a small clubhouse on leased land in 1873. Located on the west half of Raspberry Island under the Wabasha Bridge, this remains the site of the boathouse today. The leased land was purchased by the Club in 1877. Rowing was initially a local activity, occurring on home waters and involving only Club members. The year 1877 is significant, however, as it marks MBC's first participation in a regatta. The Club entered singles, doubles, and fours in a competition at Devil's Lake, Wisconsin, and won every race except for one. This was the beginning of an outstanding record of victories that the MBC established.

The logs of the MBC provide a fascinating insight into rowing at that time. A few entries in 1877 are illustrative: On February 27, Butler took his single out and had a "delightful day." The next day Norman Wright was out "but a change of weather put a stop to rowing until March

11 when Wright took another 'pull.'" Other entries:

"On the 3rd of April the river was clear of ice above the piers and T. L. Schurmeier, Rhodes, Gates and Butler took out the 'Norman Wright' and the season may be said to be fully opened."

"On April 9 Squires and McMasters started rowing before breakfast."

"On April 14 Gates took the first plunge from the float. He is a tough one, you bet!"

"Wilkes came down on May 16 to help the boys out and took his first pull in the 'O Polly Carp.' His new suit and muscular development excited the admiration and approval of the usual crowd of gamins on the bridge."¹³

John A. Kennedy became coach of the Club in 1888 and was its mainstay, until he left to coach at Yale in 1898. He produced a number of victories fielding eights from the sixty members of the Club. He was a highly regarded, competitive, and creative coach. One member observed: "I remember when he [Kennedy] cut down the oars after George Langford came back from Henley [the premier regatta in the world] and told him how the 'Britishers rowed with toothpicks' and I remember just as distinctly how he changed back again the next year and allowed that the Britishers didn't know it all!"¹⁴

Kennedy's Senior Four won a series of victories beginning in 1892 at a regatta held at Lafayette Boat House on Lake Minnetonka. The oarsmen included L.S. Bigelow at stroke, W. N. Armstrong at bow, Archie Wright in the third seat, and George Nettleton in the second seat. For "Toot" Bigelow, this race was the culmination of years of training at the Boat Club. The next year, 1893, was the year of the Financial Panic and a series of triumphs for MBC. For the first contest of the year, the Minnesota-Winnipeg Association held its regatta at Lake Minnetonka and the MBC won six out of seven events (every event except for the Junior Single, in which it had no entry). Shortly afterward, at the Mississippi Valley regatta, held at the same place, the Club's crews won all four races they entered. Then its senior four went to Detroit and won its race in the national regatta.



The Minnesota Boat Club's clubhouse on Raspberry Island below the 1859 Wabasha Street Bridge. This photograph from the 1880s by T. W. Ingersoll looks toward the West Side.



A race circa 1895 on the Mississippi River below the Wabasha Street bridge, which had been rebuilt, its old wooden trusses replaced by wrought iron.

At the Columbian regatta in Geneva, the junior four and a junior eight also won top honors.

The victories at the Columbian regatta were celebrated in St. Paul by a procession with militia from the Union Depot to the Club after the rowers returned by train. The celebration was organized by the president of the Club, E.A. Jaggard,

later a justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court. Other leaders in the Club included C.E. Flandrau and George Thompson of the *St. Paul Dispatch*. They arranged for a salute to be fired as the train arrived. At the end of the procession, speeches were made and a celebration held.

In the early days, the Club featured more than just rowing. It had tennis

courts and it built, in 1891, the first curling rink in the area. The clubhouse was a prominent spot for dinners and dances. Club members, wearing their distinctive cherry and white uniforms, regularly marched in the St. Paul Winter Carnival carrying a rowing shell on their shoulders.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, membership in the MBC was considered highly prestigious. Robert Stewart Sr., a St. Paul investment broker who joined in 1889, described "membership in those days as *carte blanche* membership in any other organization. It was the exclusive club of the town and took the place of the old German club."⁵

In 1915 Leavitt Corning also described the importance of the MBC to St. Paul:

For to be a Boat Club Member in the old days was to be a member of the Best Man's Club in St. Paul. To see his name on the membership roles of the "Minnesotas" was a distinction highly prized and not easily won. It was not only a badge of social distinction but of real manhood—an indication of recognition of the Manly Quality in a man by other men who were competent to judge and This Spirit with its accompanying demand for absolutely clean sport was a characteristic of the Club throughout its history right up to the time of its last competitions with other Clubs in 1897 and many a ruction has been started and fought out to a bitter finish by the Cherry and White Committees when other clubs resorted to questionable methods and tried to "row" men who had been treading dangerously close to the forbidden territory marked as "professional."⁶

The "Spirit" referred to above was formulated by H.M. "Hunt" Butler and applied to rowing: "Remember that no matter how nearly exhausted you may feel physically, the other fellows are probably just as badly off, and if you have the head, the nerve, the will, to put forth an extra effort at the finish you are almost certain to win."⁷ This articulation of the psychological element of rowing became one of the traditions of the Club.

* * *

The Minnesota Boat Club was not only a rowing but a socially active organization. In 1909, the Club's yearly calendar included the annual meeting in early



Old St. Paul's downtown around 1900, the backdrop for a crew on the river.

March, which always was followed by a "smoker;" the annual dinner just before the opening of each season on the water; a mid-winter picnic, consisting of a dinner with speeches, songs, and lively talk, and attendance at some theater; a fall watermelon feast at the old Crosby farm up the river, to which the members and guests went in all sorts of watercraft; a winter entertainment—play or concert—followed by a dance or reception; the annual ball which followed each regatta; and sometimes in the fall or winter, football, curling, or hockey games. It has been reported that some of St. Paul's happiest romances have had their beginnings at some of the Club affairs.

"Around 1915 when rowing was at its peak," wrote one Club historian, "the river racecourse would be lined with spectators from start to finish." By that time, enthusiasm for rowing was being threatened not only by the Spanish-American and Boer wars but by "golf, the bicycle, tiddledy winks and other milder games [which] had made their inroads and taken men who realized that it required stern stuff and sterner training to win renown with the oars and who preferred the milder games which permitted the uninterrupted use of the cigarette and the cocktail and afforded one all the comforts of home in their pursuit." The MBC

was in need of new boats, repairs to the boathouse, and some of the "old Spirit."⁸

The boathouse that the MBC built on Raspberry Island in 1910 was considered the best rowing facility in the country. Its Spanish design boasted the unique feature of being flood proof, a factor that has come in handy at least seven times after it was built. The design of the building is such that, during a flood, the outer walls collapse, leaving intact the inner steel-reinforced concrete columns imbedded in bedrock.

* * *

A list of the Club's membership over the years is impressive. It includes governors, mayors of St. Paul, and architect Cass Gilbert. Several Ellerbess, Griggses, Butlers, Weyerhaeusers, and Ordways have belonged. Almerick H. Paget, later Lord Queensbury, rowed when he was living in St. Paul around the turn-of-the-century. Governor William R. Merriam was its fourth president.

The MBC struggled between the First and Second World Wars. Many of its members departed for military service. The Great Depression added to the challenges the Club faced. Things began to improve after World War II, however, and by 1953 the Club was again competing and winning at the national level.



A Minnesota Boat Club shell races past Harriet Island in the background, circa 1890.

In the 1960s and 1970s the second floor of the boathouse was leased by several bars and restaurants. Tugboat Annie's was a popular restaurant until floods in the 1960s caused it to close. The River Serpent followed Tugboat Annie's, but it too went out of business.

Women first joined the Club in 1971, and four of them are previous U.S. national champions. A recent census indicated that about a quarter of the Club members were women, and the Club now enters crews in both men's and women's competitions. It is the success of the women's crews that has enabled MBC to carry on its winning traditions. The Club now regularly competes in the Northwestern International Rowing Association and the Canadian Henley regattas. MBC crews have won a number of championships in each.

In 1978 the city of St. Paul completed a plan to redevelop the riverfront around Raspberry Island. Referred to as the St. Paul-Mississippi River Corridor Plan, it called for the creation of a new park and marina between Harriet and Raspberry

Islands. Unfortunately, the Club had sold the downstream two-thirds of Raspberry Island to the city in order to pay \$2,000 of taxes when MBC was in financial difficulty in the 1940s. The city then, using its power of eminent domain, attempted to purchase the Club's remaining property and demolish the boathouse.

The city believed that it needed to own the MBC property in order to be eligible for state and federal development funds. It had the property appraised at \$99,000 and money was appropriated to buy MBC's portion of the island. Concerned that the city did not appreciate the historic significance of the Club, the membership and leadership of the Club opposed this effort. Another concern was the relocation of the Club; it would have been difficult and expensive to relocate the boathouse, which had to be close to the water to permit rowers to carry their boats from their storage racks to the water's edge. This would have been hard to replicate on the Mississippi River's floodplain.

Doug Holmberg, then president of the

Club, and several other members fought to save the Club. They submitted applications to both the St. Paul Heritage Commission and the National Register of Historic Places. The Club's application to the National Register stalled the city's redevelopment plan. In June, 1979, the National Register determined that MBC's boathouse was eligible for inclusion. A year later the city withdrew its request for funds to acquire Raspberry Island, and the boathouse and Club were saved. In the 1980s the Club partially renovated the boathouse. The first floor included a place to store boats, locker rooms, and a launching area for the rowing shells. The second floor was leased to the Co Partnership, an architectural firm with twelve people.

Enthusiasm for riverfront redevelopment was reignited in the mid-1990s. A new Wabasha Bridge was completed in 1996. Harriet Island underwent a \$15 million renovation that was completed in the fall of 2001. A \$1 million gift from the Target Corporation financed the construction of the Target Stage, designed by

Michael Graves & Associates, Princeton, N.J., and local architects Rafferty, Rafferty & Tollefson. The Paddleford Packet Boat Company continues to operate excursion boats from the island.

In addition to the Paddleford Company's boats, three new attractions are anchored on Harriet Island. The Covington Inn is a bed and breakfast on a rebuilt barge; the Mildred Pierce on Harriet Island is a restaurant also built on a renovated barge; and a new Minnesota Centennial Showboat opened in July 2002. Operated by the University of Minnesota, the showboat was inaugurated in 1958 and moored at the U of M's campus in Minneapolis. It was towed to Harriet Island in 1993 for renovation but destroyed by fire on January 27, 2000.

The West Side is in the middle of re-development as well. Joseph's, a restaurant formerly at State and Concord Streets, opened in a newly renovated building on Wabasha. The Drake Marble Building on Plato Avenue was completely rebuilt and opened this year with tenants including the Northwest Area Foundation and the Drake Bank, the first bank to be chartered in St. Paul in the last fifty years. U.S.

Bank is building a 350,000-square-foot administration building at Robert and Fillmore Streets that is scheduled to be opened in 2004.

Raspberry Island has received some recent improvements as well. Two 100-foot-tall stairways were built last year to connect the new Wabasha Street Bridge to the four-acre island. A new bridge to the island was also completed in 2002. A total of 325 feet in length, the bridge fits in with the aesthetics of the neighborhood. It has the same type of streetlights that line the road along Harriet Island, and it also has what is known as St. Paul ornamental railing in the same copper-patina green and terra-cotta colors as the Wabasha Bridge. Finally, under construction on the downstream end of Raspberry Island is the Schubert Club's Kugler Band Shell, designed by Jamey Carpenter. It is planned to open in the fall of 2002.

The MBC boathouse is presently in the midst of a major renovation. The first phase, costing \$350,000, has been completed. The north and south patios have been repaired, the external stucco has been restored, historically appropriate

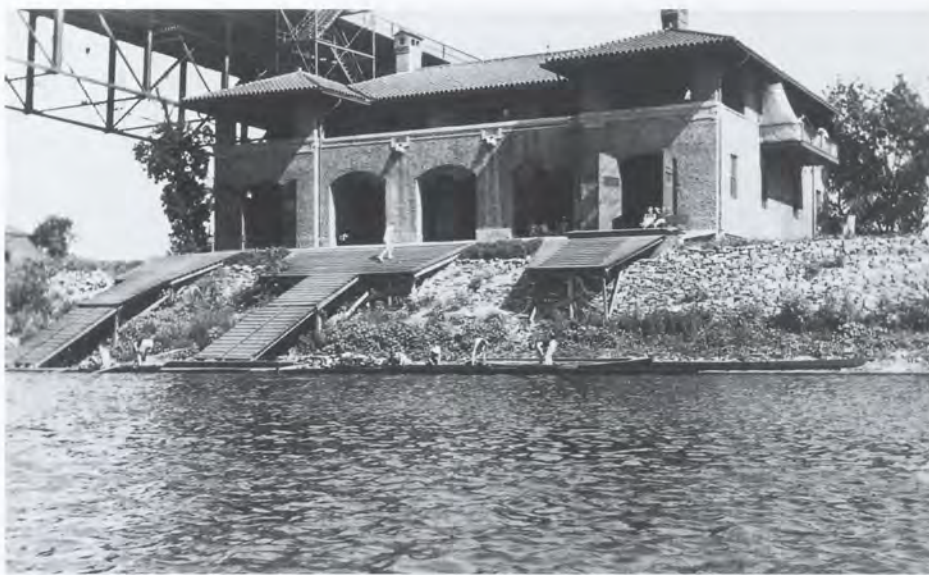
windows have been installed, the second floor has been insulated, and the electrical and plumbing systems have been brought up to code. A prairie garden with native plants has been planted to help protect the island against erosion. Antique bricks have been laid in the parking lot and in pathways around the building.

The second phase of planned improvements is even more ambitious. The locker rooms and restrooms will be moved to the second floor; an additional boat bay will be opened; stairs and an elevator will be built to the second floor; public restrooms will be built for use by all visitors to Raspberry Island; a special events room on the second floor will be renovated; and a new dock will be constructed. These improvements are projected to cost in the neighborhood of \$1 million; by mid-2002 almost half of the money had been raised.

The MBC has 100 active and 200 alumni members. It is a non-profit organization and a member of the United States Rowing Association. The Club shares its boathouse with the University of St. Thomas rowing program and Club members serve as coaches. Athletes from



The Boat Club's Senior Four, with their oars, on the dock in 1915. The Robert Street bridge is in the background downstream.



The clubhouse on Raspberry Island in 1915.



Almost under water in the flood of 1960.

the University of St. Thomas, Hamline University, Macalester College, and the University of Minnesota have enjoyed success at the Club and several have gone on to win National Team berths. High school students from Humbolt, Cretin-Derham Hall and St. Paul Academy-Summit School participate in classes and events sponsored by MBC. Rowing has been added as a club sport at Central High School.

The MBC has hosted a spring regatta known as the Minnesota Rowing Classic on Lake Phalen since 1959. Nearly 400 athletes from the Midwest and Canada participate annually. Funds raised at the regatta go to support leukemia research at the University of Minnesota. In 1995 the Club was host to the year's premier masters rowing event known as the U.S. Rowing Masters National Rowing Championships. More than 1,500 ath-

letes from throughout the United States, Canada, Peru, and Brazil participated. Proceeds went toward the restoration of the historic boathouse.

* * *

In 1909, W.P. Kirkwood paid a fitting tribute to the MBC in an article he wrote in *The Bellman*:

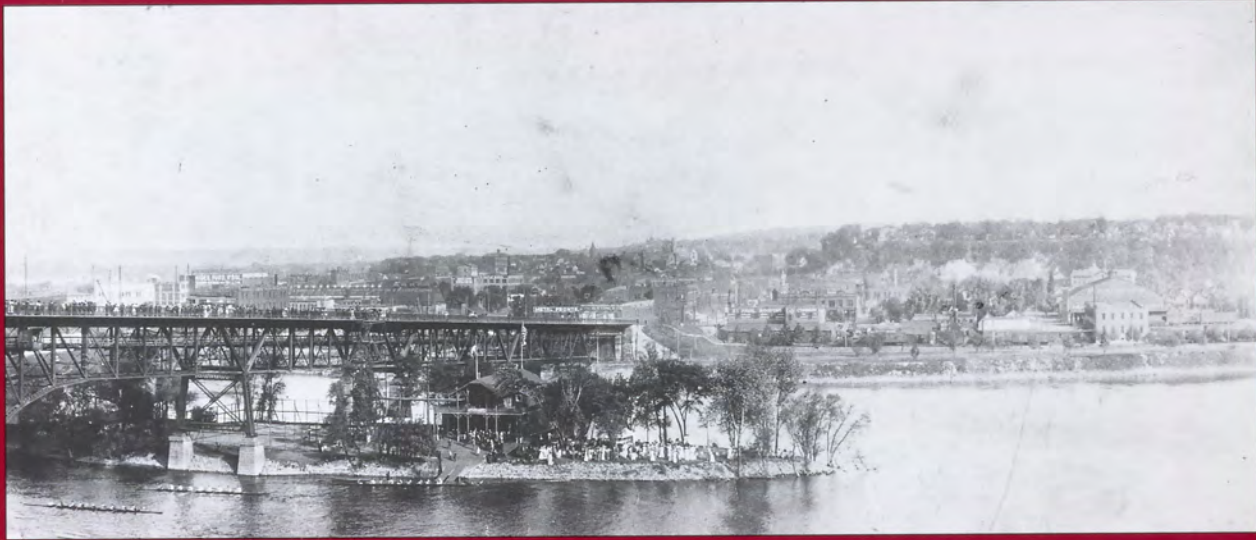
The members of the Minnesota Boat Club learn through their club life, if nowhere else, that success is won only through prolonged hard work, no matter what advantages one starts with, and they have it ground into them so that it may never be forgotten that the will to give that extra pull at the finish is what wins the most fiercely contested races. Applying this to the more serious business of life, they find it a good and thoroughly workable rule. One suspects that the application of this old-time tradition of the club has been the hidden force in more than a few professional and business careers to which St. Paul now "points with pride."⁹

Kirkwood concludes his article by reciting the closing remarks of the president of the Minnesota Boat Club at one of its dinners in 1909: "The club is a potent force for good in the city's life and work."¹⁰

Jim Miller is a former member of the MBC and has served as an officer. He lives in St. Paul near the Mississippi River and works as a commercial real estate broker in an office at the corner of Water and Wabasha Streets, overlooking Raspberry Island.

End Notes

1. *The Razoo*, L. Corning, February, 1903, page 9.
2. *The Razoo*, L. Corning, February, 1903, page 9.
3. *The Razoo*, L. Corning, February, 1903, page 11.
4. *The Razoo*, L. Corning, February, 1903, page 12.
5. *Twin Cities*, Patrice Harper, September 1981, page 65.
6. *The Razoo*, L. Corning, February, 1903, page 10.
7. *The Bellman*, W.P. Kirkwood, July 31, 1909, page 910.
8. *The Razoo*, L. Corning, February, 1903, page 14.
9. *The Bellman*, W.P. Kirkwood, July 31, 1909, page 913.
10. *The Bellman*, W.P. Kirkwood, July 31, 1909, page 913.



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.
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