RAMSEY COUNTY
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A Lynching in St. Paul? Almost—in 1895, an Era of 'Vigilante Justice'

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Life on the Mississippi:

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

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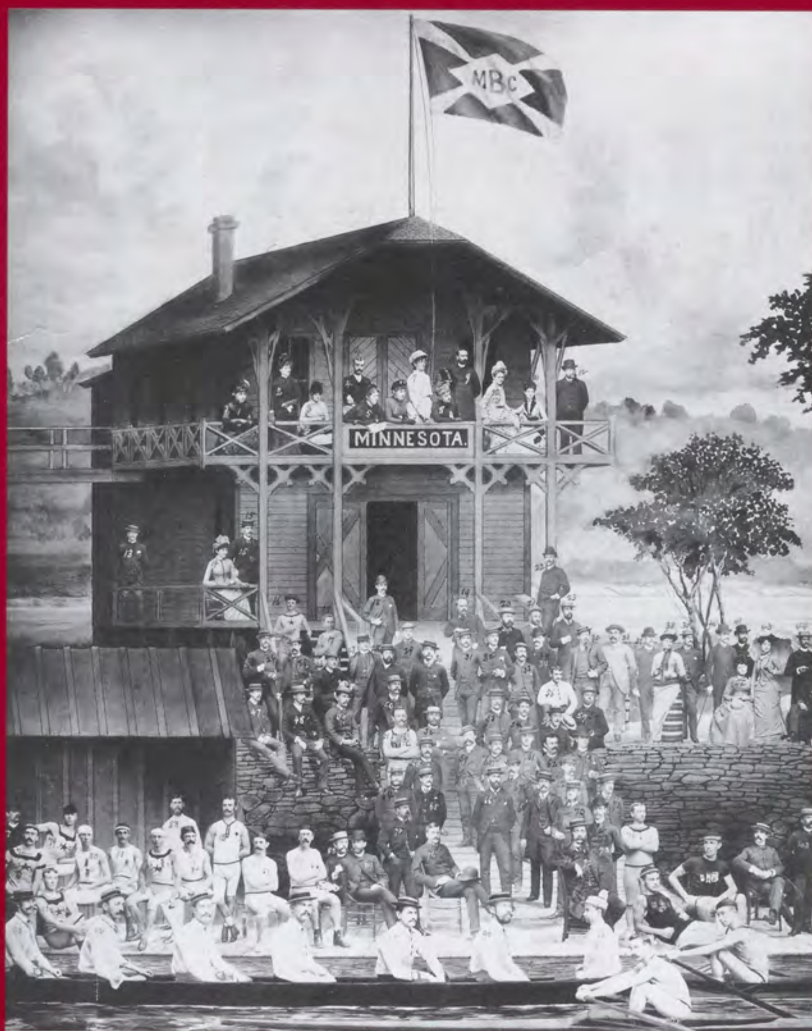

The home of the Minnesota Boat Club, circa 1880s. This photograph by C. A. Zimmerman "was one of the most remarkable pieces of photography ever accomplished," according to an article in a 1903 issue of The Razoo, *a Boat Club publication, adding that it "and has been commented upon by photographers all over the country. . . . In order to get it, Mr. Zimmerman had to keep a sketch of the boathouse 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

'Hang Him! That's the Best Way'

A Lynching in St. Paul? Almost, in 1895, an Era of 'Vigilante Justice' in the Nation

Paul D. Nelson

"Hang him!"

"Beat the hound to death with a club!"

"No, let's hang him, that's the best way"

"Well, get a rope then and be quick about it; five minutes is too long for him to live."

In the gray light of the early morning a frightened Negro cowered before a crowd of resolute men. They were wild with anger. He trembled like a leaf and between his gasps for breath implored his captors to be merciful. Their answer was a burst of righteous wrath. So declared the *St. Paul Globe* on June 3, 1895.

Duluth, 1920? No, St. Paul, 1895.

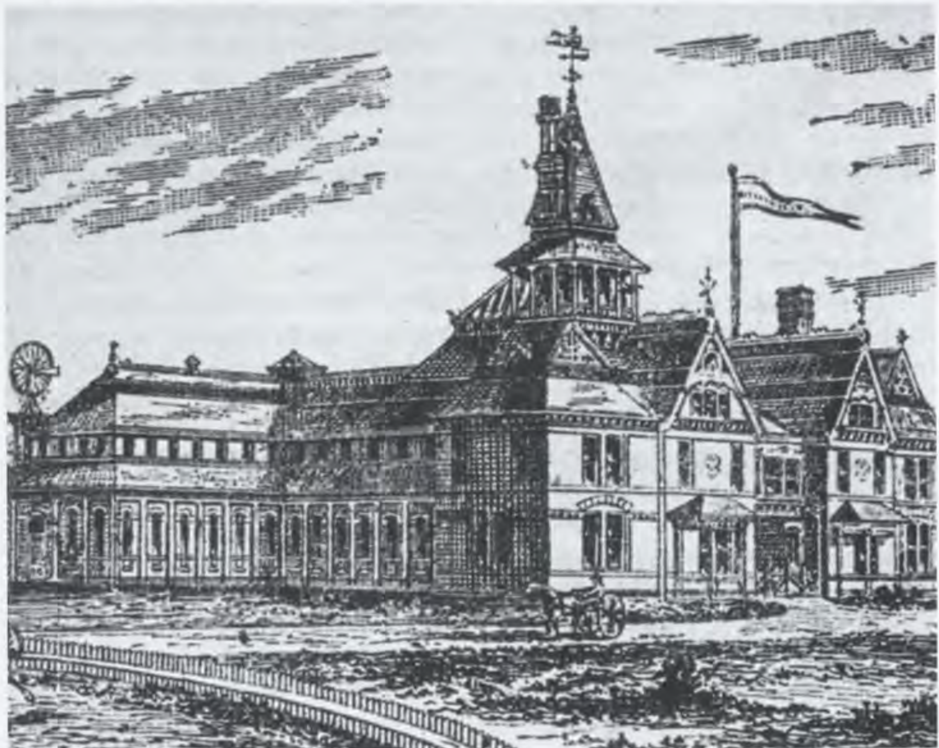
The only Jim Crow-style lynching—that is, the ritualized, often public murder of an African American (almost always a man) by whites acting in concert—in Minnesota history took place in Duluth in 1920, and that story is well-known. What has been overlooked until now is how close St. Paul came to anticipating the Duluth outrage by a full quarter century.

The Duluth lynchings occurred near the end of the fifty-year period, roughly 1880s to 1930s, when these murders served to intimidate and control black Americans, mostly in the South but in the later years in the Midwest too. By 1920 the frequency of lynchings had fallen to a third of its highest levels, and few occurred in the North, so the Duluth crimes seemed to come out of nowhere. The St. Paul event, by contrast, came during the worst decade of such murders nationwide. In the 1890s, it is now estimated, more than 1,000 African-Americans lost their lives to this kind of mob violence; countless more perished unknown or in white riots or following rigged legal proceedings.

As early as the late 1880s the great anti-lynching investigator, writer, and campaigner Ida B. Wells Barnett exposed as a lie the popular view of lynchings as spontaneous vigilante justice against black rapists of white women. In fact, allegations of sexual assault figured in only about one fifth of cases. Her work, however, reached mainly an African American audience. Elsewhere a certain template seems to have lodged in the popular imagination: the prowling black, subhuman brute intent on defiling the purity of white womanhood; the enraged community acting as one to avenge the victim; the emotionally satisfying result of swift and public justice.

By 1895 the Southern reaction to Emancipation and the loss of the Civil War had reached full strength, manifested in an unholy trinity of measures: disenfranchisement of black voters by means formal and informal; Jim Crow public accommodations laws and practices; and violence, tolerated and sometimes encouraged by government. These were overwhelming phenomena of the former slave states, but the forces behind them were so powerful that they affected the North and Midwest too. It was as though, a generation after Emancipation, a wave of revulsion against all things African American swept the nation. St. Paul, home to a tiny and harmless black population, felt the wave too.

Stories of lynchings and other forms of vigilante "justice" appeared often in the Twin Cities daily press during this



Norman W. Kittson's stables at Kittsondale, where the chase ended. Minnesota Historical Society archives.

ESCAPED THE FATAL NOOSE.

HUSTON OSBORNE, A TRAMP, IS PARTIALLY LYNCHED.

He Makes a Criminal Assault Upon Miss Ketchell—Her Brother, Anton Ketchell, Pursues the Desperado and Captures Him After a Hard Struggle—Mrs. D. W. Horst Intercedes and Prevents the Villain's Death—He Is Turned Over to the Police.

Huston Osborne, a negro tramp now locked up at the Rondo street police station, knows how it feels to be half-hanged. Early yesterday morning a half-dozen excited men strung him up to a tree at the corner of Iglehart street and Lexington avenue, and would have left him there to perish had it not been for the prayers of a woman. Just as the negro was losing consciousness the rope was slackened and his life preserved. His crime was an attempted criminal assault upon Miss Freda Ketchell, an eighteen-year-old girl who lives with her two sisters at 1007 Iglehart street.

From the June 3, 1895, issue of the St. Paul Pioneer Press. *Minnesota Historical Society newspaper archives.*

time, sometimes in long, wire-service pieces full of detail, just as often in tiny, space-filler items. In the month before the St. Paul case, for example, six lynching stories appeared in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press.*

The two most prominent ones dealt with events in Florida, where the victims were black, and Illinois, where they apparently were white. The two pieces, both wire service stories, followed the classic formula. Young white women were "assaulted" and grievously injured or killed. Angry citizens, not police, identified and caught the criminals. The accused readily confessed, though in the Florida case threats of instant death were used as persuasion. In both stories the writers assumed the young men's guilt. The instruments of death distinguished the two events: the three black men in Florida suffered torture, flaying, then burning, while the Illinois men were hanged from a bridge. Both stories reported the popular justifications. The leaders of the Illinois mob, "among the most prominent men of the county," feared that the rapists would be pardoned, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported on May 26, 1895. In Florida, the lynchings contributed to public harmony: "Twelve negroes have now been lynched in six months, and it would seem that the fate of the last three should prevent further attacks upon the white women. . . . There is no fear of trouble between the races," the *Pioneer Press* had noted five days earlier on May 21.

The people of 1895 St. Paul, then, had to do no more than read the newspaper to grasp the elements of the classic lynching: white woman assaulted, black brute pursued, community outrage boiled, cathartic justice carried out. The parts had been written and the stage directions marked; then onto the set wandered the unfortunate Houston Osborne.

Osborne was a transient, one of tens of thousands roaming the country in this depression era of the 1890s. He apparently worked sometimes as a waiter. For reasons never fully explained, he broke into the little house located at 1097 Iglehart, near its intersection with Lexington Avenue in St. Paul (the current site of the Oxford Pool), just before dawn on June 1, 1895. He entered through a window, into the bedroom occupied by the Kachel sisters—Maggie, Katherine, and Frieda. Frieda, age eighteen, awakened, saw Osborne, and asked him, "What are you doing here?" He put a hand over her mouth and demanded silence, but she screamed, rousing her sisters, who added their screams too. The din woke up their brother, Anton, sleeping in the house next door.

The Pioneer Press described the chase in its June 3 issue. Anton dashed outside in just his nightshirt, to see Osborne take off running. Anton chased him, soon aided by neighbors D.W. Horst and A.M. Thompson. The chase, described in detail by all three St. Paul dailies, looks to today's reader like a movie scene. Osborne, a trim young man himself, sprinted northwest, across what is now the campus of Central High School, but then open land belonging to the State Reform School. The nearly naked Kachel pursued, Horst and Thompson trailing. "At Martin Street [now vanished in the freeway trench] Kachel descried a number of men milking cows at McMenemy Bros. Dairy [413 North Lexington]. He shouted to them. Under any other circumstances the spectacle of a Negro tramp pursued by a naked man in the dusk of the morning, and across green fields, would have been highly amusing; but they did not stop to consider it. Four of the milkmen stopped work to join in the pursuit."

Osborne then turned west southwest toward Kittsondale, pioneer fur trader Norman Kittson's old stable and race track in the Midway. "Up and down, across pastures, plowed fields, fallow ground, fences and hedges went the pursuer and the pursued. [Kachel's] feet were bruised with the hard clods and his bare legs scratched with briars and brambles, but he did not slacken his pace. Not far behind were the four milkmen, puffing like porpoises."

Just beyond Kittsondale, west of Snelling Avenue, Osborne got tangled up in barbed wire fences, slowing his flight. Kachel, apparently unencumbered by clothing, shot through these fences "like an eel," and brought Osborn down. "Both men were almost exhausted, but fought like tigers. Gradually the young man overcame his opponent and crushed him to the ground. Osborne was not ready to give up, however, and by a quick stroke threw Kachel off . . . . Once more they went down and rolled over and over on the ground. . . . With what little strength remained in him, Kachel cast himself upon the tramp's back and clutched him by the throat. Osborne staggered back and fell heavily on his face," the *Pioneer Press* reported in describing the chase. The chase was over. It had gone on for a mile-and-a-half. Assisted by the milkmen and his neighbors, Kachel led Osborne back to the scene of the crime, where another crime would soon take place.

Up to this point, Anton Kachel and the other pursuers had behaved well, perhaps admirably so. Now, however, they gave way to the impulse for instant "justice" that afflicted much of the nation at that time. Someone in the party—the *St. Paul Globe* identified him as A.M. Thompson—shouted, "Get a rope and hang him."

The June 3 *St. Paul Globe* continued the account: "The others took up the cry. Someone ran in the house for a rope, and the most intense excitement reigned. The Negro pleaded for mercy, but nothing but curses were heaped upon him. The man who had gone after the rope [identified by the *Pioneer Press* as Anton Kachel] reappeared . . . with a long piece of window sash cord. He made the noose as he walked towards the crowd. . . . In the rear of Horst's house [stood] a large tree with a convenient limb at the proper height. The Negro was dragged towards the tree and the rope was hastily thrown over the limb . . . . In an instant more than half a dozen pairs of hands grasped the slack end of the rope and Osborne dangled in the air. His body began to twitch convulsively."

At this moment, normally law-abiding white citizens of St. Paul stood on the brink of degrading themselves and their city beyond redemption. Though St. Paul already had lost to Minneapolis the battle for regional economic and population superiority, it retained a great deal of vitality and its leaders fostered an image of enlightened progressiveness. Houston Osborne's death would have marked St. Paul as the instigator of the northernmost Negro lynching in the nation to date, a badge of shame even in that Jim Crow era. St. Paul's air of civic superiority, something that survives to this day, would have been irrevocably exposed as a sham.

The local press unanimously identified an older sister of the three Kachel girls, Mrs. D.W. Horst, as the heroine of the day. She pleaded with the men not to kill Osborne, and they relented. Soon the police arrived, and Houston Osborne surely greeted the closing of a cell door behind him with relief. The next day the distinguished African American criminal lawyer, Fredrick McGhee, undertook his defense.

Osborne's crime had taken place on June 1. On June 2 both the *Globe* and the *Dispatch* published editorials about the case. Both expressed a troubling (to today's observer) fractured reaction. On the one hand, both papers assumed Osborne's guilt of the crime of rape, even though their own news reports made clear no rape had occurred. The Negro "is undoubtedly guilty of the most dastardly and most shameful crime in the annals of wickedness," opined the *Dispatch*. "A wretch like Osborne has no right to encumber the earth . . . ." "[E]very man will rejoice that the criminal did not escape, and will demand that he suffer the extremest penalty of the law," added the *Globe*. Osborne was "a vile wretch who could claim no pity." In these remarks the St. Paul dailies imitated their Southern counterparts, which often proclaimed the suspects' guilt, stirred up venom, and encouraged lynchings while the suspects remained on the loose or in jail.

Attorney Fredrick McGhee, who defended Houston Osborne. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

On the other hand, however, both papers expressed relief that Osborne had been spared. He deserved the worst, according to the *Dispatch*, but "it is the law alone that can determine the degree of his punishment." Mrs. Horst had saved St. Paul "the ineffable disgrace of a Negro lynching." The *Globe* probably had it exactly right, saying that only "a happy accident" had spared the city "the reproach and lasting regret that must follow lawlessness. . . . St. Paul is law-abiding. Let us never lose that good repute, even under the strongest provocation."

Both editorials went on to reach dubious conclusions: that sexual assaults by black men against white women were a growing problem (nothing in the news reports of local crime so indicated), and that the only way to stem them was for the too-lenient courts to get tough on the bad guys, try them (and convict them, obviously) quick, and punish them hard. Without such reform, vigilante action was understandable. This too conformed to the practice of Southern papers and lynching apologists, who often portrayed the murders as the natural corrective action of the people, betrayed by excessively mild and dilatory courts—pure nonsense.

We do not know how the Twin Cities African American community reacted to the Osborne outrage; all issues of its weekly paper, the *Appeal*, for this period are lost. The daily press reported no protest meetings or marches. Whatever local black citizens and their leaders may have felt or said privately, it is certainly possible that they kept quiet in public. They knew how to raise a ruckus and had done so often enough, but they also knew how to pick their battles.

Given the climate of the times, and black Minnesotans' limited political assets, Houston Osborne's was probably not the best case for making a statement. He evidently had been guilty of a low crime (though not rape), had not been killed, and now had able African American legal counsel. What's more, Osborne belonged to a class of people, a transient proletariat, which made the upstanding, striving black middle classes uncomfortable.

Two cases a few years hence illustrate the calculations that local black leadership made from time to time. In 1903 a black man named James Haynes had abducted, apparently for the purpose of rape, a fourteen-year-old white girl. After his capture, the black community convened a mass meeting and adopted a resolution deploring "the unspeakable horror [of] the brutal crime and condemn[ing] it with all earnestness as law-abiding citizens." They offered to help track down and bring to justice any similar malefactors. Just two years earlier, however, they had rallied to protect a killer. Harry Summers had killed a white man in Tennessee and fled to St. Paul where he lived for a time incognito. Upon capture by local police, a Tennessee sheriff came to town to

take Summers back South for trial. On this occasion the black community mobilized to try to block Summers's extradition, on the ground that he might be lynched in Tennessee. They took the case to the press, the public, the governor, and to the state Supreme Court.

The differing reactions reflect sensible judgment. The Summers case, with its genuine danger of a Southern lynching, offered the prospect of success and the enlisting of white public opinion. (Summers was extradited to Tennessee, where he received a mild sentence for his crime.) In the Haynes and Osborne cases, by contrast, by the time the black public got involved all danger of lynching had passed, and the accused had competent counsel (in both cases Fredrick McGhee.) Public protest probably would gain nothing.

With attorney McGhee at his side, Houston Osborne quickly and quietly pled guilty—not to sexual assault, appropriately, but to burglary (breaking and entering with intent to commit a felony), a crime of which he was probably guilty. None of the men who tried to murder him faced any criminal charges.

Why did Houston Osborne live while so many in his position died by the rope, the bullet, or the bonfire? The press gave all credit to Mrs. Horst, but it was probably more complicated than that. Several elements of the case may have played a part. For one, Frieda Kachel had suffered neither rape nor other physical harm, and her unhurt presence at the scene prevented wild rumors. The events also took place early on a Sunday morning in a thinly populated part of town, thus inhibiting the gathering of a big crowd: in many lynching cases, enormous crowds raised the emotional pitch, egged on the killers, and blurred individual responsibility. The small crowd, estimated at about a dozen, also probably helped make Mrs. Horst's entreaties both heard and heeded.

The most important factor of all probably was St. Paul's lack of deep race hatred. The huge majority of lynchings took place in the South, where the races had lived together in discomfort for centuries. Slavery left a poisoned legacy. Of course lynchings sometimes took place in the North and Midwest too, but in most of those cases they were preceded by a surge of black immigration and white resentment. St. Paul, with no history of slavery and a small, slow-growing black population, lacked the crucial elements for the festering of murderous racial animosity.

By "happy accident" Houston Osborne survived his brush with the mob and the noose, but the events of that Sunday morning perhaps brought about his death soon enough: he died of tuberculosis in Stillwater prison less than two years later.

Paul D. Nelson is a member of Ramsey County History*'s Editorial Board and author of the recently published biography of Fredrick McGhee, the first African American lawyer admitted to the practice of law in Minnesota. Nelson's article published here is adapted from his book,* Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861–1912 *(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002).*

Notes

Information on the number and places of lynchings in the United States is from US: NAACP, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States 1889–1918* (New York: Arno Press and the *New York Times,* 1969, originally published by the NAACP in 1919); Appendix I, page 29 (number of persons lynched); Appendix II, Chronological List of Persons Lynched, pp. 43–103.

Books On Lynching

Why read about lynchings? Because they have played a big part in American history. Contrary to one popular image, most lynchings were not isolated acts of vigilante justice carried out by backwoods rednecks. Lynchings are better understood as a durable, semi-official institution for the control of the first two post-Emancipation generations of African Americans. Respectable white citizens often directed and participated in them; Southern civic leaders and politicians defended, even celebrated them. Many, perhaps most, Southerners understood perfectly well that lynching was an instrument of white supremacy.

The history of lynching reminds us that slavery did not really end with the Civil War. Lynching, peonage, and other institutions preserved many of the elements of slavery into the middle of the twentieth century. American history cannot be fully understood without recognizing lynching's place.

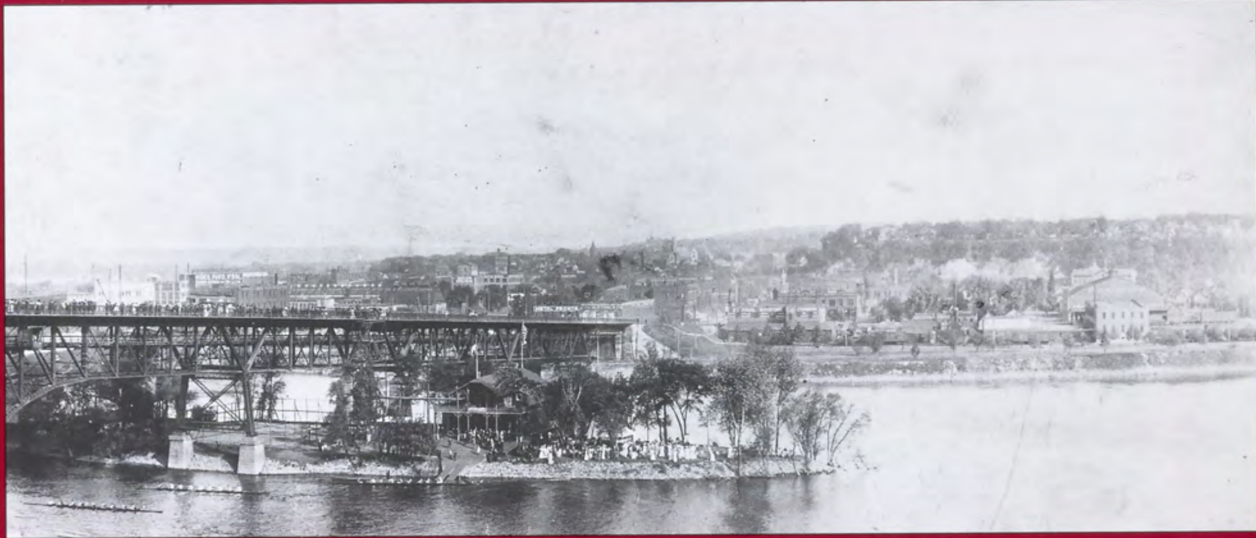
Four excellent books on the subject have appeared in the past few years. The most current is Philip Dray's *At the Hands of Persons Unknown, The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002). This thorough and well-written book goes well beyond the stories of the crimes themselves, to explore the politics and social conditions in which lynching thrived and finally expired.

Leon Litwack's *Trouble In Mind, Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), covers much of the same ground, with more attention to African American culture and daily life. His chapter devoted to lynching, "Hellhounds," is compelling and horrifying; the descriptions of one grisly crime after another suggest the cumulative degradation that lynchings inflicted.

The photo book, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America,* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Press, 2000), by James Allen, reprints many photos of lynching scenes. These were not snapshots but souvenir postcards produced to celebrate the crimes.

Michael Fedo's *The Lynchings in Duluth* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000), admirably illuminates one of our state's worst crimes. Fedo takes the reader through the events in horrifying detail; the book is gripping and profoundly disturbing. The author makes clear that this horror, though in a way anomalous, arose from the same poisonous elements as other lynchings of black Americans. Yes, we Minnesotans were capable of this. Recently republished, the book's only flaw is its lack of footnotes.

P.D.N.



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.*

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