

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

*Harvest of Victims:  
St. Paul's Smallpox  
Epidemic of 1924*

Page 10

Summer, 2003

Volume 38, Number 2

*Fog and a Dark October Night*

The Fabled Wreck of the 'Ten Spot'  
In Its Plunge to the River Below

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The wreck of Terminal Railway's No. 10 on October 15, 1912 when the 145,000-pound locomotive, tender, and eight cars plunged off the railroad's swing bridge into the Mississippi twenty-five feet below. Photograph from the Davis, Kellogg and Severance Case Files at the Minnesota Historical Society collections. See article beginning on page 4.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 38, Number 2

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue of *Ramsey County History* returns to the first decades of the twentieth century with two compelling accounts of losses of life: the wreck of the locomotive "Ten Spot" on a foggy night in 1912 and the virulent smallpox epidemic in St. Paul and Minneapolis in 1924–25. In our lead article, labor historian Dave Riehle recounts what happened on the Terminal Railway swing bridge across the Mississippi River on the border of Ramsey and Dakota counties in South St. Paul and how the accident killed the locomotive's engineer. Paul Nelson then tells us how smallpox spread through the Twin Cities, killing many more in Minneapolis than in St. Paul, over a fourteen-month period and how vitally effective vaccination was against that dread disease. In light of current public debate over the need for vaccination of large numbers of the populace against smallpox, Nelson's research provides a cautionary episode from Minnesota's public health records.

Moving from problems in industrial safety and the efforts of public health officials in the prevention of a highly communicable disease, this issue finishes with two charming and nostalgic articles. The first, written by Paul Johnson, is about the enigmatic Minnie Dassel (1852–1925), a long-time St. Paul resident who was well-connected but fell on hard times and yet was always willing to help others in need. This issue concludes with Carleton Vang's recollections of summer swimming holes and the State Fair neighborhood of his carefree youth in the 1930s while growing up in St. Paul's Midway area.

*John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board*

# Books

## *The River We Have Wrought*

John O. Anfinson

University of Minnesota Press 365  
pages including index, illustrations  
and maps

Reviewed by *Billie Young*

John Anfinson, the former historian for the St. Paul District of the Corps of Engineers, has written a book about the Upper Mississippi that both engineers of the river and environmentalists will appreciate. However, it is the environmentalists who will love it more.

The subtitle states that the book is "A History of the Upper Mississippi." Actually, the book is an account of the Corps of Engineers' efforts to create, first the four-and-a-half-foot channel, then the six-foot channel, and finally the present nine-foot shipping channel in the Mississippi River. The creation of the channel with its associated dams transformed the river from a free-flowing body of water that sustained thousands of species of life to a series of twenty-six semi-stagnant pools that step down from the Twin Cities to Alton, Illinois, just above St. Louis.

From the environmentalists' perspective, the result of the Corps' work has been water pollution, the destruction of wild life habitat, the extinction of several species, and the possibility of an ecosystem collapse on the once verdant and vibrant Upper Mississippi.

From the perspective of grain shippers and farmers, the nine-foot channel is a boon that enables Midwest growers to economically move their products to world markets and frees them from the threat of monopolistic railroad rates. Agricultural organizations and the towing industry see the highest and best use of the river to be that of a shipping canal



*A view of downtown St. Paul from the river in 1936. Note the squatters' cabins. Photograph from the Minnesota Historical Society.*

and they are presently lobbying to dredge an even deeper channel and enlarge some of the locks from their present length of 600 feet to 1,200 feet.

Anfinson begins by describing the river as it once was—a beautiful but at the same time hazardous body of water that frustrated steamboat captains. The water level fluctuated—high in the spring and so low in late summer that, at times, people and livestock could wade across the river. Boats would get hung up on sandbars with barely eighteen inches of water flowing over them. For weeks at a time steamboats would be unable to navigate to St. Paul because of low water. Fallen trees, often lurking just under the water's surface, were lethal hazards.

Following the Civil War and the phenomenal growth of grain production in the Upper Midwest, Congress heeded

local pleas to improve the river for shipping. Anfinson details the political pressures generated by the Grange and business organizations to modify the river. Claiming to be beset by the "evils and defects of our railway system" the Grange movement, boards of trade and chambers of commerce of the Upper Midwest, in 1878 convinced Congress to "remake the Mississippi River into the commercial highway they dreamed it could be." The task of remaking the river was assigned to the Corps of Engineers.

The first step was to outfit snag boats to grapple with the fallen trees and drag them out of the river. While that improved safety on the river, it did not solve the problem of low water. The Corps was then directed to deepen the channel by dredging and by building wing dams and closing dams that drasti-

cally narrowed the river, forcing the swiftly moving water to scour out its own deeper channel.

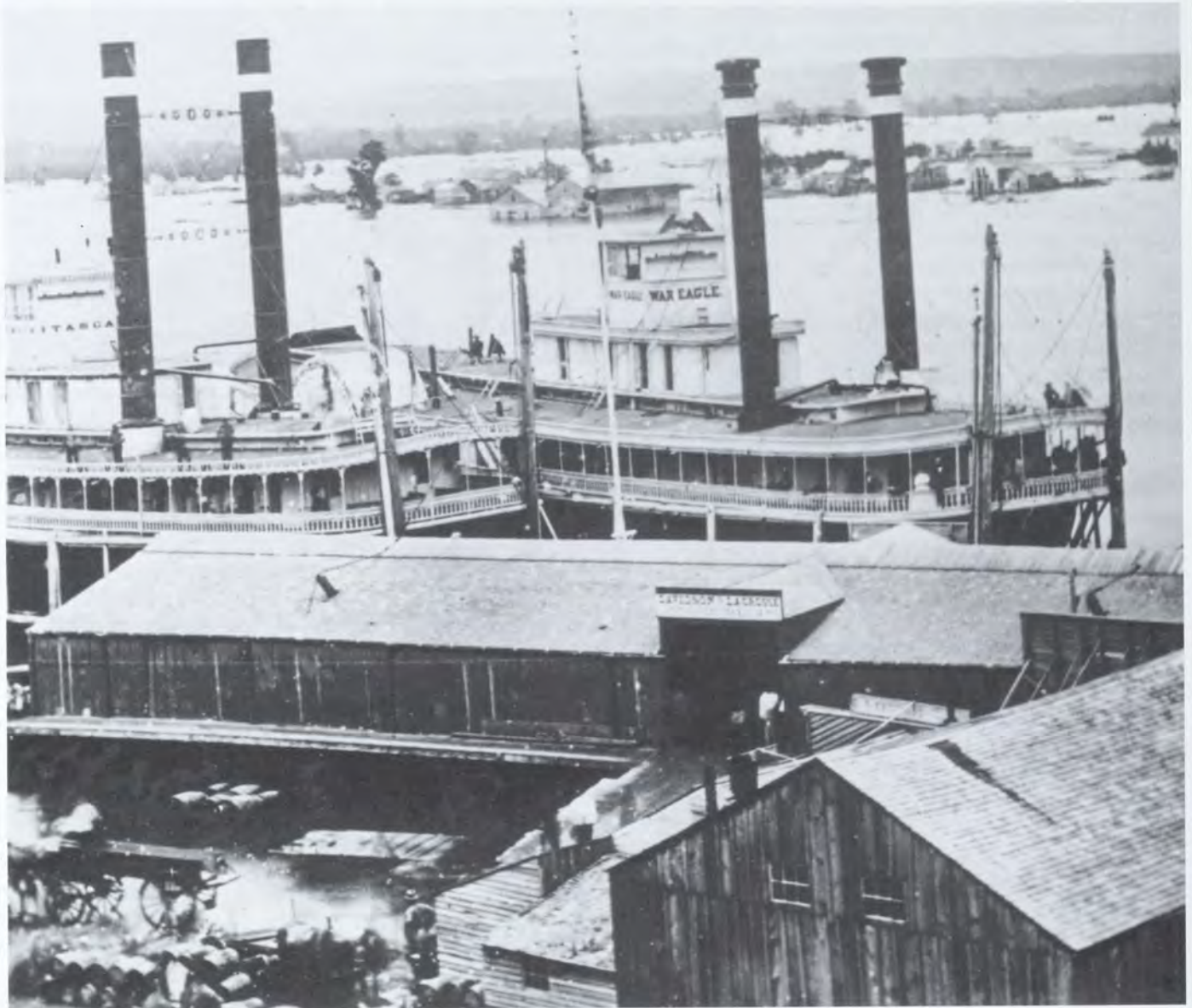
Supporters of changing the river maintained that, once the channel had been deepened to four-and-a-half feet all the way to St. Louis, the volume of shipping on the river would increase. Instead the reverse happened. Railroads took over more and more of the shipping and passenger traffic. When lumber rafting ended, little moved on the river. A speech by James J. Hill in 1902, stating that the era of shipping on the river had ended and the government was wasting its money trying to im-

prove navigation, galvanized the river communities into action. If a four-and-a-half-foot channel would not bring back shipping, they would dredge out a six-foot channel, which would certainly bring back the river traffic.

Once again the Corps was called on to build more wing and closing dams, further constricting the river. By 1930 more than 1,000 wing dams had been built just in the 140-mile stretch between St. Paul and LaCrosse. And once again, despite the dredging of a six-foot-deep channel and the claims of the boosters, the promised increase in river shipping did not take place.

Alarmed by the changes taking place in the river, conservationists and sportsmen began promoting an alternative vision, one that called for a natural Mississippi. In 1924, under the leadership of Will Dilg, head of the Isaac Walton League, Congress was persuaded to authorize the Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge, ultimately setting aside 233,000 acres along the river for wildlife.

Conservationists were making great progress promoting their competing claim on the river when two events galvanized shipping interests once again. They were the building of the Panama



*The cluttered Lower Lever during St. Paul's steamboat era. Photo dated 1861 is from the Minnesota Historical Society.*

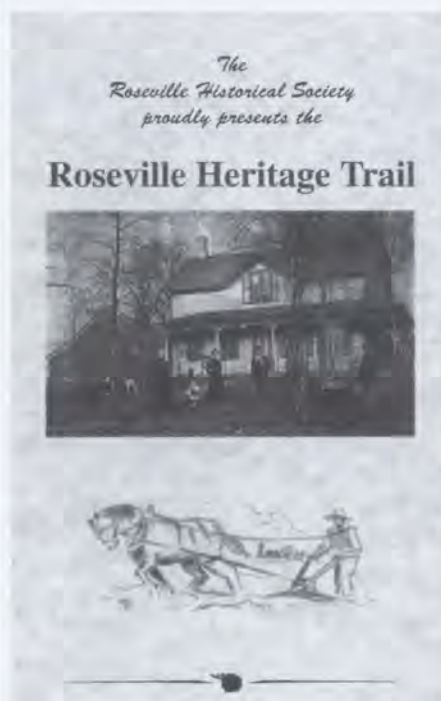
Canal and the Indiana Rate Case of 1922. When the canal was completed, shippers discovered they could ship goods more cheaply by water from one coast to the other than Midwest farmers could ship to either coast via the railroads. The Indiana Rate Case ended the preferential railroad rates shippers in the Midwest had previously enjoyed. The only solution appeared to be increased use of the river. Anfinson explains in great detail the complicated political maneuvers of the campaign in the Midwest and in Washington that led to federal approval of the present system of locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi and the creation of a low-water, nine-foot channel in the river. With the exception of a few solitary voices of dissent (some from the Corps of Engineers itself) residents of the Mississippi Valley supported the reengineering of the Upper River.

Contrary to the experience with the four-and-a-half and six-foot channels, once the nine-foot channel was completed in 1940, it stimulated shipping beyond its boosters' wildest dreams. Soon millions of tons of grain were moving down the river to New Orleans. At the same time many of the fears of the environmentalists were confirmed.

During the past decade, residents of the Upper Mississippi Valley have become newly aware of a river they formerly had ignored. Thanks to the activities of organizations such as the St. Paul Riverfront Corporation, communities have been reestablishing lost connections to the river, to the commerce that flows on its surface and to its threatened wildlife. It is clear that today most citizens want the best of both worlds, for the Mississippi River to be a major transportation artery and, at the same time, a healthy habitat for wildlife as well as a playground for sportsmen and boaters. Others are not sure this will be possible. Anfinson's book ably explains how we developed the highly engineered river that we now have. He states "... the river wrought by our predecessors has led us into the current dilemma" and points out that the decisions we make now will determine the

kind of river and economy we will hand off to future generations.

*Billie Young is the author of Cahokia—The Great Native American Metropolis (Univeristy of Illinois Press); A Dream for Gilberto and Obscure Believers. She has just completed a book on the history of the Upper Mississippi River, written at the request of the Minnesota Historical Society Press.*



#### Also in Print

The Roseville Historical Society has published a new edition of its Roseville Heritage Trail brochure, a pictorial survey of fifty-three sites combined with brief descriptions that reflect the history of St. Paul's northern suburb once known as Rosetown. In the early years, the brochure's Introduction notes, "Rosetown was almost entirely agricultural. Old timers can list at least 20 different hog farms. . . . As many as 33 dairy farms existed. . . . But by far the most numerous were the truck farmers on small acreages of 10-20 acres. Truck farming was a very labor intensive occupation that required lots of help during the growing season—larger acreages were not feasible."

The brochure describes some of the

hog and dairy farmers as also raising vegetables, apples, and berries to sell to markets in St. Paul and Minneapolis. Few of their houses had central heating, so coal and wood burning stores provided heat. Many homes had a cement or stone cistern to store rainwater and a hand pump to bring the water up into the kitchen. Indoor plumbing was rare, so wells provided water.

The Heritage Trail was first established in 1975 when the Roseville City Council encouraged its Bicentennial Committee to put together a "lasting remembrance" of the celebration. The Trail was dedicated in 1976, with thirty-two sites listed. A year later, as a offshoot of the project, the Old Rosetown Historical Society, now known as the Roseville Historical Society, was established. Updated in 1983 and again in 1991, the Trail's fifty-two sites are numbered and identified with a marker and a color photograph of each site. Where available, an old photograph of the site as it once looked has been added.

Delightful historical vignettes are included in many of the descriptions. For example, the reader learns that the house at 1755 Alameda was built as part of the old Ramsey County Poor House to be used as a pest house for patients with communicable diseases; that the Roselawn cemetery chapel and administration building was designed in 1903 by famed architect Cass Gilbert; that the cemetery has a headstone for a horse owned by Governor William Marshall, who once lived on the property; and that before 1930, only six houses had been built on the entire half-mile square bounded on the west by Snelling Avenue, on the north by County Road B, on the east by Hamline, and on the south by Roselawn. Five of those houses remain.

This little brochure, which includes a fold-out map of the area, is a fine example of a historical society preserving the history of the community it serves. For more information, contact the Roseville Historical Society. V.B.K.

# THESE KIDS WON'T HAVE SMALLPOX

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*Hundreds Take Advantage of School Holiday to Get Vaccinated at City Hall*



*Photograph from the St. Paul Daily News for November 5, 1924. Minnesota Historical Society, Collections. See article beginning on page 10.*

## R.C.H.S.

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