

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**

—Page 4



*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

Summer, 2003

## CONTENTS

- 3** Letters
- 4** Fog and the Dark of an October Night—  
The Fabled Wreck of the 'Ten Spot' in  
Its Plunge to the River Below  
*David Riehle*
- 10** Fear a Powerful Motivator  
A Harvest of Victims: the Twin Cities and  
St. Paul's Traumatic Smallpox Epidemic in 1924  
*Paul D. Nelson*
- 21** The Story of Minnie Dassel: Was She a  
Mysterious Countess Who Settled in St. Paul?  
*Paul Johnson*
- 22** *Growing Up in St. Paul*  
'I Didn't Know If We Were Rich or Poor—  
Times Were Idyllic Then . . . We Roamed at Will'  
*Carleton Vang*
- 25** Books

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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*

## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

# 'I Didn't Know If We Were Rich or Poor—Times Were Idyllic Then . . . We Roamed At Will'

*Carleton Vang*

In 1937, when I was eight I didn't know if we were rich or poor. My parents always seemed to make ends meet. There was always food on the table, always a little extra for new clothes when they were needed. We lived on Thomas Street then, upstairs in a duplex, in back of Westlund's Grocery Store, which was on Snelling Avenue. I attended Hancock grade school. The seasons didn't matter much to me, rain or snow, sun or cold, we shared them all with friends. Time seemed so unending then.

I remember my father telling me about a piece of property he had purchased out near the Fair Grounds. It was there he and my mother built their first house, on the northeast corner of Almond and Arona. He took me out there with my brother when the basement was being dug using a horse and bucket. We watched with him as the cement blocks were laid, as the studs were being raised. I remembered my father saying that the house cost about \$4,000 to build. I had not yet developed an appreciation for money, but \$4,000 seemed like a lot of money to me. Dad had survived the depression despite hard times, and it seemed then that we were on top of the world. The new home was grand. I had a different neighborhood to explore.

My new grade school was Tilden, located kaddy-corner from our home. It was a large, redstone structure, much the same as Hancock, with an old section on one end and a new section on the other. I was introduced into its third grade the year we moved. It was a two-story school, classrooms on the first and second floors, a gymnasium in the basement. The principal's office was on the second floor, a place as dreaded as if it were a dragon's lair. It was where one went when discipline was necessary. Outside,



*Carleton Vang with perched on a pony in 1934. All photographs with this article are from the author.*

in front, were the swings and teeter-totters, not much grass. The large playground was in back, stretching the entire length of the school.

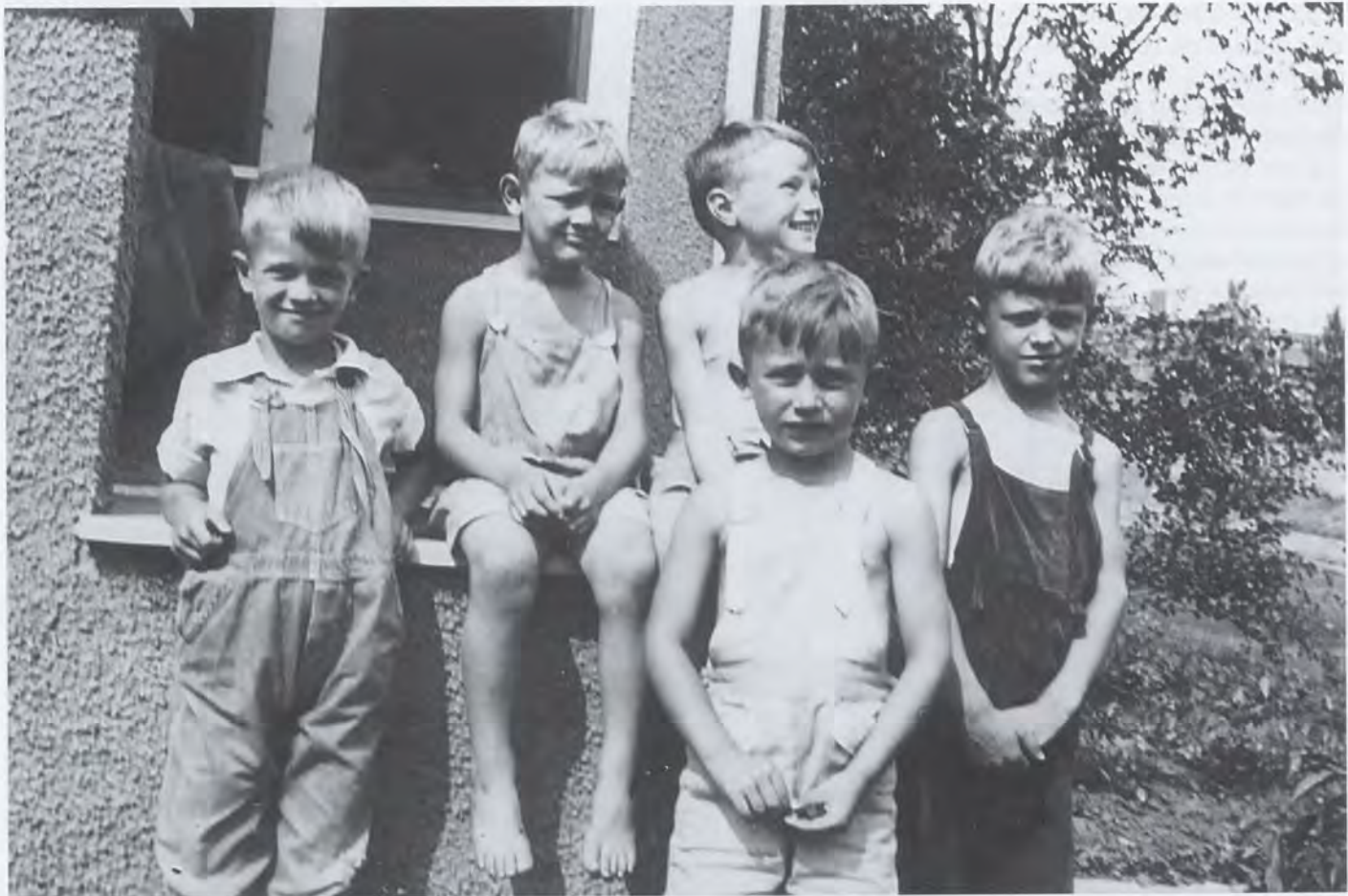
I don't remember much about Tilden until I was in the 5th grade, for it was there I learned to write using the Palmer Penmanship Method, a series of exercises designed to control the hand in order to craft the swirls, curves and lines needed to make readable alphabet characters. I had terrible handwriting when I started. I was one of the worst writers in the class. But a teacher named Mrs. Emory worked very hard with me, holding my hand, moving it with her own, showing me the skill that was necessary to write well, giving me the confidence to

conquer what was then very difficult. Before the year ended I was writing quite well. I will never forget Mrs. Emory.

Grossman's grocery store was a block away. It was the only place we shopped. I was often sent there by my mother to get things she needed. It was a one-room store about twenty by forty feet in size. I remember Mr. Grossman having to climb a sliding wooden ladder to get items off the top shelves. His inventory was kept in the basement. Candy was purchased for a penny. I often got a treat as a reward for going to the store. It was also a place where we could return pop bottles for a 2-cent refund. If we saved up 5-cents we could buy a Dixie Cup.

Our house was situated a block east of the State Fair grounds and two blocks north of Como Avenue. Behind Grossman's, on Como, was a gasoline station with a large shed in back. Beside it was the Midtown Theater. Across the street from the gas station was a small dime store, and several houses. Down toward Snelling, on the theater side, was the Midway Creamery. It was there we watched milk being bottled, and where we snatched ice from the trucks when they backed up to load for deliveries.

Snelling and Como was different then. The Fair Ground's main gate was there, set at an angle across the streetcorner. Across from it, on the south side, was a pharmacy that later became Joe Stoffel's restaurant. On the southeast corner, nestled beneath a huge bower of oak trees, was a filing station, and behind it, the Hecht Barber Shop. On the northeast quadrant was Hassett's restaurant, a greasy-spoon as we called it, and beside it a small garage that always serviced Offenhauser race cars during State Fair Days. Snelling and Como was a streetcar hub for the Snelling Line that ran all the way from Randolph, to where it and ter-



*The author, far right, with his brother Richard, second from left, and their neighborhood friends.*

minated at Hoyt and Hamline, and also for the Como Harriet Line that ran from downtown St. Paul all the way into Minneapolis.

To the north of our house, a block away, was the Jewish Home, a small building facing Midway Parkway. It was a retirement and nursing home, small at the time, occupying only a fourth of the block-square property. The remaining land was unkempt, weeded. It was there my friends and I hunted butterflies and bugs for our insect collections. There were many bugs in those days, and butterflies by the hundreds.

To the South, beyond Como Avenue, was the wilderness created by the Shiely Sand and Gravel Company, two huge depressions gouged out of the earth, separated by the Northern Pacific Rail line that ran between them. What a playland for kids. Four city blocks long and two

wide, each filled with earth mounds, sand, trees, and rock, creating worlds of miniature deserts, diminutive mountains. And up by the Northern Pacific shops were huge chunks of granite stacked one atop the other to form virtual hideouts among their many crevasses and caves. Sand and gravel was mined from the one remaining source, the former Quinlan farm located between the NP tracks and the Hamline University football stadium. It was carried by truck to the compound on Snelling where it was washed with artesian water pumped from deep wells. After the water was used, it was discarded through a long three-foot diameter pipe that carried it several blocks to an area behind the streetcar dump to a place we appropriately called BAB (Bare Ass Beach) as it was there we used to go swimming in the summer months even though we lacked bathing suits.

The streetcar dump, which bordered Como Avenue, a block west of Snelling, was a deep pit filled with runoff water. It was where the streetcar company dumped its waste. The streetcar gondolas would come off the Como avenue tracks, take a wide bend around a grove of poplar trees, and descend into the dump, emptying their waste within the confines of the pit. The dump was also a place where we played, and shot foot-long rats with our bb-guns whenever we got the opportunity. My first bb-gun was a Red-Ryder carbine action gun that came one Christmas.

We made a makeshift raft one day, down in the streetcar dump, one of scrap wood found on the shore, and launched it into the long, narrow thread of water that bordered the tracks. We were in the middle of the pond when the raft broke apart. None of us swam very well, and one

friend, who didn't swim at all, went right down through the boards. The water was over our heads, but somehow we were able to pull him to the surface and help him hang on to the wood.

It was the last time we built a raft in the streetcar dump. In the winter, when the water froze, we played hockey on its surface without skates. We used lumps of iced snow for goals. We were free souls back then. We roamed at will, to wherever we wanted.

That was my neighborhood when I was a boy, a place of infinite fun. We wore shorts mostly, ran barefooted throughout the summer, got tar on our feet when the streets were resurfaced and sanded, stubbed our toes more often than we liked. We became very familiar with Mercurchrome and Iodine. When we dressed up we wore corduroy knickers, long stockings, lace-up shoes, and more often than not, a knitted cap. We didn't get long pants until we were older, somewhere around the time of puberty when we outgrew the title of "youngster."

Meal time was a fun time. We all gathered around the table and talked. My father was the clown, always laughing about something. My father was easy to love. My mother was the more serious of the two, always insisting that we eat our carrots because it was good for our eyes, always insisting that we clean our plate. Our favorite snack before bedtime was graham crackers and milk, and sometimes boiled rice sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon.

Times were idyllic back then. We had nothing to fear. We roamed at will, to wherever we wished to go, as long as we were home for supper.

I will never forget those boyhood days. They were the best of times.

*Carleton Vang is a St. Paul native who attended Tilden grade school and Murray High School. He served aboard the US Wisconsin during the Korean War, then pursued a career in graphic arts and rose to the vice presidency of his company. He has won awards for excellence as a wild life artist and has published his first book, Grace With a Sword under the pen name of Karl Vanghen.*



*The house on the northeast corner of Almond and Arona.*



*The author's parents, Carl and Mabel Vang.*

# 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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