

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*'Say It Ain't So, Charlie:'
Comiskey's Labor Dispute and
the Opening of Lexington Park*

Page 14

Summer, 2004

Volume 39, Number 2

*From Farm to Florence: The Gifted Keating
Sisters and the Mystery of Their Lost Paintings*



Madonna of the Rosebower (Stephan Lochner, c. 1435; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum). A beautiful example of the elegant International Courtly Style of the late Middle Ages, this 3' by 5' copy was painted by Sr. Anysia in 1939 as a gift for her niece, Margaret H. Marrinan. See article beginning on page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 *From Farm to Florence: The Gifted Keating Sisters
And the Mystery of Their Lost Paintings*
Margaret M. Marrinan
- 14 *Say It Ain't So, Charlie*
The 1897 Dispute Between Charles Comiskey
And the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly
Over the Opening of Lexington Park
David Riehle
- 19 *The Rondo Oral History Project*
Buelah Mae Baines Swan Remembers Piano
Lessons and a 'nice vegetable garden' Out Back
A HandinHand Interview with Kate Cavett
- 24 *Spring Wagons and No Roads*
A Gibbs Daughter Remembers a Pioneer
Family's Sunday as 'a serious undertaking'
Lillie Gibbs LeVesconte
- 26 Book Reviews

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Judge Margaret H. Marrinan has long had more than just the casual interest of a family member in the artistry of her two aunts, Sr. Anysia and Sr. Sophia Keating, who belonged to the Congregation of St. Joseph of Carondelet in St. Paul and were sent by their Order to Italy from 1908 to 1910 to study art and copy Old Masters' paintings. The many reproductions of famous religious and secular paintings that the Sisters made during their three-year journey, as well as those they made after their return to the College of St. Catherine, have been a source of great pride to Judge Marrinan and her family, but have also raised many questions concerning what became of these paintings beginning in the 1950s.

Judge Marrinan unravels this tale as best she can, but a full account remains untold. So that our readers will better appreciate the artistry of Sr. Anysia and Sr. Sophia, the Society has reproduced eight of their paintings in full color on the front and back covers and in selected pages of this issue. The Society also salutes the College of St. Catherine, which on August 31 begins a nearly year-long celebration of its 100th birthday, by publishing these paintings and acknowledging the talent, hard work, and faithful dedication of two of the many women religious who have served so well to educate so many at the College over the past century.

John Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Byron R. Mortensen Remembers The Society in His Will



Byron R. Mortensen
1949-2003

Byron R. Mortensen (1949-2003) was born in St. Paul and spent the early years of his life at 865 Sherwood Avenue, near Arcade Street. His father, Gordon Mortensen was an East Sider, but his mother, Loretta, was from the West Side. In 1961 the Mortensen family moved to White Bear Lake, where Byron, his brothers, Gordon Jr. and Neil, and his sister, Arvilla, all grew up.

Byron graduated from White Bear Lake High School. One of his favorite school activities was the Photography Club, a hobby that Byron continued as an adult. After high school, Byron attended Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minn., studying history and business. He completed his business education at Lakewood Community College.

Using his business training well, Byron was employed by various Twin Cities businesses in the food service industry. He became very skilled at analyzing food preparation and handling equipment and arranging for its installation at commercial sites. His employer for about the last six years of his life was Commercial Kitchen Services in St. Paul.

Byron's father had been a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army and had served in

Say It Ain't So, Charlie!

The 1897 Dispute Between Charles Comiskey and the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly Over the Opening of Lexington Park

David Riehle

It was a cool, clear Friday afternoon. The turnstiles spun at Lexington Park in the "Saintly City," as the local sportswriters liked to say. On April 30, 1897, St. Paul's legendary Lexington Baseball Park opened to the public for the first time, the start of nearly sixty years as the site of professional baseball in the city. Some 5,000 fans poured in to watch the Saints (or the Apostles, as they were interchangeably called by the newspapers) play the season opener against Connie Mack's Milwaukee Brewers. The fans "gasped in amazement and delight as they entered," a reporter wrote, and, "as they gazed out over the wide open plain of green grass and brown earth, as smooth as a billiard table, their admiration knew no bounds." The park was thought, at least by the hometown press, to be "the finest in the West and surpassed by few if any in the National League."

Prior to 1897 the St. Paul club had played at a smaller "Comiskey Park" on Dale between Aurora and Fuller streets, while Comiskey established his residence nearby at 617 Fuller. (An 1895 photo shows the park being used for skating in the wintertime.) The construction of the new park was a giant leap forward.

Before the game a parade wended its way from downtown to the ballpark site at Lexington and University avenues, and the crowds came early, on streetcars, bicycles, and carriages. Many of those, "whose exchequer was limited to the price of a bleacher ticket," arrived on foot.

It was a good day for the home team, as the St. Paul club surged ahead in the ninth inning to win 10-3, and a good day for the box office, so good that manager Charles Comiskey, who was busy counting the receipts, forgot that he was sup-

posed to accompany Mayor Frank Doran out to the grandstand, where Hizzoner intended to make a speech.

When, at long last, Comiskey escorted the Mayor and the owner of the new park to the front of the backstop, they were greeted by shouts of "Play ball!" and "Get on with the game!" Securing the attention of "a limited section of the grandstand," it was reported, the Mayor said that his remarks were intended for the players, not the spectators, "and he addressed himself to the former, despite the suggestion from the stands that none of them voted in St. Paul."

Top Sporting Entertainment

The St. Paul ball club at that time was a part of a circuit called the Western



Charles A. Comiskey. From the book 'Commy': The Life Story of Charles A. Comiskey, written in 1919 by Gustaf Axelson.



A game in progress at Lexington Ball Park, ca. 1916. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.



Also the following referred to in the preceding report.

St. Paul, Minn. 4/27 1897

*Attn: Mr. Esq.
Rep. Trades Labor
St. Paul Minn.*

Dear Sir

In response to the several calls your committee have made on me in relation to quinquina etc.

*I would state that it is the desire of the management of the St. Paul Club to heartily recognize all fair and just demands of your body and with that spirit we shall not buy or allow to be sold any cigars not having the proper label, we shall not hire any but union musicians on opening day and agree that no signs obnoxious to labor organizations will be permitted on inside fence of Lexington Park, trusting that this will be acceptable to your honorable body
I remain*

*Very Respy Yours,
Chas. Comiskey*

Comiskey's response to the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly concerning the opening of Lexington Park.

giving his name to the celebrated south side Chicago stadium at Thirty-fifth and Wentworth. Comiskey was still presiding over the Chicago club in 1919 when a group of players, including the legendary Shoeless Joe Jackson, accepted bribes from gamblers to throw the World Series in the famous Black Sox scandal.

Baseball and the Workers

One hundred years ago professional baseball was the sporting entertainment for the urban masses, many of whom were deeply affected by the resurgent labor movement of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Those who put their wares before a city's working classes strove not to offend the new unions and their enthusiastic adherents. Boycotts and protests against non-union enterprises by labor-oriented consumers were vigorous and frequent. They demanded the union label on their purchases. They insisted on seeing the union cards of clerks and trades people, and checked to see that they were current and paid-up in their dues.

Manufacturers of workers' clothing like the Carhartt Company reprinted the platform of the American Federation of Labor in their promotional materials and boasted that the eight-hour day prevailed in their factories. Although St. Paul's three English-language daily newspapers, recognizing the sentiments of their rank and file readerships, gave the labor movement's affairs abundant coverage, only the German-language *Tagliche Volkzeitung* ("Daily People's Press"), which exclusively employed members of German Typographical Union Local 13 in its composing room, had the right to use the Typo's union label.

Professional baseball itself was not unaffected by the turbulent labor events of the 1880s and 1890s. The National Brotherhood of Baseball Players, organized in 1885, set up a "league of their own," the Players League, which fought the National League for a few years in the early 1890s, before disappearing from the scene.

It was none other than Charles

League, which also included Minneapolis, Kansas City, and Detroit. In 1895 Charles Comiskey, already famous for his playing career with the St. Louis Browns of the National League, transferred the Sioux City franchise of the Western League to St. Paul, and moved there as manager, disregarding St. Paul's then-current reputation as "the graveyard" among the minor leagues. Returning home from his first road trip in 1895 after seventeen straight losses and learning

that in his absence an injunction had been issued against Sunday games, Comiskey may have wished he had heeded the warning and stayed in Sioux City. (The artful Comiskey managed to sidestep the ban by playing on Sundays in a park on the West Side, which was then outside city limits.)

In 1900 Comiskey moved his franchise again, this time to Chicago, re-establishing the White Sox as part of the new American League and of course

Comiskey, a leading organizer of the Brotherhood, who was the beneficiary of the construction of the new St. Paul ballpark by a Buffalo, New York capitalist named Edward B. Smith. In 1890 Comiskey had served as captain-manager of the Chicago Brotherhood team, holding forth at the Wentworth and Thirty-fifth Street site which twenty years later would be the location of a new "Comiskey Park."

Banker Smith put \$75,000 of his own money into the park, big money in those days. This, of course, was at a time when no one would have dreamed of asking for public money for such a facility. Comiskey, too, had by this time left visions of cooperative baseball utopias behind him, and graduated from player-manager to investor-manager. According to someone who knew Comiskey well, "Everything he had invested in the [St. Paul] ballclub and the equipment of his ballpark compelled him to become chummy with the bankers."

Baseball and Beer

Breweries built many early parks, especially in heavily German cities like Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Milwaukee as an additional venue for their primary business.* (St. Paul itself had six German-owned and staffed breweries in 1897.) The guests of the St. Paul club on opening day, the "Brewers," based in the Teutonic metropolis of Milwaukee, certified through their well-chosen appellation this harmonious combination of sport and refreshment.

Dispute with Labor

Precisely what the business and financial relationship between Smith and Comiskey was is unknown. However, it was Manager Comiskey who became the focus of a crescendo of complaints from St. Paul unions. At a Trades and Labor Assembly meeting in early April, 1897

a grievance against the manner of constructing the park, initiated by the carpenters, was referred to the Building Trades Council. A particularly sharp grievance emanated from Local 20 of the Theatrical Stage Employees Union, which was engaged in a struggle with the management of the Metropolitan Theater over the employment of union stagehands. As a result of the dispute, a boycott had been placed on the theater by organized labor, and the local was incensed when it learned that a sign advertising the Metropolitan was to go up in Lexington Park in time for opening day.

A special committee was appointed to visit Comiskey to raise these and other grievances—asking additionally that only union label cigars be sold at the park and that only union musicians be employed at the ballpark. The baseball committee reported to the Assembly two weeks later that it had fulfilled its mission of visiting Comiskey and raising the issues, but "had failed to arrive at any definite or satisfactory results."

On April 27, three days before the park was to open, Comiskey wrote to the Assembly that it was "the desire of the management of the St. Paul Club to heartily recognize all fair and just demands of your body." Comiskey pledged "not to buy or allow to be sold any cigars not having the proper label."

"We shall not have any but union musicians on opening day and agree that no sign obnoxious to labor organizations will be permitted on the inside fence," he promised.

All did not go smoothly, however. The band Comiskey employed on opening day had misrepresented itself to him as a union group. Non-union cigars were on sale. The sign was still on the outfield fence. The Metropolitan sign had been placed in the park, Comiskey said, because he had been "hoodwinked" by the theater manager. Comiskey, the committee reported,

claimed he had rented the space to a wily entrepreneur who had then sublet it to the Metropolitan over his protests.

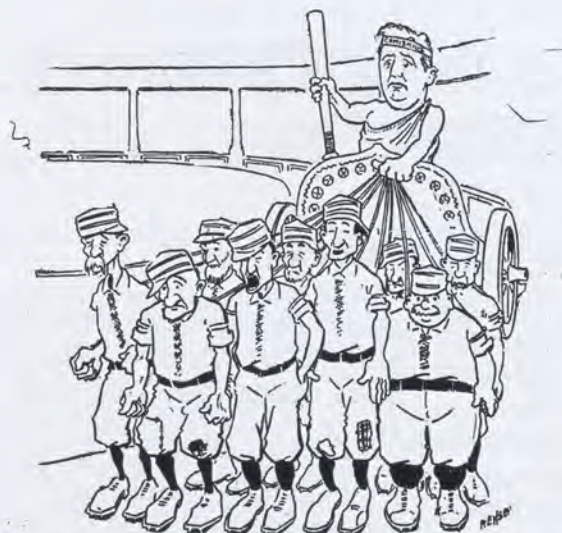
"The Met has did just what it agreed to with me in regard to my fences and will put no sign on it." Charles Comiskey

In view of the urgency of the situation, a special Assembly meeting was called for May 7. At the meeting Local 20 delivered a letter calling on the Assembly to place a boycott on Lexington Park. Action was deferred for one week, and the secretary instructed to notify Comiskey that if the



A baseball card from the Library of Congress collections.

* German brewers introduced lager beer into the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Lager beer, unlike the English ales and porters, which it eventually replaced, is good only when freshly tapped. If it is open too long, it becomes stale and unusable, and therefore requires rapid consumption. A rapid consumption, however, can take place only where many people congregate. Hence the baseball park as an ideal venue for the dispensation of the new lager beer, produced in growing industrial cities in industrial quantities. (The German-speaking and Socialist-led Brewery Workers Union did make one concession to the English language—they placed Marx's famous slogan, "Workers of the World Unite!" at the top of their official stationery.) see: *The Brewing Industry and the Brewery Workers' Movement in America*, by Herman Schlüter. International Union of United Brewery Workmen of America, Cincinnati, 1910



OH SAY, SEE ME WIN THE CHAMPIONSHIP THIS YEAR WITH THESE YOUNG COLTS.



THE FIRST GAME—BERT'S TO THE CHAMPIONSHIP

Cartoons by George Washington Rehse for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. Minnesota Historical Society photos.

sign did not come down, the boycott would be instituted at the Assembly's regular meeting a week later. At the May 14 meeting the baseball committee reported progress "but no assurance of a satisfactory settlement," and the boycott was imposed.

Shortly afterward the sign came down. Comiskey wrote to the Assembly stating that "the Met has did just what it agreed to with me in regard to my fences and will put no sign on it." At the May 28 meeting of the Assembly the boycott was officially declared off. And finally, on July 16 James Nelson, Local 20's secretary, reported to the Trades and Labor Assembly that as a result of labor's boycott the Metropolitan Opera House had closed for the season. The St. Paul *Union Advocate's* editor and publisher, P. J. Geraghty, noted the result with evident satisfaction, congratulating Local 20's colorful leader, Colonel C. H. Bonn, on "the victory of the Stage Employees over that mucklehead L. N. Scott (the Met's obdurate manager) and his one-horse opera house."*

* *St Paul Union Advocate* July 25, 1897

Such disputes were not uncommon in those days. Later that summer the Assembly received a communication from Cigarmakers Local 25 declaring a boycott against the Milwaukee baseball club supported by the Milwaukee Trades Council and Labor League, and the Assembly endorsed the campaign. Two years later, the Assembly minutes show, another baseball boycott was declared, this time against the Indianapolis team, and again a committee was directed to talk to Manager Comiskey about it.

Lexington Park is gone, torn down in 1956 to make way for Midway Stadium, torn down to make way for Metropolitan Stadium, torn down to make way for the Metrodome. A couple of walls from the old grandstand are still there in the southwest corner of the ballpark site, presently housing the decaying remnants of a former shopping center. The location of home plate is marked on the floor of a now-closed retail store. A few people remember the original 500-foot centerfield and the inter-city streetcar series that the Saints and the Millers played.

Much has changed since 1897, both in baseball and organized labor. But the

choreography of the game between the diverging white chalk lines has changed but little, and it is still the working stiff's who buy most of the tickets and sip the amber waters of the brewers.

Yet who would think today that organized labor was a part of the story, that it had the temerity to insert itself into this grand civic celebration in defense of its own interests, and that it got away with it? And thereby hangs the tale of Charles Comiskey and the unions of St. Paul in the spring and summer of 1897, another piece of the mosaic of labor history buried for so long, like the lost city of Pompeii, under the dust and ash of the past century.

David Riehle is a labor historian and a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History.

Notes

The story of the dispute between labor and Comiskey's organization resides solely in the records of the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly deposited at the Minnesota Historical Society. Unfortunately MHS's collection of the fledgling *Union Advocate* newspaper is missing the crucial issues for 1897,



A Retail Clerks Union identifying button for 1903.

which undoubtedly would have taken notice of the dispute. The newspaper, which has expressed the point of view of organized labor in St. Paul for more than 100 years, actually began in that same year.

The opening of Lexington Park received generous and enthusiastic coverage from the St. Paul dailies, but apparently the dispute and the resulting boycott were not deemed newsworthy, and are not reported in the *Pioneer Press*, the *Globe* or

the *Dispatch*, although the major part of the background information for this article was derived from them.

Much has been written on early baseball. The local scene has been reviewed in *Before the Dome—Baseball in Minnesota When the Grass Was Real*, edited by David Anderson and published by Nodin Press, Minneapolis, 1993, and in *Twin Cities Baseball Parks—Designing the National Pastime*, by Kristin Anderson and Christopher Kimball, *Minnesota History*, Fall, 2003.

There is also bountiful material in most libraries about Comiskey and of course the Black Sox scandal, although not much on his five years in St. Paul and nothing on the labor dispute.

'Commy': the Life Story of Charles A. Comiskey. (Chicago: The Reilly and Lee Co.) written in 1919 by Gustaf Axelsson, a journalist who had known him for a long time, was helpful and somewhat contemporary.

There are additional fragments of information in "When Charlie Comiskey Came to St. Paul," and "The Downtown Ball Park," by Max Winkel, in a collection of one-page articles on the history of St. Paul written for the Junior Pioneer

Association, which cover the 1895–1900 period and are held at MHS.

An earlier version of this article appeared in the *St. Paul Union Advocate* in 1997.

Sources for illustration are noted with them.

The Cartoonist

Two of the images that illustrate this article ("Oh, Say, See Me Win the Championship," and "The First Game—Here's to the Championship") were drawn by the *St. Paul Pioneer Press's* prolific cartoonist, George Washington Rehse. A marvelously talented draftsman, Rehse, who was born in Hastings in 1868, was educated in Minneapolis public schools and self-taught in art. In 1895 he drew for the Minneapolis-based *Penny Press*, moving later to the daily *Globe* and the *Pioneer Press* newspapers.

As a staff artist, Rehse was called upon to create daily illustrations, usually tinged with humor and caricature, to accompany major front-page articles. The use of half-tone printing plate reproduction of photographs was still relatively limited in daily newspapers, due to cost considerations.

Rehse's cartoons were collected in at least three annual volumes issued by the *Pioneer Press* (1904–06) and one additional book of cartoons, *American Boyhood & Remember These*, published in 1910 in St. Paul. Rehse's most enduring image, and a frequently recurring one, was a depiction of the city of St. Paul as a portly friar, usually dressed in a monk's robe with a rope belt cinched around the waist, and a halo floating just above his tonsure and bald pate, although in the cartoon accompanying this article, he has substituted a baseball uniform for the occasion.

Rehse later moved on to a long career with Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* as a staff artist and editorial cartoonist, and died, apparently in New York City, in 1939. Rehse's talents are still well-thought-of, so enough so that a brief biography is included in the seven-volume *World Encyclopedia of Cartoons*, published in 1999.



Comiskey (center, second row) with his St. Paul Base Ball Club.



The Pantheon (Rome). Original watercolor, 1908. The nuns' sojourn coincided with modern Italy's movement to distance itself from Vatican influence. An example of this evolution is found in the Pantheon itself. In the late nineteenth century, two bell towers added during its use as a Catholic church were demolished and the building reverted to the secular Pantheon we recognize today. Several of the people in this 1908 watercolor by Sr. Anysia wear the peasant dress still worn at that time by the lower classes. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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