

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*

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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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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 39, Number 2

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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.

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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

The Rondo Oral History Project—First in a Series

Buelah Mae Baines Swan Remembers Piano Lessons And ‘a nice vegetable garden’ Out Back

Interview by Kate Cavett

Through oral history interviews with those who lived, worked or played in the historic Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul before Interstate 94 was built, the Rondo Oral History Project creates a mosaic of the vibrant Black culture that flourished in St. Paul during the first half of the century. Despite the racism of the time, this vital community created many notable scholars, artists, musicians, educators, public servants and social activists. In telling these stories, the rich heritage of the past is kept alive to enhance the lives of coming generations.

I am Buelah Baines Swan. I live here in St. Paul. I've been a resident in the Black community about forty-five years. Before that, I was raised out near Como and Dale by my parents, in my parents' home. My father came here after the start of World War I as a timber cutter for the war movement from Arkansas, and he had been seeing my mother as young people and he brought her here as his bride. They married here and purchased a home out at 1094 North Kent Street. There were about three other Black families in that small community at Como and Dale. My parents lived and died in that house. They always had a nice vegetable garden to the back, which my dad took care of, and my mother loved flowers, and she raised flowers in the front.

I'm the oldest child, my sister Elmercia is a second girl and my brother, Walter Benjamin Baines Jr., is the youngest. I was born—as my brother and sister were—at the old Ancker Hospital¹ out West Seventh Street.

We would come into the Rondo Neighborhood on Saturday. My dad and mother gave all three of us piano lessons with Reverend L.W. Harris. He was a very prominent minister. His daughter [J. Arlee Harris] gave piano lessons. We would come in on Saturday. We would walk a mile-and-a-half in and have our piano lessons, and then we would come in on Sunday with our parents to attend church.

I can remember when Pilgrim Baptist² had a little shack educational unit with a horrible toilet system next to the building



Buelah Mae Baines Swan

there. When I was eight and ten years old, my dad and I used to go on Saturday night and start a fire in the furnace and all that, and provide coal and wood and kindling so there would be some heat in the building on Sunday during the winter when people would come.

They always had a big garden and Reverend L. W. Harris, who was a very prominent minister in the community, used to walk from his home. The minister's home used to be at 719 St. Anthony. He would walk out to my mother and dad's in order to get greens and other vegetables from their garden to take home to his family, because the

What is Oral History?

Oral history is the spoken word in print. Simply put, oral histories collect spoken memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews.* Over the next year or more, *Ramsey County History* will publish a selection of oral histories HandinHand has conducted with members of St. Paul's Black community and transcribed verbatim.

Oral histories do not follow the standard language of the written word; transcriptions of the interviews that will follow have been edited by HandinHand only for clarity and understanding. Through the medium of oral history, interviewers hope to capture the flavor of the narrator's speech and convey that person's feelings through the tenor and tempo of speech patterns.

An oral history also is more than a family tree with names of ancestors and their birth and death dates. Instead, oral history is recorded personal memory; it complements other forms of historical text; it does not always require historical corroboration; and it recognizes that memories often become polished as they are sifted through time, taking on new meanings, and potentially reshaping the events they relate. These memories create a picture of the narrator's life—the culture, idiosyncrasies, thoughts, opinions, joys, sorrows—the rich substance that gives color and texture to life.

Kate Cavett

* Donald A. Richie, *Doing Oral History*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995.

church did not pay him. I can remember that very well.

During the depression I remember mostly being aware of the commodities my dad got in exchange for money. I remember—I believe it was orange and blue food stamps during the depression, and I can remember he took all sorts of odds and ends of food in exchange for fuel or ice or whatever people needed. My mother was a very good cook and she learned to make many things with odds and ends and make do.

Besides our own garden and dad was very good about doing the—he used to do the grocery shopping. Both my parents were farm raised. I can remember dad buying like a hundred pounds of flour, hundred pounds of sugar. As a matter of fact, he used to bring home lard and then mother would render it and things like that. So I don't remember being hungry. I can remember my mother going to places like the Goodwill and the Salvation Army and getting other people's clothing and making it over into clothing for us, but I didn't feel deprived by the depression. My mother had a sewing machine and my mother was a beautiful quilter and crocheter. I have a very beautiful quilt that my mother—my mother died at seventy-nine, and at age seventy she was working on this quilt. And it's beautiful.

My father Walter Benjamin Baines Sr.'s business was at 554 Rondo and he was very well known in the community. He was between Kent and Mackubin Street. McKinley School³ was up on a high bank behind the business. His lots ran back to the alley on Carroll. This is just off of Rondo and Kent. His business was coal, wood, ice, kindling. That was for heating and for the refrigeration at that time. Rondo was the front street where his office was.

People would remember him for passing out chips of ice to the children and carrying ice up steps for iceboxes. People often didn't have money to pay for fuel, coal, wood, kindling or fuel oil and when my dad died, just before he died, he gave me a book listing people in the community who owed him money, and he said to me, "Daughter, perhaps they will pay you." And I said to him, "Dad, if they didn't pay you, they won't pay me."

The Spirit of Rondo

The historian primarily generalizes, painting a broad picture that sums up many lives in great themes like "The Depression" or "The War." But no historian's generalizations can tell the whole story or perhaps even the real story. That has to be done by a living breathing person. That's what Kate Cavett's oral histories of Rondo do—histories told by one person, one family, at a time. These interviews tell the story of a small, long-established, predominantly but not wholly Black community planted in a northern city in Minnesota, the Rondo community of St. Paul. Blacks had come early to this northern city, beginning in the 1830s, some of them up the underground railway from slave plantations.

But this story begins long afterwards, from the 1920s to the 1950s and up to the present. Two miles long and half-mile wide, Rondo was a microcosm of America, a microcosm of the Black experience in America. It evokes memories that are sweet, bittersweet, and sometimes just bitter. But the dominant theme here is life triumphing over adversity, sometimes in small ways, sometimes in big. The old Rondo neighborhood, like so many others in American cities, was broken up by the coming of the freeway, in this case I-94, which was driven through the center of the community in 1959, obliterating

its main business street and some 750 homes.

In the memories of those who grew up there, Rondo was vibrant, alive, and personal. It was a place where a child felt safe and could go into any home and be treated like family. The community was close-knit and characterized by hard, hard work and by vital churches and social groups, as well as Bar-B-Q places and good music. There was the inevitable racial discrimination in St. Paul; for instance, a sign in a white-owned bar just outside the Rondo neighborhood that read, "Indians, dogs and niggers not allowed." And many well-educated Rondo men had to be content with menial jobs at the packing plant or on the railroad as waiters or porters. But the predominant memory is that St. Paul, and Rondo, in particular, were less discriminatory than most other U.S. cities. The main emphasis of these families was overcoming odds (on actually becoming a college professor, or a police chief, or a successful executive and entrepreneur).

Cavett's oral histories not only recapture a bygone time, but provide an inspiring model of a successful community and a link with the heritage of the past. And as any historian will tell you, knowing our past is essential for knowing who we are in the present.

*Kent Shifferd, Ph.D.
Retired History Professor*

I have a picture of him by a—probably a 1918 Model T Ford truck that he was very proud of. He had many trucks and eventually—I think he probably started out hauling and moving people and then he eventually got the land and started the business there.

His business was enough that he employed several people. At one time he had a woman that I became very familiar with employed as a clerk in his office. He employed my uncle and some of my cousins. His business—he was very well known in the community. His business grew well enough that he had promotional items that he gave out, like fans that said W.B. Baines Sr. Coal and Wood. And then he

had a baseball bat lead pencil that he would give out, so he did quite well.

Yeah, I used to work with my dad. I was very crazy about my dad. He wasn't so crazy about women or girls. I used to go with my dad out to—it's Square Lake. It's just off of Rice Street, where they used to cut ice in great big chunks and I helped him cut ice and load it on the truck and bring it back in town. My dad was very ambitious. At the back of his lot was a real high clay bank off of Carroll Avenue and he and my Uncle Jett [Jettson Scott] took shovels and cut that out, cut that clay out. The clay insulated and they put straw in it and then they would put the ice in it. They would get the ice in the winter and it

would last well into the summer. He and Uncle Jett cut that out with shovels and I would say it must have been fifty-by-fifty and maybe ten or twelve feet tall. Coal was sold sometimes by the sack full. It depended on how much money he had to pay. He used to go to Thorne Coal,⁴ which was on the Mississippi River bank. The coal used to come up the river by barge and he would go there and buy coal to supply his customers, and I used to go with him. He had sheds for the different type of products. Whether it was hard coal, soft coal, kindling, he had different sheds. I would say for coal he probably had four sheds, for wood maybe a couple sheds, maybe a couple sheds for kindling. He had a little building for the office and the ice storage place. At that time the lots were very small in St. Paul. I would say he had a minimum of two or three lots that he had his business on. The woodsheds were like twelve feet across and twenty feet deep. They were not locked like today. They were open because he always kept German Shepherd dogs to watch, to keep people out of it at night. I don't remember a fence.

And then he had an icehouse where the ice that was cut up was ready for the public and he used to have little wagons. People would come and get ten and fifteen cents worth of ice and then pull it home in his wagon, and then they would bring it back when they wanted another piece of ice. Oh, let's see, I remember ten or fifteen cents of ice would be ten inches, maybe eighteen-by-twelve-by maybe ten inches deep or something like



Walter and Nina Baines with Beulah, age one, in the yard of their home at 1094 Kent in 1928. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs with this article are from Beulah Mae Baines Swan.

that. If it was a good one, maybe it would keep four to five days.

He stayed within the Black community for his customers. When I was maybe like eight years old and his business was going well, I can remember one time my dad came home and ordered my mother, brother and sister and me into the basement and got his shotgun. He had gone into a white ice, coal and wood dealers' community and they were after him, and he ordered us into the basement until he felt it was safe to come back upstairs. I could see that my dad was very frightened. He was afraid of being lynched or harmed or his family harmed. After that he just didn't go out of the community.

There was a Renchin Drug Store⁵ on University and Dale, and I believe that Mr. Renchin owned part of Citizens Ice Company.⁶ That was on Selby and Dale, and my dad used to do business with them occasionally, but when they would get in their anti-Negro moods, they would cut him out. He was a competitor of theirs. There were other companies that sometimes then would serve the Black community. He didn't have it exclusively.

I don't remember where he got his wood, but I can remember splitting wood logs on his property. He had a nice business and in 1940 or 1942 he lost it when he didn't pay his real estate taxes. A man who became aware of it went down there and paid the taxes and my dad lost the title to the land. He became mentally ill for a while behind that. But then he recovered and he got himself a truck and he used to haul stone for Bisanz Stone Company.⁷ That was a company [in] downtown St. Paul and he used to go on long trips hauling stone for them.

When I got older my mother did day work—



HAPPY SCHOOL DAYS
1937

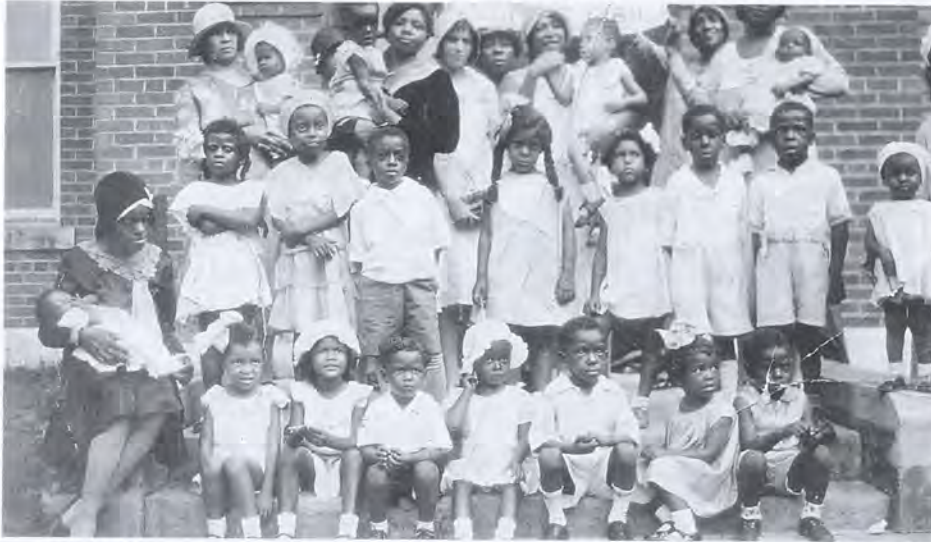
Happy school days, 1937.

housekeeping, cooking cleaning. She worked for Baron Desnick who had Desnick Drugstore⁸ and they had a home in town. I never was there. And then they built another home out in Mendota Heights and she worked for them for a long, long time. She would use the streetcar to get to work. Streetcars were the transportation mode then. And then the buses came and all that. We used to have a big black lab dog—his name

was Footy—at home and he was crazy about my mother. He was my dad's dog but he was crazy about my mother. And he used to walk her up to the Como Line to catch the streetcar, and then he would leave home when he thought she should come and sit up there and wait until she came home.

I went to Gorman Grade School, which the City of St. Paul destroyed and put in housing at Front and Western. That was my elementary school. I enjoyed when I went to Gorman Grade School and I was one of the first Black children in there. There was only one incident that I can remember with my elementary school. My mother had prepared an outfit that consisted of a sweater and a skirt with some kind of top on it, and she said, "When you go to gym"—so it must have been like the third grade—"don't take off your sweater. Tell the teachers not to take your sweater off." And I didn't like my gym teacher and her name was Miss Secord, and I told a lie. I went home and told my mother that she made me take it off and it was a lie. My mother went up to school and raised hell and found out I had lied and all of that. I really, really regretted that. That's a ugly incident in my elementary school education. I graduated from Washington High School,⁹ which is still out at 1041 Marion St. And had a wonderful time in high school. I did very well.

In 1945 when I graduated, everybody said that I should have been valedictorian but I guess because of my race, I didn't make it and all of that. As a matter of fact, about six, eight years ago, one of the last



The Pilgrim Baptist Church Sunday School class.

living teachers in our school, Washington High School, was at a class reunion and she apologized to me because she had done wrong. They did not let me get in the National Honor Society¹⁰ and I should have been. I didn't realize that I had been not even submitted for National Honor Society. I didn't realize that until after graduation.

And they did not let me be valedictorian of our class and I should have been. Her name was Grace Benz and she came to me at our class reunion and apologized. I can remember two teachers came—I didn't realize what they were doing. They came to me and said, "There's been some error made in your grades and we are changing the records." And of course, I was young and foolish and didn't pay any attention, but that deprived me [of] a lot of things. I wanted to go to the University of Minnesota. I started at the U and I wanted to be a MD, but I didn't have the financing. It hurt that they would do that, because some of my best friends are my high school classmates until this day.

Well, the last time I was at the class reunion, Gwendolyn Schlichting is her name, and her dad was a police officer in St. Paul. She sort of acknowledged that things weren't the way they should be and she was the valedictorian. A boy, Dick Crum was his name, he was salutatorian—I used to work with him on class reunions. But they were the two. It didn't make me angry until way later in life when I realized what

had been done about that. I don't think my parents realized. I think they just accepted what was handed down.

My father preferred to keep us out of the Black community, so most of my friends in elementary school and high school were white. He didn't approve of a lot of the activities in the community and he just thought we'd have a more wholesome life. He was rural raised and he thought—at that time, 1094 Kent was considered out in the country. We were near the end of the Dale Street streetcar line and he just felt it would be more wholesome for us.

I was never particularly race conscious. We were in a white community. The first boy I kissed was white. We went their way when they went to church and socialized. And otherwise, we got along. I was never particularly conscious of the difference between the races. I don't think I really became conscious of the differences in race until sometimes in seeking employment. S. Vincent Owens was head of the Urban League.¹¹ In addition to college prep courses, I took business courses. I was capable of stenography and he would send me to various places trying to crack the employment. That was kinda hard. He was trying to get me a job and then after I got in there, the plan was I would work for awhile and he would look for a replacement for me and I would go to another place and I'd be replaced by somebody else Black.

And that's the way we'd get different employers. I was one of the young people he would place, not the only one. I had that ability and they used me like that. I can remember I went to one place on University Avenue at what used to be a big insurance company, right at the city limits. I started out there. I rode either the streetcar or bus out there. And I started there and applied for employment. They said, "We'll see ya" and all of that. And I walked to University and Raymond; there was a place there that was advertising for typists. Oh, I can't think of the man's name. I went up there and they gave me a typing test and they said, "We'd like to hire you but nobody will work here if we hire you." And that hurt my feelings. So then I was walking and then I walked all the way down to the State Office Building and took a test there and did very well and I got hired immediately by the state. And so I worked for the State of Minnesota. I worked on the project that planned the freeways as a research analyst.

I worked for the state for awhile and then I worked in private industry. Let's see, I don't remember. I was at the unemployment office and they had a bunch of college graduates there, so it would be June, telling them about different jobs that were available. I was sitting there waiting to take a test or something and I listened to what they were telling them. And they told about a statistical job at Simon and Mogilner.¹² They were children's clothing manufacturers. So I just got up from my seat and hightailed it down to Simon and Mogilner ahead of all the college graduates. Told them what I'd heard and that I wanted to be hired. And they hired me. I worked there—I have an analytical mind. I worked there and I used to take all the salesmen's orders, tabulate what needed to be manufactured and what delivery date. And I worked out a system whereby we could schedule incoming orders, delivery date, what material needed to be ordered, what accessories need to be ordered, how many people you needed to work on it. I got my salary doubled.

I've had my salary doubled twice in my life. Yeah, and because it was a good plan and they used it until they moved to Birmingham Alabama. They moved south when costs got to be kind of high here.

They were the second largest children's clothing manufacturer in the United States. This would have been 1955.

I wanted to tell you something else. I got a little money together. I learned to keypunch. I was a good typist, learned to keypunch. I got a little money together and I went to Control Data Institute.¹³ I had six hundred dollars and I went there to learn how to be a programmer. When my money ran out, they kicked me out. The Institute was over on France Avenue and at that time I drove. When my money ran out they said you can't be in class anymore. I had gone over there during the day to go to a class and they said you are absolutely out, turn in the books and all like that. So I just drove up France Avenue and they [Control Data] had a big plant at 4201 Lexington. Drove up there and applied for a job, and I said I just spent six hundred bucks at your Institute and they kicked me out and I want a job. And I got a job, and I got my salary doubled there too.

I had a boss—he started me out as a Weekend Warrior and I was supposed to do very minor tasks, and he soon discovered that I knew more than minor things and I learned how to operate . . . I'll tell you something funny. He came—I was working one weekend and I used to have the guard lock me in. They had a big lab with a glassed in lab—lock me in there. And we had I think it was four computers and I don't know how many printers and other computers. I was in there doing work. I had taken off my blouse, I think I was in my bra and one of them fluffy petticoats and stockings, and I had all the

computers going and the printers going and I was running around. I liked the challenge. I was running around, my boss came in and said, "What on earth is going on?" And I said, "I'm getting your work out." And I said, "Don't bother me now, I'll be right back." And when he saw the amount of work I did that's when I got my salary doubled.

I was working at the Post Office. Oh, I made foreman in the Post Office. First Black foreman. I had a career there twenty-six years, and I had fifteen years where I clerked, I carried, I worked in the stations. I did all that. And I had eleven years as a foreman. I retired at sixty. I often would have three jobs—one full-time job and two part-time jobs.

After I was divorced from my husband, I bought a home in the Black community. I bought a home that was one block from Maxfield School,¹⁴ one block from the church because I wanted my children not raised out in St. Paul Park. [That's different from my father, but] since I would be raising the two children¹⁵ by myself, I felt that they would—it would be much better in the Black community. I'm very satisfied, but they're not part of the community either. There must be some intangible difference. They have friends and all that but they're not—Well, like my son says, "I'm Buelah's boy. I'm not a Baines, I'm not a Swan. I'm Buelah's boy." And that makes a difference.

Notes

1. Ancker Hospital opened in 1872 as the City and County Hospital. In 1923, it was renamed in honor of its late superintendent, Arthur B. Ancker.

2. Pilgrim Baptist Church was first organized as a prayer group before 1863 and formally organized as a church November 15, 1866. Their first house of worship was constructed in 1870 at 12th and Cedar Streets in St. Paul. They moved in 1918 to the current location at 732 W. Central Avenue, St. Paul.

3. McKinley School was located at 481 Carroll Avenue, between Mackubin, Arundel and Rondo from 1903–1966. Fire destroyed the building in 1966.

4. Thorne Coal had a location on the Mississippi River and at 1429 Marshall Avenue, St. Paul.



Beulah Baines's graduation picture, dated 1945, when she was eighteen years old.

5. Renchin Drug was located at 621 University Avenue at Dale Street, St. Paul, MN.

6. Citizens Ice Company was located at 600 Selby Avenue, St. Paul, MN.

7. Bisanz Stone Company was located on 6th Street in St. Paul.

8. Desnick Drug was located at 1098 University, St. Paul. This store was opened in 1942 as the Lexington Drug Company, became Desnick Drug in 1955/6 and closed in 1995.

9. Washington High School became a junior high in 1976, and is located at Cook, Lawson and Galtier.

10. The National Honor Society began in 1921 as the nation's premier organization to recognize outstanding high school students for extraordinary leadership, service, character, and scholarship.

11. Urban League has served the Black community since 1923 as a human service advocacy organization.

12. Simon & Mogilner was located on the 6th Floor, Lindeke Building, 332 Rosabel, (renamed Wall Street) St. Paul.

13. Control Data Institute is a computer company.

14. Maxfield School was originally at 363 St. Albans at St. Anthony, and was built in 1890. In 1955 a new school was built at 680 St. Anthony at Victoria, Avon and Central.

15. Buelah's children are Virgie Mae Swan and Everett Nathaniel Swan.



Walter Baines with his Model T truck.



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.
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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