

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

Crex Carpet  
Company Revisited

Page 18

Summer 2006

Volume 41, Number 2

*“He Was Mechanic Arts”*

Mechanic Arts High School

The Dietrich Lange Years, 1916-1939

—Page 4



*A hand-tinted portrait of Dietrich Lange, who served as principal of Mechanic Arts High School between 1916 and 1939. Photo courtesy of John W. Mittelstadt. Photography by Maureen McGinn.*



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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 41, Number 2

Summer 2006

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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Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr.  
and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

## A Message from the Editorial Board

Good historical research and writing ultimately reveals the stories of people  
from a new perspective. In his history of diverse Mechanics Arts High School,  
John W. Larson shares his insights on the influence of a committed principal and En-  
glish teachers on the later careers of graduates, including Roy Wilkins and Harry Black-  
mun. Paul D. Nelson shows how his earlier article on the Crex Carpet Company led to  
a new discovery: memoirs of the company's first president, Michael J. O'Shaughnessy.  
And Paul Picard outlines the story of Billy Miske, a St. Paul boxer who took on Jack  
Dempsey in 1920 despite an illness that would soon take his life. We are proud to help  
preserve accounts like these, which otherwise would go unrecognized, and showcase  
them for our wider member audience. As you hold this magazine, you are in a unique  
position to read these stories: share the wealth and recruit a new member today!

*Anne Cowie,*  
Chair, Editorial Board



# Book Reviews

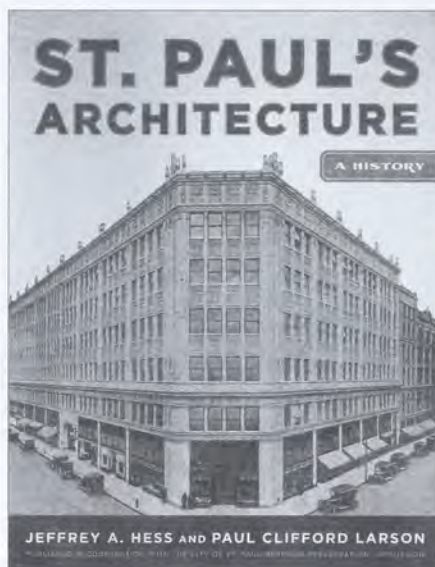
## *St. Paul's Architecture: A History*

Jeffery A. Hess and  
Paul Clifford Larson  
Minneapolis: University of  
Minnesota Press, 2006  
278 pages, \$34.95

*Reviewed by Brian McMahon*

The architectural heritage of Minnesota's capital city has finally received a serious examination in this impressive volume by Jeffery A. Hess and Paul Clifford Larson. The opening sentence of *St. Paul's Architecture: A History*, sets out not only the lofty goals of the book, but also the literary élan being offered to the reader for this enjoyable tour of over 150 years of architectural history. "Before the airplane, before the motor car, before the railroad, there was the river, and the grandest of all was the Mississippi, a majestic glide of water 2,350 miles long, sweeping through the heartland of the young American nation, carrying all manner of traffic, trade, and tradition upstream and downstream, between Minnesota and the Gulf of Mexico." With expectations now raised, the reader quickly learns of the origins and development of St. Paul as a frontier town with an account that is brisk and insightful. In addition to the significance of the Mississippi River, another major influence is quickly introduced—the rivalry with the city across the river. Both continue to shape the physical form of St. Paul to the present day.

The book is at its best in this opening chapter describing how this rivalry shaped the downtown district, and at the end when recounting the serious challenges brought about by the post-



World War II decline of the business district partially attributable to competition with Minneapolis. In a planning study done by Raymond Loewy Associates in 1945, the "downtown area of another city," unnamed in the report, was essentially the cause of the decline. Lowey noted, "The proximity of this competing city heightens the danger of the situation, for it is virtually as easy for the people of St. Paul to visit their neighbor's downtown area as it is to visit their own." When the community needed to be mobilized to either build or rebuild a city, the surest motivator was to invoke the threat of the rival city. Hess and Larson skillfully use this competitive climate to enhance their engaging narrative with a dramatic tension.

Religious congregations, we also learn, were not immune from using competition as a motivator—and were not spared from the authors' wit. The building of Assumption Church seemed "to have caused a certain amount of consternation among neighboring Protestant congregations who, in an age not known

for its ecumenical spirit, were scarcely pleased to see their city's skyline dominated by a foreign Catholic shrine. It fell to the First Baptist Church . . . to redeem the honor of the Reformation."

Architectural history can be told in a number of ways. The sweeping "big picture" drama described above, is very effective. I also found the author's "context" analysis of ten projects built between 1985 and 2000 to be highly successful. The authors used a case-study approach because they felt that a different perspective was needed with "in-fill" architecture in a completely developed city. They were also uncomfortable rendering a premature historical or architectural judgment on these buildings. Ironically, these nonjudgmental "context" studies often provided more interesting architectural insights than many of their critiques throughout the book that relied on more traditional "stylistic" analysis.

Architectural styles are a helpful and perhaps efficient way of organizing things, but as with stereotypes, over-reliance can sometimes limit independent analysis and fresh observation. This occurred on several occasions. For example, in covering the New York Life Insurance Company Building, ca. 1900 (razed) the authors described "an asymmetrical double tower layered in the conventional Renaissance Revival fashion but surmounted by an elaborately decorated attic and a stepped gable on each of the facades." While this description is certainly accurate, I was left wondering why this high-rise office project was split into two towers. Was it a desire to bring more light and air into middle of the office spaces? Other questions come to mind. What was the impact of this innovative floor plan on the layout



of the elevator banks? And would this unusual design have been considered for a speculative office building rather than for a corporate user? And how did high-speed elevators, and later, air conditioning influence office design? And so on. Stylistic analysis alone provides us with insufficient information.

Even as the authors make heavy use of stylistic analysis, they do so with irony and wit. In describing the transition from later Greek Revival to Federal, they acknowledge "it is difficult to decide where one style 'stopped' and the other 'began.'" They describe the "Queen Anne" label as "chronologically challenged." One architect had a "signature combinatorial style, drawing on elements of the English Renaissance as well as the current Queen Anne and Romanesque fashions." They also describe a house that "defies classification under any category other than 'eclectic.'"

*St. Paul's Architecture* is a thoroughly researched book that is far more than a history of buildings. It is an entertaining and enlightening study of a prominent city in America's heartland, and its place in the world.

*Brian McMahon is an architectural historian, an occasional contributor to this magazine, and the executive director of University UNITED in St. Paul.*

### *I Always Sang for My Father (or Anyone Who Would Listen)*

Victor Tedesco with Trudi Hahn  
Minneapolis: Syren Book Company  
236 pages, \$15.95

*Reviewed by Thomas J. Kelley*

Vic Tedesco's memoir describes in clear and candid language his rise from Swede Hollow, an immigrant enclave on St. Paul's East Side, to become a success in several lines of work. Most of the citizens of St. Paul know Vic Tedesco as one of the most colorful members of their City Council, but he was also a successful businessman. He was only nine years old when he began sell-

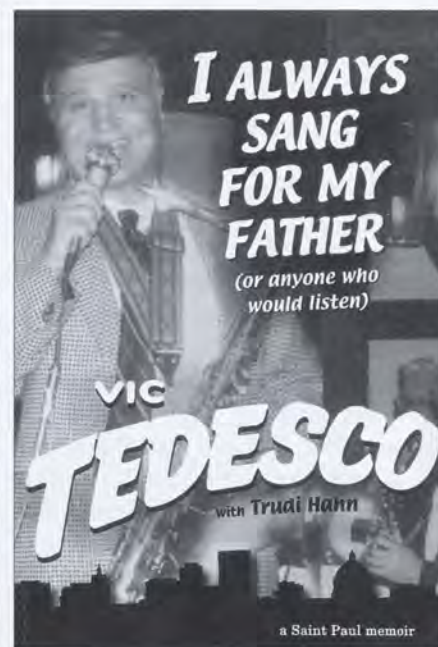
ing newspapers, at a busy intersection of Fourth and Jackson streets, directly kitty-corner from the Railroad Building. On a good day he made as much as fifty cents, which he took home to his mother.

By the time he was ten years old, Vic Tedesco was taking music lessons at the Christ Child Community Center on Payne Avenue. His sense of humor shows throughout the book, but it is especially entertaining as he relates his childhood circumstances. He reveals this is a chapter on his free guitar lessons at the Christ Child Center (the predecessor of today's Merrick Center), a chapter he titles "I Discover Music—and Also That I Am Poor." He was offended when a photo of him and his instructor appeared in the newspaper with a caption stating that the was "underprivileged." He was so offended he quit his lessons.

As a second-generation Italian-American, Tedesco recalls experiences from his childhood with extraordinary detail. He started life on May 22, 1922, in a close-knit, predominantly Italian, community in St. Paul, which came to be called Railroad Island because of the tracks of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific railroads separated it from the adjacent neighborhoods. Later his family moved from this homogeneous neighborhood to one adjoining the city market, which included Italians, Jews, and Irish residents among others. Tedesco graduated from Johnson High School in 1941.

Despite having quit his guitar lessons, music, including singing, has remained an important part of Tedesco's life. In 1942 he worked in a meatpacking plant during the day and in the evening leading a band. After he entered the U.S. Army later that year, he was briefly assigned to the 10th Armored Division band but then was reassigned to a regular army division. Tedesco was quickly promoted to corporal and was assigned to serve as corporal of the guard. He called it a "lucky break," when he was subsequently assigned to another army band during the short time before he was discharged in February 1946.

As soon as he returned to St. Paul, Tedesco resumed leading a band three



nights a week at a popular neighborhood bar making \$18 a week. It was there that he met Florence. He and Florence were married in April 1947. They had three children: Patricia, Elizabeth, and Tony. Tedesco tried many jobs, but music was his anchor in lean years. In 1948 Tedesco's brother Albert passed on to Vic a magazine called *Broadcasting*. In it he spotted an ad by Larry Andrews of Davenport, Iowa, that said, "Let me build your radio station from the idea to the complete station." Tedesco responded to the ad, and it was the beginning of a very successful career establishing and operating radio stations. He teamed with Albert, who had graduated from Beck School of Broadcasting, and Nick, his oldest brother who had been born in Italy, to start radio station WSHB in Stillwater. He later managed a station in Austin, Minn.

The work was distributed among the station partners. Vic became the music librarian, sometimes radio salesman, and "Uncle Vic," who appeared on the air at 5 PM on the Stillwater station and the show became a big hit. Some adult listeners compared him to Mayor Fiorello

La Guardia, who during a newspaper strike, read the comics on the air, comics that listeners would otherwise have missed. On the show "Uncle Vic" read



stories, played recorded kids stories, and even hosted a picnic attended by 700 children. He finally gave up the show, but it continued to be a popular show with other hosts for many years. Two other Tedesco business ventures were real estate and publishing a pro football news tabloid.

Shortly after Christmas 1965 when Tedesco's business ventures were at a low point, State Representative Richard Richie and attorney Fiori Palarine urged Vic to run for the St. Paul City Council. Tedesco first opposed the suggestion, but after adjourning to a bar with his two new supporters and having several martinis, he later agreed to run.

His endorsement for the position by the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party was a cliffhanger. At about 3:00 AM, he received the party's endorsement by one vote. He went on to win in the general election in April 1966 and become the second Italian in the city's history to win a seat on the City Council.

At the time, St. Paul had a unique charter modeled after the one used by the city of Galveston, Tex., which had been created after that city had been devastated in 1900 by the famous Galveston hurricane. Each council member, in addition to making decisions for the city as part of the council, also was head of one of the city's six departments. The mayor was responsible for deciding which council member was assigned to which department. Tedesco requested libraries, but Mayor Tom Byrne assigned him to Parks and Recreation, a major and diverse department.

This memoir has numerous anecdotes from Tedesco's years in charge of the department, including assisting in the annual weighing of Julie, the python, and encounters with Casey, the gorilla, at Como Zoo as well as using his vacation time each year to perform the jobs of his department employees. Tedesco tried his hand at being a laborer, elevator operator, librarian, garbage hauler, and other jobs. While on the council, he used his entertainment talents to promote the Parks and Recreation Department's activities and facilities.

When voters passed a new city charter, which took effect in April 1972, council members no longer were heads of departments. Tedesco compares the 1972 government structure unfavorably to the commissioner council organization. His disagreement with the new charter, along with the fact that he had served on the council for twenty-one years and his pension would not increase if he continued to serve, were contributing factors in his decision to retire in 1987, shortly before the end of his eleventh term. He regards his part in saving the old Federal Courts Building as one of the most important acts of his political career. Under the direction of John and Betty Musser, Frank Marzetti, and a number of other civic leaders, the building was restored. It reopened in 1978 and became the home of the Schubert Club and its Musical Music Instrument Museum, COM-PAS/United Arts, North Star Opera, SteppingStone Theatre, the Ramsey County Historical Society, and other cultural and civic organizations. The restored courthouse, which is now known as Landmark Center, also provides a venue for music, dance, theater, exhibitions, and other special events.

Tedesco had a large and diverse experience in business and music, and although he later retired from the council, he never retired from music. Today in his eighties, Tedesco and his band continue to entertain at public gatherings. *I Always Sang for My Father* is more than an engaging story of Victor J. Tedesco's life. It should also be treated as an eyewitness account of the history of the Italians in St. Paul and of St. Paul city government from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. This memoir is nicely reinforced with excellent black and white and color photos and many cartoons featuring Tedesco and his work on the city council that were drawn by Jerry Fearling, who for many years was the editorial cartoonist at the *Pioneer Press*.

*Thomas J. Kelley is a retired St. Paul and Ramsey County administrator. He is also a member of the Society's Editorial Board.*



*TWOgether:*  
*A Fictional History*

Dick Harris  
Edina, Minn.: Beaver's Pond Press,  
2005  
342 pages, \$19.95

*Reviewed by George Richard (Dick) Slade*

*TWOgether: A Fictional History* by Dick Harris is an intriguing book as it stands on several crossroads of recent writing and publishing of memory-based history. In the first place, the author insists that this is not a true story although it is based on and around members of his mother's family and their migration from Lithuania to the United States and relocation to Saint Paul and Grantsburg, Wisconsin. The narrative in its best moments describes the early years of two cousins—Ytzhak (Ike) and Laba (Louie) Cohen—in Vilnius, Lithuania in the 1870s, a time when historic tolerance of the Jewish people was eroding into harassment and persecution. By the early 1880s, the cousins determined to emigrate to the United States, one through New York, the other via Montreal. They maintained a correspondence that led, ultimately, to following the suggestion of a new friend, "Uncle"



Chaim, "that there is an area not far from a city named St Paul which is located near two rivers that should prove to be a fine place to settle."

The story continues with the two adventurers arriving (from different directions) in Grantsburg, settling in, finding and creating new jobs, and generally succeeding in the New World. They marry—Ike to his dear friend Riva Kandinski from Vilnius; Louie first to Louise "Nook" Sheep, a Native American, who dies in delivering their son Hime; and later, to Elina Cardozo, a young woman from Montreal whom he had met during his journey to Minnesota—increase their families, and diversify their businesses. From this point, the story erodes somewhat, although it is textually enriched by newspaper snippets, real (perhaps) or created, and advertising material—all of which reflect Dick Harris' sense of humor and perhaps real events, real people, and real businesses.

I am a friend of Dick and his family and am familiar with many Jewish families in the community and I found myself distracted by trying to identify the real personalities in the novel (Joseph Goodkind? Joseph Elsinger?) from the ones who are less real (Doc Ward?). In the way of being critical, I should also admit that I was distracted by what appeared to be overuse of Hebrew or Yiddish expressions necessitating a visit to the glossary at the back of the book; the use of slang or corrupted English by the frontier people was equally difficult and had no equivalent glossary.

I salute Dick for writing this book. His research into the early times and people was careful, earnest, and I'm sure, a pleasure to put together, and that pleasure (and sense of accomplishment) overrides the modest criticisms of style and finish. The other interesting part of this publication is that he chose to use one of the several personal publishing media: Beaver's Pond Press. The copy of the book that I have just finished reading would never have existed had I not e-mailed the press and ordered it. Printed on demand, it arrived in two days. The book cover is graced with a primitive painting by the author reflect-

ing two young couples off in the wilderness. (The women carry the baggage.) The volume is further graced with five appendixes containing some facts and some more fancy. Dick wrote this for personal satisfaction and not to be a best seller, and Oprah will not chastise him for over-enhanced imagination. *TWOgether* is an interesting read for those who want to enjoy an informal presentation of the great wave of immigration to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and the true settling of the frontier.

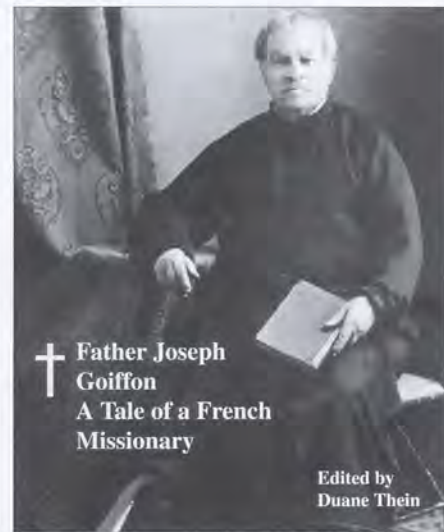
*George Richard (Dick) Slade is the author of Banking in the Great Northern Territory: An Illustrated History and serves on the RCHS Editorial Board.*

### *Father Joseph Goiffon: A Tale of a French Missionary*

Duane Thein, editor  
White Bear Lake, Minn.: White Bear  
Stereoptics Co., 2005  
92 pages, \$20.00

*Reviewed by Anne Cowie*

A blinding snowstorm, a makeshift refuge under a buffalo robe, and a final rescue: this book presents Father Joseph Goiffon's compelling first-person account of a near-disastrous trek north from a Red River trading post to St. Boniface, near Fort Garry, Manitoba, in fall 1860. Goiffon's party started out in late October but was delayed by a broken oxcart axle. Goiffon went ahead by himself on horseback, carrying no food and clad only in his priest's cassock and a light overcoat, and met a surprise fall blizzard. He prayed and then slept wrapped in a buffalo robe under a mound of snow, waking to find that his horse had died and the robe had frozen around him. He managed to stay alive for five days by eating horsemeat and eventually attracted the attention of a man who brought him to the Pembina home of Joe Rolette, where he slowly recovered. Although losing his right foot, Goiffon returned to his duties as a



parish priest and wrote vividly about his experience forty years later.

After surviving his winter ordeal, this stouthearted priest went on to serve parishes in White Bear Lake and Mounds View. He also built the third church of St. Genevieve in Centerville (1870), which had a growing French-Canadian population in Anoka County, and the first church of St. Mary of the Lake, White Bear Lake (1880), which used French during its first five years. Fr. Goiffon also took the lead in establishing the second church of St. John the Evangelist in Little Canada (1881). He is buried in Calvary Cemetery in St. Paul.

Duane Thein's careful editing job with Goiffon's primary-source account (one of two he wrote about the incident) remains true to the author's original intent while providing a thorough context for later readers. Thein has wisely recruited help to translate the original French account into English (though for purists the French version is also provided) and consulted with church and other local historians in both United States and Canada to provide background material, including photographs. But in the end, Fr. Goiffon's own matter-of-fact voice sets the tone, underscoring his dedication, ingenuity, and toughness in the face of a challenge that most modern readers cannot even imagine.

*Anne Cowie is a member of the RCHS Board of Directors and chairs the Society's Editorial Board.*





*This 1966 yearbook photo of Mechanic Arts High School was provided by Robert Cramer of the class of 1955. See John Larson's article beginning on page 4.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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