

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

Crex Carpet  
Company Revisited

Page 18

Summer 2006

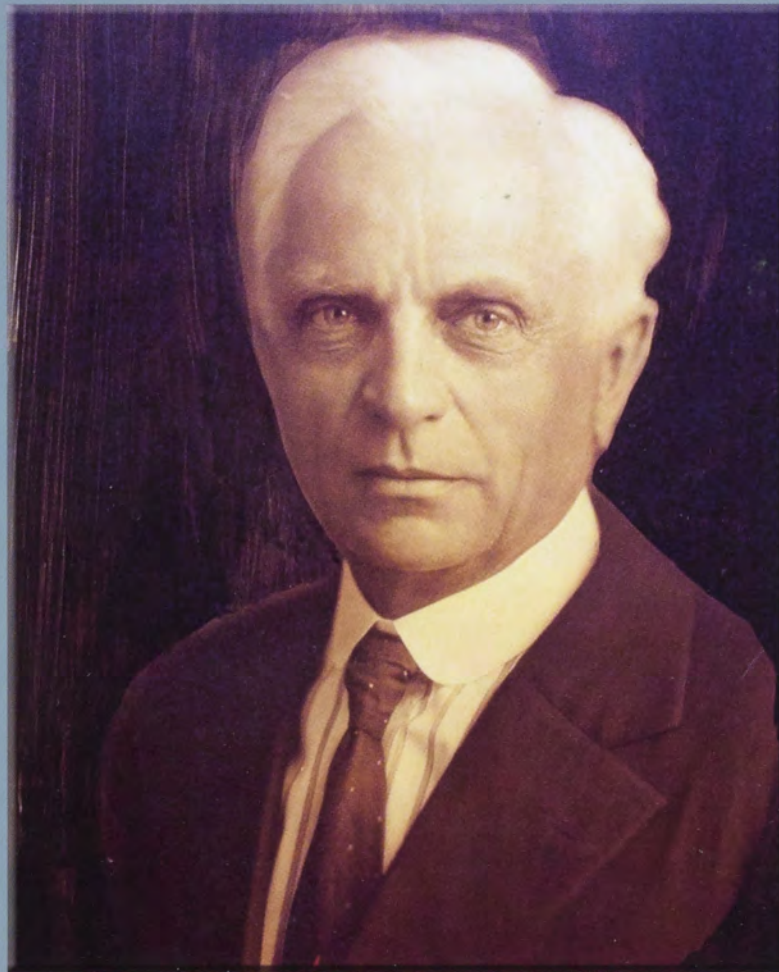
Volume 41, Number 2

*“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.

## CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 "He Was Mechanic Arts"  
Mechanic Arts High School: The Dietrich Lange Years,  
1916–1939  
*John W. Larson*
- 18 "Dreams of the Immensity of the Future"  
Crex Carpet Company Revisited  
*Paul D. Nelson*
- 22 *Fighting Billy Miske*  
The Heart of a Champion  
*Paul Picard*
- 24 Book Reviews

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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



# “Dreams of the Immensity of the Future”

## Crex Carpet Company Revisited

Paul D. Nelson

Who write history, especially of the previously untold variety in which this magazine specializes, always hope that something we publish will lead to treasure—that a reader will call to say, “I’ve got this trunk in the attic you might want to look at.” The contents of the trunk, or the diary, or the chest of glass-plate negatives turns out to be a fabulous find, leading to a book, critical praise, and applause. Some historians get famous that way.

This has not happened to me or anyone else I know, not yet. But the article I wrote about the Crex Carpet Company published in this magazine two issues ago (“The Greatest Single Industry?” Crex: Created Out of Nothing” [vol. 40, no. 4, Winter 2006]) did lead to a marvelous find. The piece mysteriously made its way, through cyberspace probably, to Victoria, British Columbia, and into the hands (or onto the computer screen) of Tybring Hemphill. Mr. Hemphill e-mailed me to say that he had some manuscripts I might want to read.

Mr. Hemphill’s great-grandfather was Michael J. O’Shaughnessy, the first president of American Grass Twine Company (and of its predecessor Wisconsin Grass Twine) and nephew of company founder James O’Shaughnessy. Born in Nashville and raised in Huntsville, Alabama, Michael was installed as president by his Uncle James at age twenty-two. He was there at the company’s founding in Oshkosh and through its crucial first eight years. After leaving the company because of the financial scandal associated with Crex between 1903 and 1905, Michael J. had composed two memoirs of his grass twine days. Would I like to read them wondered Mr. Hemphill? Of course I would.

I awaited the mail from Canada with a mix of pleasant anticipation and fear. Fear is something else that stalks the historian—fear that we will be caught in a



Michael J. O’Shaughnessy, from Oshkosh of To-day, A Brief Review of the City (Oshkosh: 1898), p. 65.

blunder. (Never mind that almost no one is paying attention.) I hoped that the mailman would bring me something wonderful; I feared that the envelope would hold a rebuke from across the decades: “You got it wrong.”

The envelope was thick, the typewritten memoirs fifty pages long. Upon reading them and rereading, I had a reaction I had not expected. First, thank goodness, I had not got it wrong. There was plenty of new information, but nothing that caught me in error. I had got it right. What sur-

prised me was my conclusion that I was glad I had not had this information when writing the article.

Why? With every piece comes a time when you just have to stop researching and get the thing written. There was so much good stuff in these pages that, had I had them, my research task would have taken much longer. But there was more. Michael O’Shaughnessy was a writer! This, not business, was his true calling. I would have had to quote from the memoirs at length, revealing to all that he wrote much better—more vividly, more enthusiastically—than I do. I was glad I did not have to deal (then) with that.

I am pleased to deal with it now. The manuscripts are too long to reprint in full in this magazine. What follows here are some excerpts with my explanatory notes. Colloquialisms, misspellings, and grammatical errors that are in the original manuscripts have not been corrected here. The full text will be posted on the Ramsey County Historical society web site, [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com).

\*\*\*

What became American Grass Twine and eventually the Crex Carpet Company began as the Wisconsin Grass Twine Company in Oshkosh. It was an entirely new and speculative venture, based on the hope that wire grass, a bog-dwelling sedge plant, could be processed into a suitable binding twine. As company president, young Michael O’Shaughnessy had no direct business experience, but he came from a business family; his father has been president of the Alabama Cotton Oil Company. Despite, or perhaps because of his inexperience, the young man embraced the challenge of starting something new in a new place. It was the spring of 1897; the grass twine venture





Wire grass harvest workers take a break in the field near Forest Lake, Minnesota, around 1920. Photo from the Ray Bergerson collection, courtesy of the Bergerson family.

had just set up in a little factory—a building, some untried machines, and a dream. Michael O’Shaughnessy writes:

William Dichmann, ex-Mayor of the town, and all-round good fellow, was largely instrumental in our locating the first plant at Oshkosh. As he dearly loved the “Hurrah boys” method of doing even a prosaic thing, he naturally drifted into our employ and found his position of local factotum very congenial. He swelled up “wisably before your very eyes” when the general order went forth from the Main Street office, that no one, not even the most prominent citizens of the town, could enter the plant without a pass signed by Dichmann . . . When called upon to perform this duty, he signed with a flourish of a Marshal of France. I don’t recall, in my experience, any man more effective in small matters, but one had constantly to create situations bordering on the heroic to keep him up to concert pitch. . . .

The officials and even the workmen from the plant would congregate in Dichmann’s grocery store sitting about on crates, boxes and barrels until the President came over from his supper at the Hotel Athern, when a “cabinet meeting” as it was called would convene upstairs. Here the result of the day’s work and problems it developed would be fully discussed, each contributing sugges-

tions from his particular angle. . . . After the business, we went into what we called social session; but still it was the business, not tasks, duties and details, but dreams of the immensity of the future we were working in. Never was there finer esprit de corps in any organization large or small. Oh, the joy of this work.

*After getting twine production going, the time came, on short notice, to put the stuff to a test. A real test, at a real wheat harvest in eastern North Dakota. O’Shaughnessy dashed to St. Paul, where he met James J. Hill, toured the idle cordage factory that would become the company’s main plant, and rounded up a Minnie Harvester to ship to Fargo for the harvest demonstration.*

Fear in my mind is the great bar to human progress. There is a great Rubicon in everyone’s life that makes or breaks him, but there are innumerable small ones that gradually shape our destinies and mold our character. The act of decision is all important and here it is that fear plays its nefarious part. Some linger on the bank to more fully prepare, while others rashly rush across, and the propelling motive in each case is fear. But I was young and of normal mind so crossed the Red river from Morehead to Fargo in a comfortable Pullman in the early morning fully

prepared for success or failure as the merits of my business might determine.

*Arrangements had been made to try out the twine at various big wheat farms nearby, including one belonging to one Berghardt, “a big kindly German with a flowing white beard.” The twine and the Minnie were hauled to the farm and set up to cut and bind the grain. This machine and this twine had never before met.*

Shortly before day break we were on our way to Berghardt’s forty [acres] nearest the house. We chose for our first and last rehearsal the far end of the field, which lay in a sufficient depression to be out of sight of the house and the road. The moment of greatest expectancy had arrived and I felt a sort of thickness in the throat when Hixon [the “field expert” hired by O’Shaughnessy sight unseen] threw the machine into gear, the buzz started and the grain began to fall upon the platform. In an instant a stream of grain was kicked out of the binder, instead of neatly tied bundles. Horrible sight, and more horrors to come. Halfway down the twine can [a container that held upright the big spool of twine] came off disclosing a nasty tangle and in the wake of the machine not a bundle tied. I felt a faintness in the pit of my stomach. Hixon swore and the callous Swede driver [of the horse-drawn harvester] laughed after the manner of his race in mirthless gulps.

*They tried again, with no greater success.*

[T]he binder choked, the teeth of one of the sprockets on the rollers were stripped off, and we stopped short. The machine was badly choked with tangled grain, the men



The “Minnie” with Combative Knitter.

*This is a 1901 version of the harvester used in the 1897 field test described in O’Shaughnessy’s memoir. From American Grass Twine’s 1901 catalog, Wisconsin Historical Society.*



thoroughly mad and I in despair. . . . We must have presented a sad and disordered spectacle. A couple of hundred yards of untied grain behind us and a busted machine in a horrible mess.

*The next day, armed with a night's rest and counsel received by telegraph from Oshkosh, O'Shaughnessy and company tried again.*

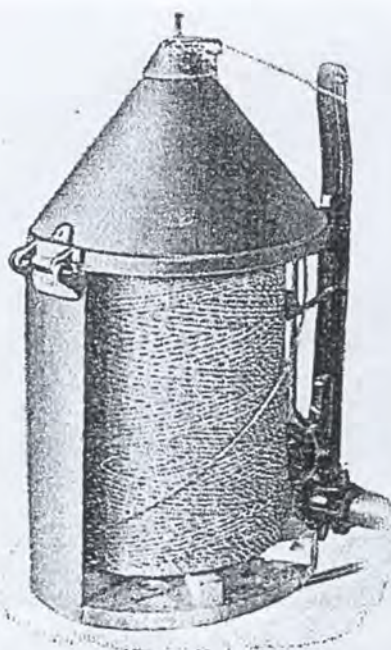
We were in the field the next morning by six o'clock, took the twine from the center of the ball, and went round after round of our forty acres, kicking out bundle after bundle of neatly tied grain without a miss. OH JOY what a morning. . . . After about two hours of cutting all hands seemed entirely satisfied and realized that they had witnessed something quite extraordinary: grain being tied with the waste product of waste lands that in some instances adjoined the wheat fields. . . . My telegram to New York, if I must say it myself, was a masterpiece. . . . Victory, brilliant and spectacular had been "snatched from the jaws of defeat." Our industry had survived the great peril of its infancy.

*Getting the twine to work, and thus stimulating demand, led in due course to more challenges for Michael J. O'Shaughnessy. Demand had to be met, which required finding, getting the rights to, and harvesting vast volumes of wire grass. Carex stricta grew prodigiously in Minnesota, but in miserable locations—peat bogs. The work was hard, wet, and hot, and the workers mostly transients. Some of them would take a drink now and then.*

A very large camp was established [in 1898] at McGregor [in Aitkin County] on a twenty thousand acre marsh . . . and what a nightmare. The largest camp we had thoroughly organized and equipped; forty teams and hundred men including thirty Indians camped with their women and children on an island about half a mile from our camp site. . . . Well, it commenced to rain ten days before the harvest should have started and rained some part of every twenty-four hours for nearly four weeks.

*They kept the men busy as best they could, but these were not the most tractable of fellows.*

[O]ne day in our improvised office in Brainerd we tried to get thru to the camp by



### Twine Box for Grass Twine.

*Twine box from a 1901 Minnie Harvester. The box carried a 22-pound spool. Efficient operation of the harvester required smooth functioning of the twine box. From American Grass Twine's 1901 catalog, Wisconsin Historical Society.*

"phone" but the wire was reported out of order. I felt apprehensive . . . . [About two hours later I] found this very disturbing telegram "Trouble. Come quick."

I caught the east bound express at two o'clock, which would pass the camp at about four in the morning. . . . When I alighted from the train in darkness, with a lighted lantern, I was challenged by Higgins [the foreman] more than half drunk. The men were sick of the job and wanted their money. He would slit Jerrems [a company man] throat from ear to ear the black hearted ----- He would burn down that damned shack indicating the commissary. I had seen a good bit of rough men and knew that silence was safer than threats you wouldn't back up with lead.

*At this point three trustworthy men, Swenson, Riley, and Schick emerged from the bunkhouse.*

This colloquy proceeded between these three trusty men and myself. "What's the

trouble?" "Nothing much, right smart red eye in camp." "The boss [Higgins] beat up his old woman pretty bad." "She broke away from him and got into the commissary with Jerrems [an Oshkosh man and, according to O'Shaughnessy, the inventor of the bog shoe]." . . . "Old man Higgins tried to rush the commissary but them Winchesters stopped him aright and damned near got him too." . . . "The men is down hearted, nasty and full of booze." . . . "Cook drunk?" "Allow he is comin out of it by now ." . . . "Who cut the wire?" "Higgins I recon, didn't want the big boss buttin in." I felt the course I decided upon was quite safe.

Turning on Higgins I demanded to know how the woman happened to be in camp. He knew the rule against women in camp well enough and I wanted to put him on the defensive. Out of the volume of oaths and filth that came from his mouth one could gather that she was living in Aitkin the next station to the west, had come to camp to spend one day and Higgins imagined Jerrems had insulted her. This explanation seemed to enrage him beyond control and he advanced threatening me with a club. Whereupon my three friends jumped him, disarmed and bound him. I ordered two of them to hustle the brute over to McGregor and put him on the westbound train for Aitkin. He was a big man, hard as iron, but too drunk to put up a real good fight. He did well enough however as he was taken out of camp to arouse the men in the bunk house from their drunken stupor.

Quick action was now necessary. . . . Leaving Schick and his pal with the rifles to keep guard at the bunk house I went back to the commissary. That Higgins woman. What a sight. Her face was badly battered up, her hair in wild disorder, and her cheap finery in shreds. No man was ever so resourceful in blasphemy and filth as this harpy in her demoniacal rage at being told she was to take the next train West the very same on which her late lord and master was being forcibly conducted. . . . The man roared with delight at the antics of this helpmate as she was put aboard scratching, biting and screaming. The engineer tooted "bye bye" and off that precious pair rolled away to Aitkin. . . . where a marshal awaited them to advise them to continue on.



*Calm at the camp had been restored, and O'Shaughnessy decided to cut his losses. He closed the camp and ordered all the equipment and horses shipped south.*

Back to St. Paul we went licked, badly licked, but we had fought a good fight, and in any case battling with nature and the elements was an uneven struggle. However we saved the day in southern Minnesota.

\*\*\*

Michael O'Shaughnessy left American Grass Twine and St. Paul in 1904 or 1905, apparently shortly before his uncle and the other founders were forced out of the company for theft.

He went on to have a remarkable career, eventful if only intermittently successful. According to a short and unpublished biographical sketch (delightfully titled *His Diversified Life*), after his departure from American Grass Twine, "frustrated in an attempt to become suc-

cessful in business, O'Shaughnessy's attention was redirected to more venturesome and less reputable exploits," in the company of some of the same men, including Uncle James, who disgraced themselves in the twine trade.

In 1917 Michael O'Shaughnessy surfaced as president of the Scranton Foundry and Engine works. That venture did not go well either. But in 1924 he got into the oil business, concentrating on South America. "The oilman's fortunes fluctuated wildly and he was penniless at least once." But in this industry he used his writing talents well, publishing a journal called *O'Shaughnessy's Oil Bulletin* and some books on the oil business. Today the Library of Congress lists six titles under his name.

The coming of the Great Depression, coupled perhaps with some personal tragedies (he lost a wife and a child) and his disillusionment with the business world, turned O'Shaughnessy from a Republican to a Roosevelt Democrat; he

called Roosevelt "the great white knight of social justice." "Thus began a new career as a social and moral reformer for a new society." He became a founder of the Catholic League for Social Justice and editor of its journal, *Social Justice Bulletin*. Michael J. O'Shaughnessy died in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on February 14, 1946.

The manuscripts that he wrote, and are now available for the first time to the public, are full of pleasures. In addition to O'Shaughnessy's skills as a writer, we get rare glimpses into the creation of a successful business over a century ago. Everything has changed and nothing has changed: people still make their ventures go just as O'Shaughnessy did, by marshalling wit, enthusiasm, and energy, and casting aside the fear of failure.

*Paul D. Nelson is a member of the RCHS Editorial Board and a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History.*

## *Operating in the Shadows*

### James O'Shaughnessy, Founder of Crex

While Michael O'Shaughnessy operated out front, his uncle James, the company's founder, held himself in the shadows. In writing the Crex story I had never been able to learn much about him. Once again, Tybring Hemphill helped fill in the blanks.

According to nephew Michael, James O'Shaughnessy was "affectionately known from New York to New Orleans as the Colonel." He had been "one of the pioneers in the Cotton Oil industry amassing a fortune in the American Cotton Oil Trust in the '80s which he lost in the Nicaragua Canal project [a failed predecessor of the Panama canal] and in booming several Southern

towns twenty years in advance of their natural development."

Uncle James made another fortune in the Planters Express Corporation, an enterprise that "bid fair to revolutionize the handling of the cotton crop." It failed to do so, but not until after O'Shaughnessy had made a killing in its stock.

James O'Shaughnessy made fortunes and lost them, and he preferred making to losing. He was a *laissez-faire* capitalist in the days before such nuisances as the Securities and Exchange Commission. This may explain why, starting in 1902, he joined with the other founding directors of American Grass Twine in looting its treasury of some \$640,000.

He was forced out of the company when the theft came to light in 1905. Disgrace apparently did not descend upon him. He died in comfortable circumstances in New York City in 1914. His *New York Times* obituary put the lie to Mark Antony's famous declaration in *Julius Caesar* that "the evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." Uncle James was remembered as a businessman and a founder of the Crex Carpet Company, and not as its plunderer. And perhaps that was fair; the company prospered without him and survived him by twenty years.





*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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