

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Whither the Passenger Train?

St. Paul Union Depot:
Decline and Rebirth

John W. Diers

—Page 12

Summer 2013

Volume 48, Number 2

For the Masses or the Classes?

Fine Art Exhibits at the Minnesota State Fair 1885–1914

Leo J. Harris

Page 3



This is an oil painting of an Irish wolfhound named "Lion," painted in 1841 by Charles Deas (1818–1867), an early Minnesota artist. The painting was a first prize winner in the 1860 Minnesota State Fair. In the article beginning on page 3, Leo J. Harris provides the background on this painting and considers fine art exhibitions at the Minnesota State Fair later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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Volume 48, Number 2

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

As the St. Paul Union Depot reopens with fanfare and hope for a revitalized future, John Diers takes us on a tour of its past—not just the romanticized version, but with a clear-eyed view of its strengths and weaknesses. After its completion in 1926, the Depot was managed by nine railroads and anchored by a massive postal operation. But already, the availability and use of automobiles was making inroads in rail passenger service, and soon air travel would do the same. The fascinating business story of the Depot over its working life has not often been told, and Diers does a great job. Leo Harris also shares with us the eclectic history of the fine arts exhibit at the Minnesota State Fair, which began as a tribute to European artists before the rise of local museums. Later, it evolved as a display of home-grown talent, reflecting popular Victorian pastimes—think china painting—as well as paintings by Minnesota artists. Finally, check out our book reviews for tales of two murders, 130 years apart, and John Milton’s complete examination of the life and times of Nick Coleman, former Minnesota Senate majority leader. Take this issue to the cabin or the beach and enjoy.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Book Reviews

*Minnesota's Oldest
Murder Mystery:
The Case of Edward Phalen;
St. Paul's Unsainly Saint*

Gary J. Brueggemann
Minneapolis: Beaver's Pond Press,
2012

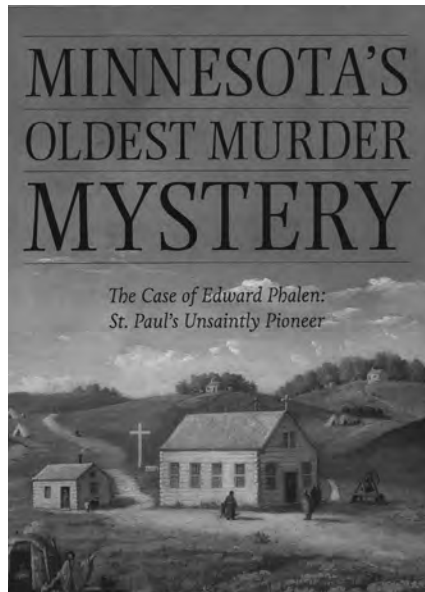
328 pages; paperback; \$19.95.

Reviewed by Paul Nelson

St. Paul, like Rome, was built on seven hills (supposedly). Beyond that, similarities between the cities get skimpy. Rome's founding story, for example, stars the semi-divine Romulus and Remus, sons of the war god Mars. St. Paul's founding story features Pig's Eye Parrant, the Selkirk Colony refugees, and Edward Phelan (or Phalen).

Phelan's name lives on more conspicuously than that of any other early settler: Lake Phalen, Phalen Creek, Phalen Boulevard, the Phalen Corridor, the Payne-Phalen neighborhood. But he was a man of low achievement, low taste, low education—and he may have been a murderer. So, for that matter, was Romulus (he killed Remus), but Romulus went on to found Rome. Ed Phelan went on to . . . well, read the book.

Phelan and John Hays, soldiers from Fort Snelling, in 1838 staked side-by-side claims in what became downtown St. Paul and lived together in a little cabin near where the Science Museum stands today. On September 6 of that year Hays went missing. His body, disfigured by devastating head wounds, turned up in the Mississippi River near Carver's Cave three weeks later. Pretty much everybody in the tiny settlement figured Phelan, an unpopular, bibu-



lous Irishman, had killed Hays. In due course he was arrested, jailed in Prairie du Chien, tried and—surprise!—acquitted. He came back to St. Paul and took up living again in the cabin he and Hays had shared.

Not guilty: but that did not mean he didn't do it. The suspicion never left Phelan and the controversy persists to this day. In *Minnesota's Oldest Murder Mystery*, Gary Brueggemann sets out to resolve the doubts 170 years later. The author, who teaches history at Century and Inver Hills Community Colleges, makes no claim to be a detective or an attorney.

The book is a remarkable achievement in research (against long odds), mastery of the facts, and that essential element of all good history, imagination.

Only fragments of evidence remain; chiefly the notes of the magistrate who presided at the trial and memories of witnesses recorded decades later. Author

Brueggemann combines these with his own matchless knowledge of St. Paul's earliest days to reconstruct the case. He takes a patient, measured approach, starting with Phalen's dubious version of events and testing it against competing narratives. To do this requires going over the evidence again and again. It could have been tedious, but the repetition in fact serves to clarify.

Phelan insisted that a calf belonging to Hays had gone missing; that Hays suspected local Dakotas; that Phelan had paddled him across the Mississippi so he could search for the culprit; and that Phelan never saw him alive again. One by one Brueggemann introduces us to the other witnesses, gives us their testimony, and tests what they said against Phelan's account and the other discernible facts of the case. As we readers go through the events again and again, from different perspectives, we become surrogate jurors, trying to construct a coherent truth from lies and fragments.

Along the way we meet many of the original settlers—the Gervais and Perry families (Selkirk refugees), the ex-slave James Thompson, fur trader and magistrate Joseph R. Brown, Henry Sibley, Dr. John Emerson (the man who brought Dred Scott to Minnesota), Vetal Guerin—the motley assemblage who comprised the true founders of our city. Brueggemann brings them to life.

One of the marvelous things about this book is how clearly author Brueggemann portrays the early geography of St. Paul. Have you not wondered where, exactly, the first settlers lived? It's all here, woven into the story of the killing, the investigation, and the trial (and with maps). This is without question the best recreation of St. Paul in its infancy.

Once Brueggemann has taken you through the various possible explanations of Hays's death, he embarks on his own fictional, or semi-fictional, reconstruction of the crime. I was dubious. I thought at first that the author wrote non-fiction better than fiction, but little by little his account drew me in, and in the end I found it both plausible and entertaining. If you just want the facts, though, you can skip this (clearly marked) part.

So, was our founder, like Romulus, a killer? Gary Brueggemann believes he knows, but you won't get the answer in this review. Buy the book, read the book, judge the evidence for yourself. As you do, you'll be rewarded with not only a good yarn, but also an expert portrait of our city as a muddy hamlet ringed, I suppose, by seven hills.

Post-script. A reviewer often feels compelled to point out errors and defects in a book, to show how carefully he has read and—sometimes—how he knows the subject better than the author. This reviewer will resist the temptation. The publisher is Beaver's Pond Press, a small publishing establishment. This means that the author likely edited himself, an impossible task. So there are a few clunkers and errors (the entrance to Carver's Cave has NOT disappeared), but they do not detract from the achievement.

Paul Nelson is a member of the RCHS Editorial Board and has published several articles in this magazine.

*For the Good of the Order:
Nick Coleman and the High
Tide of Liberal Politics
in Minnesota, 1971–1981.*

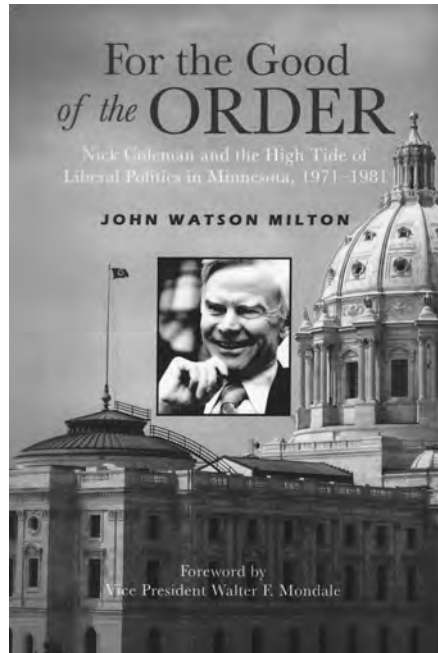
John Watson Milton
St. Paul: Ramsey County Historical
Society, 2012.

688 pages; cloth (\$36.95), paper
(\$24.95), and ebook (\$9.95).

Reviewed by David A. Schultz

John Milton, a former DFL State senator during the 1970s, has written the definitive biography of former State

Senate majority leader Nick Coleman and of Minnesota politics during his era. Milton paints a picture, as the title to his book indicates, of the heyday of Minnesota liberalism and the reasons for its genesis as well as its legacy. But the book also prompts questions: why the forces that created that era ended and what has happened to the political leadership that once defined the liberal-



ism and greatness of Minnesota?

The 1970s were a heady time for Minnesota politics, both nationally and within the state. At the center of those times were many political giants, at least for some in comparison to today's leaders. Prior to Garrison Keillor and *The Prairie Home Companion*, three images defined Minnesota's identity across the country in the 1960s and 1970s. First there were the personalities. The faces of Minnesota were Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, Orville Freeman, Walter Mondale, Wendell Anderson, Don Frazier, and Martin Sabo. All of them shared the DFL label and they represented a second image of Minnesota—its political liberalism. The third was the iconic 1973 picture of Governor Anderson holding a big fish gracing the cover of *Time* with the proclamation that Minnesota is the state of the good

life. All of these images were intertwined in defining Minnesota's identity, one that lived on beyond these personalities. Equally important, perhaps, was another name, Nick Coleman's, which needs to be added to those that defined Minnesota's liberalism.

Milton's book traces Coleman's life back to where it started—his Irish-Catholic roots. He tells the story of Coleman's ancestors coming to America and settling in St. Paul. It is a story of many in St. Paul: poor, Irish, and a loyalty to the family, faith, and public service. Milton tells of Coleman's early education, his family moving from one residence to another with each defined by its local parish. Nick served in World War II, and then attended St. Thomas College (now the University of St. Thomas) where he came to know an instructor named Eugene McCarthy. He along with many of his classmates volunteered on McCarthy's 1948 run for Congress. It was the same year Hubert Humphrey gave his famous speech at the Democratic National Convention urging support for civil rights, and the year that the modern DFL was forged. Working on McCarthy's congressional campaign and later John Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign developed the connections and honed the political skills that paved the way for Coleman's 1962 election to the Minnesota Senate.

The 1960s were a tough time for the DFL in the legislature. Still officially a non-partisan body, the House and Senate caucused as Liberals and Conservatives during that time, with Conservatives holding the balance of power. This was true in part because apportionment of districts based on their population was badly skewed and out-of-date, which gave rural Minnesota a political edge and helped keep Conservatives in power. Moreover, events such as the Vietnam War and splits in the party over support for Humphrey or McCarthy in the 1968 presidential campaign primaries taxed Democratic loyalties. Milton is terrific in describing the personalities and conflicts, but also adept in noting

how Coleman used his role in the Senate and his work on various campaigns to build the political skills he later would draw upon as majority leader.

But three events changed DFL fortunes in Minnesota. The first was a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on reapportionment, which forced “one person, one vote” into the law, thereby laying the groundwork for a shift in political power from rural Minnesota to the cities. This began the liberal and DFL rise in Minnesota in the late 1960s. The big year for Coleman was 1973 when thirteen new senators took office, putting him into the position of Senate majority leader along with Martin Sabo as speaker of the House and Wendell Anderson as governor. With Coleman in the Senate and Wendell Anderson as governor, Minnesota’s transformation into an iconic liberal state emerged. Milton’s book describes the legislation that was passed, highlighted by the great 1971 tax deal that was negotiated to benefit education. This is the “Minnesota Miracle” and for those who recently referred to Governor Mark Dayton’s ill-fated tax proposals as the “Minnesota Miracle II,” they need to read the book to understand how unique the original tax deal was.

The second change came in 1974 when Minnesota abandoned its non-partisan approach for a partisan legislature where candidates ran under party labels. The caucuses were also organized that way. This strengthened the DFL brand, allowing the party to consolidate its majorities and enact other tax reforms along with gun, environmental, and other important health care legislation.

But as quickly as DFLers took control of the state, they lost it in 1978 as a consequence of a third event. Walter Mondale’s ascension to the vice presidency and his subsequent resignation from the U.S. Senate in 1976 led to Governor Anderson taking his place in Washington and Rudy Perpich becoming Minnesota’s governor. The brazenness of Anderson’s move led to what Milton calls the DFL “massacre” of 1978 that soon ended the dominance the DFL had enjoyed for a few years. Post-1978, the

book tells of Coleman’s waning days in politics as majority leader, his divorce and remarriage, and his battle with leukemia. Coleman died in 1981.

What do readers learn about Coleman and Minnesota politics from the book? First, *For the Good of the Order* describes an era that may never exist again in Minnesota. Coleman was part of a group of politicians of similar backgrounds who shared a core liberal outlook to help the disadvantaged. They believed in government, the power of public authority, and they had the courage of their convictions. For some, the current DFL leadership is a faint resemblance in stature and commitment compared to the party of Coleman. Second, despite party differences, the 1970s was also an era of bipartisanship and shared values about what Minnesota could be—something that seems missing in the DFL-Republican battles over taxes and social issues that now dominant the state.

Overall, *For the Good of the Order* is a hefty but fascinating read. For anyone who wants to know about the personalities and policies that defined modern Minnesota politics, this is the book to read. Those who do will come to know Nick Coleman, a leader whose name deserves to be up there as one of the architects of this era of Minnesota politics.

David A. Schultz is a professor of political science at Hamline University, St. Paul, whose area of expertise is Minnesota politics.

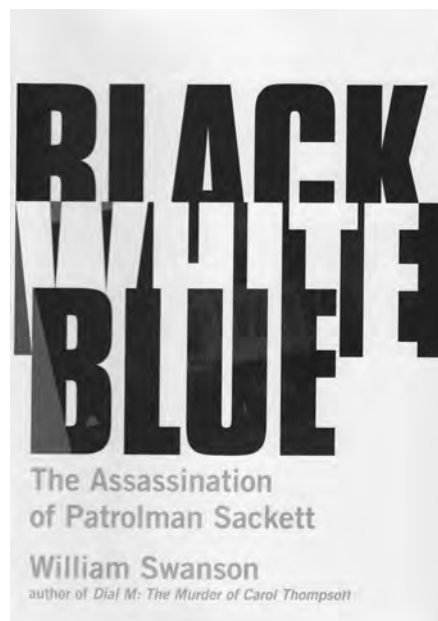
Black White Blue: The Assassination of Patrolman Sackett

William Swanson
St. Paul: Borealis Books; Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012
251 pages; hardcover; \$24.95.

Reviewed by Bob Garland and Mike Garland

In *Black White Blue* author William Swanson simultaneously gives the reader well written and riveting accounts

of two tragedies. The first rises from the mystery of the 1970 assassination of St. Paul police officer James Sackett and its ultimate solution over thirty years later. The second is part of the equally tragic struggle of our St. Paul/Ramsey County African-American community in dealing with freeway construction, neighborhood disruption, loss of well-paying railroad jobs, narcotics, and the turmoil over the Vietnam War while



also seeking to achieve newly won civil rights. *Black White Blue* is worth reading on both counts.

Swanson does a good job recreating the local turmoil resulting from antiwar and civil-rights protests prior to May 1970. These were inevitably seen by the white community and the police mostly as violent takeovers and riots, especially in the context of the Dayton’s department store, Burlington Northern, and other bombings. The Dayton’s explosion, with its much larger unexploded second bomb, appeared designed to devastate the police and fire first responders.

Most notable in this book, from the perspective of a reviewer currently working in the law enforcement field, are the prominent roles Swanson gives to emotion and perseverance on the part of the many police officers and other in-

investigators involved. The assassination, aftermath, and lengthy thirty-year road to a criminal prosecution of the two main defendants took a toll on many members of the St. Paul Police Department and those from other agencies with whom they partnered well into the last decade. Swanson describes their feelings of loss immediately after Sackett's death with great empathy and the assassination-style killing with a single rifle bullet was taken, understandably, by many officers as a "professional affront."

An uneasy divide that already existed in 1970 between the city's 3% African-American population and its police department was deepened dramatically by the shocking assassination of Sackett and Swanson highlights this with his observations of the participants he interviewed. An officer who worked alongside the murdered cop recalled accompanying Sackett's funeral procession and being surprised when an elderly African-American onlooker on a sidewalk doffed his cap and held it over his heart as they passed. Swanson revisits Sackett's surviving partner, Glen Kothe, several times throughout his narrative and describes, with haunting frankness, the man's experience with alcohol abuse, extreme family discord, and suicidal thoughts.

Mixed emotions extend to the investigation itself in this very readable and detailed account, as members of the St. Paul Police Department deal with a case that took over three decades to reach finality. With no known witnesses from the start, the extremely slow and methodical pace of the detective work that followed Sackett's assassination is successfully explained by the author. Ronald Reed and Larry Clark, who were mentioned as suspects in the months immediately following the shooting, were not charged with the crime until 2006, and that came about only after a return to active investigation started three years earlier. In the complete absence of common present-day evidence such as DNA samples, cell phone data, video surveillance recordings, and the like, the several teams of investigators who worked on the Sackett case were forced to rely almost solely on talking to people, especially members

of an increasingly adversarial African-American community, on repeated occasions over the course of decades.

Swanson's book, based on his own interviews, archival research, police reports, court documents, and news accounts, serves as an important reminder that in early 1970 and for some time after, St. Paul was at the center of the struggle for civil rights and a city's interest in bringing about closure for its people and the grieving members of its Police Department in the aftermath of James Sackett's tragic death.

Bob Garland is a former member of the RCHS board of directors and Mike Garland is a Twin Cities police sergeant.

Before the Museums Came: A Social History of the Fine Arts in the Twin Cities

Leo J. Harris

London: Versita, 2013

125 pages; 56 illustrations; online (no cost) and print on demand (\$126.00 paperback).

Available at www.versita.com

Reviewed by John M. Lindley

Anyone who reads the standard social histories of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, will come across the names of Thomas B. Walker of Minneapolis and James J. Hill of St. Paul and learn that these two business titans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used their great wealth to acquire many fine paintings and other pieces of art for their private collections. These collections, which were housed in their residences, were open to members of the public on a limited basis and are generally acknowledged as the only notable expression of interest in the fine arts in the two cities at that time.

Fortunately, author Leo J. Harris has delved deeper. Using archival, journal, magazine, newspaper, and other documentary sources, Harris has found that beginning in the 1830s, Minneapolis and St. Paul had a growing interest in

the fine arts and that there was far more going on in the collecting and display of fine art in these cities than just the paintings acquired by Walker and Hill. *Before the Museums Came* is an account of art creation, education, training, and collecting in the Twin Cities that is important and instructive. Although there was some art created in the Twin Cities before the Civil War, the core of this book focuses on the years between the opening of the Art Gallery in the Minneapolis Industrial Exposition Building in 1886 and the establishment of the first permanent museum in the Twin Cities, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, in 1915.

Thanks to Harris, we now know there were other collectors and collections, admittedly not as extensive or as important as those of Walker and Hill, but still worth examining. In addition Harris adroitly explains how art dealers, critics, architects, academics, public libraries, and artists all contributed to a vibrant community interest in the fine arts. As a social history of the fine arts, this book succeeds in documenting the Twin Cities arts community in the years prior to 1915 with depth and detail that is unavailable elsewhere. In addition, the numerous illustrations that are included in this book aid the reader in better understanding how this foundation of activity in the arts prepared the way for the establishment of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and other art museums, such as the Walker Art Museum, in these communities in the twentieth century.

In his concluding chapter, Harris celebrates all the ways in which the fine arts flourish today in the Twin Cities. His point, which is worth noting, is "[t]hese amazing, art-friendly results did not spring from nothing." The roots of these twenty-first century successes grew out of a strong foundation that emerged from the efforts of the many individuals who had a passion for the fine arts more than a century ago.

John M. Lindley is the editor of Ramsey County History.

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Railroads spared no expense promoting their postwar streamliners in newspaper and magazine ads, on radio and television, and in colorful timetables such as these from the 1950s and '60s. All the rail lines represented here served the St. Paul Union Depot. Regrettably, many members of the traveling public found the competing appeals of Chevrolet, Ford, and Northwest Airlines were more persuasive. For more on the St. Paul Union Depot and passenger travel by train, see page 12. Timetables courtesy of John W. Diers.