

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
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Winter, 1994

Volume 28, Number 4

*A Ninety-year Run*

Giesen's: Costumers to St. Paul—1872–1970

Page 4



A St. Paul Civic Opera Company production of "Martha" in 1934. Left to right are Mary Wigginton, Bill Lee and Antoinette (Tony) Bergquist. Giesen's was the official costumer for the Civic Opera. See the article about Minnesota's first commercial costume house beginning on page 4. Kenneth W. Wright photo from Walter Bergquist's collection.



## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 28, Number 4

Winter, 1994

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## Thirty Down and Many More to Go

**W**ith this issue, *Ramsey County History* has completed thirty years of continuous publication. Founded in 1964 as a semi-annual magazine published by the Ramsey County Historical Society, *Ramsey County History* moved to a quarterly publication schedule in 1990. Over the years, it has served as a substantial source of information about the history, people, businesses, important events, architecture and historic sites, economics and philanthropy of Ramsey County for both local and national researchers and readers. Twice, in 1967 and 1993, *Ramsey County History* has won a certificate of commendation from the American Association for State and Local History for its outstanding quality as a historical magazine. Much of the credit for its sustained excellence is due to the work of its founder and only editor since 1964, Virginia Brainard Kunz.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board



## Books, Etc.

### *Too Hot, Went To Lake*

Peg Meier  
Minneapolis: Neighbors  
Publishing, 1993

Reviewed by Liz Holum Johnson

With humorous and enchanting stories accompanied by historic photographs, *Too Hot, Went To Lake* draws people into the visual world of Minnesota's fascination with the change of seasons. With such extremes in atmospheric weather, as found in the North Star state, readers are treated to a visible expression of how Minnesotans revel in seasonal changes.

Minnesota's past is revealed in photographs, letters, and diaries arranged by the region's seasons. Why seasons? Author Peg Meier, award-winning reporter for the *Star Tribune* newspaper in Minneapolis, states in her introduction that "Minnesotans arrange *everything* by season: clothes closets, books, music collections, stuff that we carry in our car trunks, memories." It is very true.

Meier, author of four other Minnesota books, including *Bring Warm Clothes*, and Jarrett Smith, designer of the book, separate *Too Hot, Went To Lake* by the four seasons—summer, fall, winter, and spring. Each section is divided by a short essay highlighting anecdotes unique and common to Minnesota climes, a rich series of photographs with detailed, informative and thought-provoking captions, followed by excerpts from a variety of quotes from diaries, letters, newspapers, and periodicals describing ordinary life in Minnesota. Each of the sections complement each other within each separate season.

In the introduction, Meier explains her methodology in identifying and



"William Schenk had a big laugh on his porch in 1912," Peg Meier writes of this little boy in *Too Hot, Went to Lake*. This is just one of the delightful photographs in her new book. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

choosing the photographs, resources, and topics. Much more goes into researching old photographs than one might think. "Old photos and detective work" go hand in hand. The opening acclimates and prepares the reader for the visual feast that follows.

Meier located photographs at the Minnesota Historical Society, county historical societies and regional collections. The process of identifying photos required a great deal of assistance from collection staff at historical societies and libraries, as well as from city directories, history books, telephone books, and newspapers. Techniques to further analyze photographs entailed looking for clues about prized possessions in the im-

ages, such as objects and clothing, personalities revealed in the snapshots, how the picture was arranged—who was sitting or standing where, and, in some cases, a visit to the place the photo was taken. The most unique technique involved checking the ears! "Bodies change, faces change, but ear shapes, especially the lobes, stay the same through life."

The process of choosing particular photos for the book was no small task. Five years of research and thousands of photos later, Meier and Smith chose "people" photos, focusing on average folks living in Minnesota. Images composed well, giving an idea of what life might have been like if the reader had



been born a few decades earlier. Photos of Minnesota's landscape, architecture, and dignitaries were skipped over in place of photos that "stirred the heart."

Within each of the seasons, photos are grouped by particular topics. Summer images highlight tourists, lakes, leisure, baseball, weddings, and camping. Fall photos include harvest, football, hunting and fishing, and back-to-school. Winter brings images of surviving blizzards, the healing climate, and holidays. Spring speaks of rebirth—Easter, dance recitals, tulips as well as housecleaning, Memorial Day, graduation, and the town band. All seasons featured the weather—from the Armistice Day blizzard to tornados.

The last several pages of the book are devoted to preservation of one's own photographs. As an archivist by profession, I was particularly happy to see this included in the book. Topics cover the use of black and white film in addition to color, proper storage conditions, labeling, scrapbooks, videotapes, and the idea of donating your photos to an area historical society. The detailed index is a must in this 300-plus page book. Meier also asks readers to help in distinguishing people, events, and dates in some of the photographs presented that were found to be unidentified. She will pass the information on to the appropriate historical society.

*Too Hot, Went To Lake* is a rich, detailed array of visual images of Minnesota's past. The reader is drawn to each photo; after examining the caption one wants to know more about that part of state history, whether it be learning about the heaviest bowling team in America or past floods in Minnesota. Every Minnesotan will find a photograph that will evoke memories of their past. The photo depicting the doctor and child at the Glen Lake Sanatorium spoke to me as the place where my grandfather and grandmother practiced as a doctor and nurse.

*Liz Holum Johnson is archivist for the H. B. Fuller Company and a member of the board of directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society. This is her third appearance in Ramsey County History.*



*Workmen posing in front of James J. Hill's half-finished house in the fall of 1889. This and the photograph on page 25 of the dining room in the Hill mansion are among the many fascinating Minnesota Historical Society photographs reproduced in its newest historic sites pamphlet reviewed here.*

### *James J. Hill House*

Craig Johnson  
Minnesota Historic Sites Pamphlet  
Series, No. 21  
St. Paul: Minnesota Historical  
Society Press, 1993

*Reviewed by Thomas C. Buckley*

A few years ago, Louis Hill, Jr., grandson of James J. Hill, related to me a historical footnote on the origin of one of the most famous homes in Minnesota. During his business career, Jim Hill made frequent visits to New York City to secure funds for his various business ventures. On one such occasion, he was visiting with Jacob Schiff, investment banker and head of the firm of Kuhn Loeb & Company. Schiff waxed eloquent about the large and elegant homes in New York and quipped, "They don't have houses like these back where you come from." According to Louis Hill, Jr., the cutting remark was believed to be one of the major factors which motivated his grandfather to build a large and technologically innovative house on Summit Avenue.

The structure was completed in 1891 and was the site of many important events, including Hill's final illness, surgery, and death in 1916. In 1925, four years after the demise of his wife Mary, and in accord with her wishes, the home was given to the Archdiocese of St. Paul. In 1978 the Archdiocese turned the building over to the Minnesota Historical Society, which used the upper bedrooms as offices while the building was being restored. Since 1980 people have been touring the Hill House with only a fold-out brochure containing basic facts and floor plans to supplement the narrative of the tour guides.

This year a handsome booklet has been produced to provide Hill House visitors with something more substantial to consult as they stroll about its 36,000 square feet. The booklet contains a concise text which treats the construction, restoration, grounds, household staff, art collection, woodwork, lighting, security, communication and heating and ventilation systems. Distributed through the booklet are eighty photographs, with sixteen contemporary photos in color. The photos of the house, family, and staff are



accompanied by lengthy photo captions, which provide details to supplement the commentary of the most experienced tour guide.

One of the common problems in restoring a historic home is locating and returning the original furnishings. That has been a particular problem at the Hill House, since the family of three boys, six girls, and numerous in-laws took away various furnishings and keepsakes. In a deposition given after the death of his mother, Louis Hill, Sr., commented critically on the way his sisters and brothers-in-law descended on the farm home at North Oaks and cleaned out the building. The process undoubtedly was repeated at 240 Summit Avenue. Those items left behind were further dispersed when the building was occupied by the Archdiocese.

Fortunately, a number of black and white photos of the furnished rooms were taken in 1922. Several of these period photos showing numerous chairs, tables, photographs, drapes, books, rugs, plants, etc., are included in the booklet. Given the paucity of furniture in the Hill House, the pictures give the visitor a better realization that numerous people lived or visited there.

James J. Hill fancied himself on the cutting edge of industrial age technology. In his transportation ventures, he sought out devices to save labor costs and attract business. His interest in technological innovation ranged from minimal friction wheels for railroad cars to fast-firing boilers to powerful cost effective engines for locomotives and steamships.

The house did not escape such innovations. Steam heat was supplied to the rain gutters to prevent winter ice build-up. Fresh filtered forced air was heated by steam pipes and distributed throughout the house to promote good health. Since water pressure was unreliable in a multi-story house up on Summit Avenue, water was pumped to a huge tank in the attic, with an assured gravity flow to all faucets on the lower floors.

In an era of transition from gas to electric lights, Hill installed his own self-contained electrical system to supplement gas lights. Later, as reliable electric power became available, the house was

connected to the city-wide system. However, even Hill did not anticipate the degree to which electrical lights and appliances would improve and proliferate. In a very few years, his house was under-powered and under-wired. The house was not built with wall outlets, and the period photos in the booklet show several extension cords dangling from ceiling light fixtures.

Jim Hill was in many ways a man of the Gilded Age when bigger meant better and abundance was testimony to one's worth. The house, with its forty-two rooms, five balconies and terraces, thirteen bathrooms, twenty-two fireplaces, and numerous closets, cellars, and store-rooms, could compare favorably in size to any of the other large mansions of Jacob Schiff's East Coast Gilded Age millionaires, whether they were located in New York City or Newport, Rhode Island.

Even with the large rooms and spacious hallways, the abundance of furnishings in the period photos attest to the fact that the Hills subscribed to the American passion to acquire things. However, the Gilded Age was also characterized by items built in haste, and covered with inexpensive gilt to give the outward appearance of quality. In that regard, and to his credit, Hill did not compare with many of his notorious contemporaries.

Early in his career as a railroader, he

stated, "When we are all dead and gone the sun will still shine, the rain will fall, and this railroad will run as usual." The railroad system continues today as the Burlington Northern. Hill was personally involved in approving the details on routes with minimal grades, track beds with adequate drainage, and bridges capable of supporting future trains of greater weight and higher speed. In addition, he assembled and trained an effective management team, and instituted a meticulous record-keeping and cost-conscious accounting system to assure that it would last.

A similar style prevailed in building the house on Summit Avenue. The site was selected with care, and Hill oversaw all aspects of design, construction, and cost. The core structural materials were selected to last: brick, mortar, stone, and steel beams. He assembled skilled craftsmen and had the building finished in fine woods, carvings, and wall coverings. Those factors are also evident in the excellent color photos which illustrate the booklet.

Hill went on to build and purchase several other substantial residences, most of which still exist. He built a home further west on Summit Avenue for his daughter Rachel. Two large brick houses were constructed for the farms at North Oaks, north of St. Paul, and Northcote in northwestern Minnesota. An eight bedroom log fishing lodge was built on the



*Mahogany woodwork and furniture and hand-tooled leather on the walls in the Hills' dining room.*



River Ste. Jean in Quebec, and it is still used. In addition, he purchased homes along Summit for several other of his children, which still stand.

The town house he bought in New York City now houses Pakistan's delegation to the United Nations, and the condominium he purchased at "Sans Souci" on Jekyll Island, Georgia, survives. During the last months of his life, Hill found the "condo" inadequate and approved plans for a cottage on that island. Three months before his death, he told a contractor to start construction. Should some scholar desire to compile a longer work on Jim Hill the house builder and renovator, ample material exists. Until then, this booklet is a good beginning.

*Thomas C. Buckley, a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History, is an associate professor in social and behavioral sciences and adjunct associate professor of history at the University of Minnesota.*

## *The Treasure Hunt*

Roger Barr

St. Paul: Medallion Press, 1993

*Reviewed by Richard T. Murphy, Sr.*

Most of us are interested in the fun, thrill and excitement of a treasure hunt. Some of us are even utterly fascinated by the challenge to ferret out the correct solution and find the prize. And some of us prefer, instead, to simply read about people and their tangled lives and motivations. If you fit into any of these categories, this is a fascinating book for you.

In short, you need not be either a St. Paulite, or a Winter Carnival aficionado to enjoy this book because Roger Barr has built a page-turner of a mystery novel around the hunt for the carnival's King Boreas medallion and the profound effect that hunt has on the lives of his searchers. His descriptions of this handful of very different people and the challenges as well as the woes that beset them are entwined with the mystery of *where is the medallion?* As we read, we, too, can experience the dreams and excitement that



send treasure-hunters out into the cold to stand in line for an early edition of the newspaper, then dash out to Como or Cherokee or Phalen park, certain that the prize can be ours.

The author's people include Steven and Debi Carpenter, whose marriage is floundering and who spend hours in their quest for the medallion in the hope that their big-city dreams will come true; Sharon Prescott, newly transplanted from Boston but whose husband, Phil, is aggressively upwardly mobile and threatening her roots in her new city; Alfred Kruse, mourning his brother and an older way of life, and his wife, Genevieve, discouraged, lonely and desperate to see her daughter; Bruce Mitchell, whose Butch Cassidy- and-the-Sundance-Kid friendship with buddy Dennis St. John, balances precariously on the horns of jealousy and rejection as they join forces in the search for the medallion; and finally, there is Keith Reynolds, whose obsession with the medallion is his undoing.

But beyond the author's finely crafted characters is another major player, the city of St. Paul itself, starring in its own right as the author creates the background for the book.

Here is Sharon Prescott as she ex-

plores her new home:

Through her journeys she assembled her own perceptions of St. Paul, independent of the glossy picture books they bought the day they purchased the house, independent of Phil's pronouncements that it was a nice town. (What did he know? He was as bad as Elaine when it came to getting around, one of the St. Paul-impaired.)

St. Paul, she observed, was remarkably clean, free of the decades of soot that had blackened the old buildings in the heart of Boston. It was also prosperous. The bad sections of the city that her elderly new neighbor had warned her about ("Our kind don't drive through there, dear") were elegant when compared to Roxbury, where whites really didn't drive, or even South Boston's block after block of battered brownstones.

She preferred St. Paul to Minneapolis. St. Paul was an eastern city, conservative like Boston in embracing the postmodern world. It had a sense of history, albeit Victorian history, of which people were proud. Minneapolis, on the other hand, with its postmodern buildings and trendy attitudes, was more of a western city, eager to embrace anything new or anything that would bring in the bucks.

The St. Paul Public Library building looked vaguely like the Boston Public Library. Cass Gilbert was the St. Paul equivalent to Charles Bullfinch. The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra was neither the Boston Pops nor the Boston Symphony. And so on.

And here is Keith Mitchell, searching in the dead of a frigid winter's night for the first edition of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* with its fresh clues:

Coming onto the south end of the High Bridge, he felt like he was in an airplane coming in for a landing. On the sides of the bridge, a row of fuzzy streetlights guided his descent toward the other bank. Ahead on the left, the red warning lights of the NSP smokestack were spots of pink through the falling snow. Behind NSP, the Schmidt sign was barely visible, a pink smudge in the snowy sky. Across the river above the empty black space of the rugged riverbank, the line of streetlights along Cliff Road burned dimly through the



snow. Somewhere in the distance behind them, lost in the orange glow of falling snow and city light, was Cathedral Hill. Normally you could see the unlighted Cathedral from here, a brooding silhouette against the night sky, and beyond that the gleaming white State Capitol, stately and impressive even from this distance. But not tonight.

West Seventh Street had been plowed. He turned right without bothering to stop for the red light. Downtown was deserted, the sidewalks white and trackless. He cut onto Fifth Street to get to Wabasha. Downtown St. Paul. Surely the only place in the world where Seventh Street cut across Fifth and Sixth, and then turned into a mall.

Steven and Debi Carpenter drive aimlessly along Summit Avenue as they ponder the next move in their search:

The cathedral inaugurated Summit Avenue. After it came the great Richardsonian mansion built by James J. Hill, the railroad robber baron, and now owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, followed by a half mile of delightfully pretentious stone houses put up in the Gay Nineties. Most of these drafty, expensive old barns had been subdivided over the years into apartments or one by one willed to unsuspecting foundations, cultural societies, or other nonprofit organizations. Few

people really knew who owned them now: they were still identified by the original family's name, and those private owners who could afford the house payments and the heating bills lived in anonymity.

But it was still fun to stare in through the leaded glass windows at the first-floor rooms and marvel at grand staircases, intricately carved woodwork, great crystal chandeliers, and beamed ceilings, wondering what it would be like to have the money and the power to live there.

The continuity of homes was broken by a small park, a triangle of grass where Nathan Hale stood ten feet tall, his hands bound behind his back with green cord, staring eastward toward the old part of Summit Avenue, wondering, perhaps—given the gilded view—if he could have his one life back. Summit Avenue ran along the bluff, but neither faced it nor, to the casual observer, seemed aware of it, for all the houses fronted inward toward the street. However, the original owners, as he had learned in his research, had long ago exercised their wealth and power, defeating plans to run the street along the bluff so the common citizens of St. Paul also could enjoy the splendid view of the Mississippi Valley. That view the wealthy had reserved for themselves.

Finally, there is one clue to go. Who uncovers the precious medallion, and

where is it found? And what sort of an impact does finding it, or striking out, have on the lives of these particular searchers?

In a note to the reviewer, the author writes that for his description of Summit Avenue, quoted above, he drew upon another writer who often used St. Paul as a setting for his work: F. Scott Fitzgerald. The February 11 and 18, 1922, issues of *The Saturday Evening Post* published Fitzgerald's celebrated description of the avenue in his short story, "The Popular Girl." Barr, however, updated Fitzgerald's description to reflect the current perception of this famous street. He adds that this passage inspired the characters of Steven and Debi Carpenter.

Roger Barr, who has lived in St. Paul since 1969, is the author of three earlier books: *The Vietnam War* (1991), *The Importance of Richard Nixon* (1992), and *The Importance of Malcolm X*. He currently is working on a novel exploring the legacy of the Vietnam War.

*Richard T. Murphy, Sr., chairman of the board of the Murphy Warehouse Company, was a three-time Winter Carnival captain of the guard (1949, 1950 and 1951) as well as prime minister in 1961. His wife, Helen Duffy Murphy, was the Winter Carnival's queen of the snows in 1947.*

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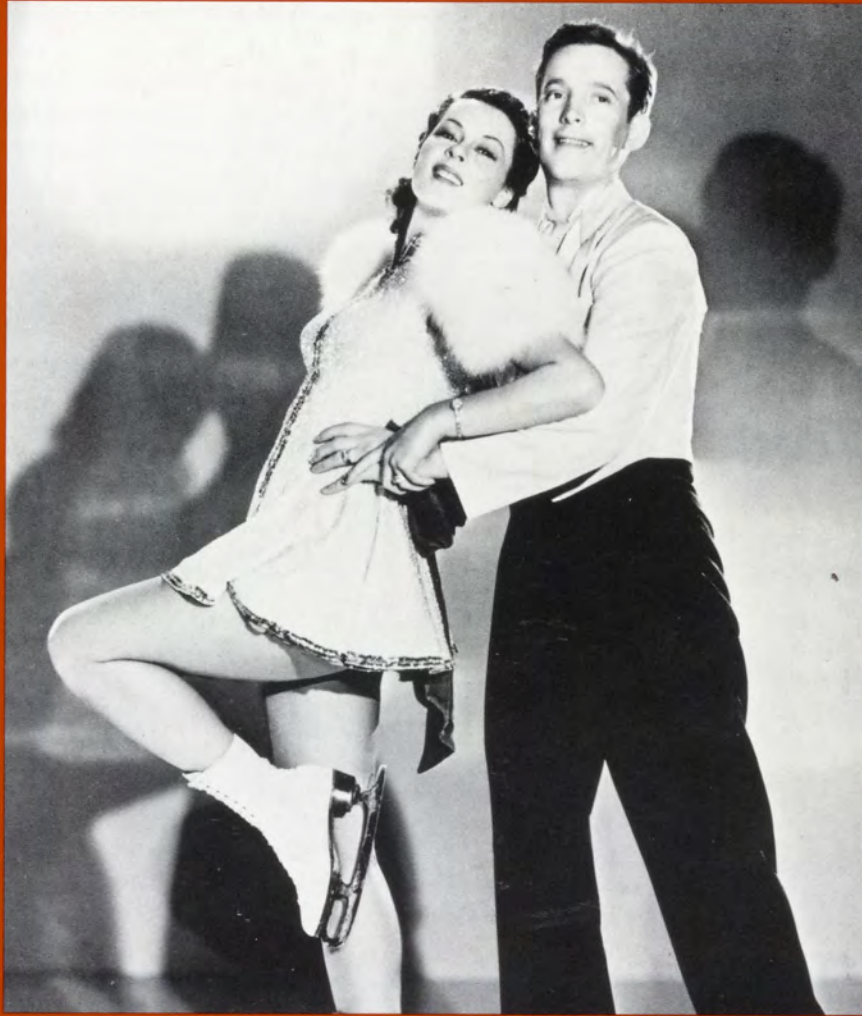
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*Ice Follies pair skaters Bess Ehrhardt and Roy Shipstad in 1938. They played later in the MGM movie, "Ice Follies of 1939." When Shipstads and Johnson were just starting out, Martin and Olga Giesen loaned them their costumes. See article beginning on page 4. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

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