

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

Winter, 1995

Volume 29, Number 4

The Boys from  
the Adams  
School

Page 16

*St. Paul Underground—  
What Happened to Fountain Cave?—Page 4*



*Fountain Cave, pencil and watercolor by unknown artist, about 1850. This is the oldest known graphic depiction of a Minnesota cave. Much of the story of Fountain Cave could have been reconstructed merely from the names inscribed on its walls. Interspersed with the graffiti are the arm-length nesting holes dug by swallows. The natural ledge in the cave wall allowed explorers to stay above the water. Is the squared timber, seen straddling Fountain Creek in the foreground, a remnant of one of the cabins destroyed in 1840 by soldiers from Fort Snelling? Minnesota Historical Society photo.*



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*Ramsey County History* is published quar-  
terly by the Ramsey County Historical Soci-  
ety, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth  
Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102. Printed in  
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Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-  
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Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported  
in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen  
in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr.

## A Message from the Editorial Board

**T**his issue of *Ramsey County History* celebrates the memory of Reuel D. Harmon, a supporter of history in Ramsey County. He had long encouraged the Editorial Board to publish something on St. Paul's caves and tunnels. Our lead article here explores Fountain Cave's history. Written by geologist Greg Brick, the article includes research never previously published and is the first in a projected series on "St. Paul Underground". The issue also contains Reuel Harmon's memoir of growing up in St. Paul and a brief history of his grandfather's house in our "Historic Sites" feature. Reuel Harmon made no secret of his abiding interest in history. This issue is a way of expressing our gratitude for his support and encouragement of the practice of history.

*John M. Lindley,*  
chairman, Editorial Board



## Books, Etc.

### *Grass of the Earth*

Aagot Raaen  
Introduction by Barbara Handy-  
Marchello  
St. Paul: Minnesota Historical  
Society, 1994  
\$12.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Gail Teas

In *Grass of the Earth*, Aagot Raaen gives us another portrayal of the struggles of an immigrant family in settling on a homestead in North Dakota in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Originally copyrighted in 1950, the book has recently been reissued with new material by the Minnesota Historical Society.

Raaen's account is biographical, not a novel as is Rolvaag's masterpiece. While presented in the third person, it is told by the eldest sister as though she were relating the story to a group of grandnieces and nephews. The hardships and heartbreak of the experience are modified somewhat by the passage of time and, because they are recalled by a protective adult, a softening of the cruel realities so as not to frighten them. In this respect, the book also can be compared with Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books. The adult reader will not be misled, however. The Raaen family had a very tough life.

Their homestead was located in a community of Norwegian immigrants who organized Newburgh Township in the northeast corner of Steele County. Their farms ranged from prosperous to poor. The Raaens' was among the poorest.

Thomas—"Far," as he was known to his family—was not a farmer by choice. A troubled and lonely man, he had few



Cover illustration: Harvey Dunn's *After School*, South Dakota Art Museum Collection, Brookings.

friends on the prairie to share his intellectual interests. He was forced by circumstances and his own weakness to try to eke out a living in an occupation for which he had no natural inclination.

The mother, or "Mor," was uneducated, poor, hardworking and forgiving. She had much to forgive. Her husband's alcoholism, which got him into trouble several times in the past, surfaces again and again in the story. The daughter refers to the periods when her father relapses as "The Shadows." It is in these periods that Far drinks up the profits from a summer of hard labor by the entire family, forcing them to suffer yet another period of deprivation and often abuse as well.

As the eldest child, Aagot frequently

had to help at home and was not able to attend the country school on a regular basis. Instead, she read her siblings' books, developing a great thirst for learning and a dream of one day attending college and becoming a teacher. Her struggle to realize this dream comprises the last part of the book.

Opening with a three-day blizzard, the story proceeds with impressions of prairie life: crops and animals, household handicrafts and innovations, primitive medicine, Norwegian food, the first school, and the gradual development of the rugged and lonely life of the homesteader into a more social small town unit, with neighbors to help and, in some cases, to "keep up" with.

This is a readable, enjoyable book. It is one with much struggle and misery, but it has a relatively happy ending. The reader will be pulling for all of them, Aagot in particular, from start to finish.

Gail Teas is a former high school English teacher and administrator of the Pipestone Community Library in Pipestone, Minnesota, where, she says, she reviewed hundreds of books for possible purchase.

### *Eggs in the Coffee, Sheep in the Corn*

Marjorie Myers Douglas  
St. Paul: Minnesota Historical  
Society Press, 1994  
\$24.95 (cloth), \$15.95 (paper)

Reviewed by John M. Lindley

Readers of the regular feature called "Growing Up in St. Paul" that appears in *Ramsey County History* will welcome the publication of Marjorie



Myers Douglas's *Eggs in the Coffee, Sheep in the Corn* by the Minnesota Historical Society Press. This book is one of the first in a series that the Press calls its Midwest Reflections Series, by which they mean "Memoirs and personal histories of the Upper Midwest."

Briefly summarized, the book is a remembrance of the seventeen years that Marj Douglas spent between 1943 and 1960 on a 1,200-acre stock farm near Appleton, Minnesota. She and her husband, Don, and their young daughter, Anne, moved to the farm after Don's father suffered a severe heart attack. Don had grown up on a farm; Marj in Minneapolis. Despite the lack of running water or indoor plumbing in their six-room farm home, Marj and Don together created a loving family that grew to include three children. Although Marj Douglas downplays the financial side of their stock operations, her book tells how by dint of unremitting hard work she and Don made their farm a financial success.

As a social history of farming in Minnesota in the 1940s and 1950s, this book is interesting but limited. It makes no attempt to make a case for the experiences of this family as typical of farm families of the time. It has no statistics on farming, numbers of family farms in the state at the time, or average farm income.

School for their children is mentioned in passing, but we have little insight into what kind of schooling the children received. Both Douglases had college educations; yet there is no information on how typical this was for a farm family of the 1950s. These are just a few reasons why Marj Douglas's book is not social history, even though it's published by a historical society press.

As family history, this book is rich and compelling. We learn about the difficulties a city-bred young woman has in adapting to farm life and to living so close to her aging in-laws. We experience the highs and lows of a family tied to the land, to the weather and to their livestock. We come to understand the important role food preparation and



Marjorie Myers Douglas. Minnesota Historical Society Press.

meals played in a farm family that was often extended to include Don's parents and the hired hands Don needed to help him with the numerous chores and tasks involved in making a living on the farm. Although highly anecdotal and written from a very personal viewpoint, the Douglas family history is well told with an intimacy that is sincere and highly engaging.

As personal history, this book is superb. Marj's individual history is what sets this book apart from being just a social or family history. We see how Marj grows from loneliness and lack of skill in farm ways, to become a very competent and knowledgeable farm wife. We learn how she grows in confidence so that she is much, much more than her limited perception of herself as "kitchen help." A strong, capable, intelligent woman who moved from the city to the country, and back again to the city in 1960, Marj recounts with grace and humor the stories that the strong men in her life—Don and her father-in-law—told to explain or make sense of their lives. In doing so, Marj often has a different slant on the episode or experience than the original story teller had.

Marj also tells new stories that are particularly hers, such as what happened when an old friend from college came to visit, that add fresh insight or meaning to what otherwise might seem to have been an unexceptional routine

of kitchen, farm or child-rearing chores. By writing this book, Marj Douglas has made sense for all of us of her years on the farm. We are richer for her work and her marvelous capacity for story telling. If you have enjoyed reading "Growing Up in St. Paul" in this magazine and are hungry for more reflections on life in Minnesota in an earlier time, then this is surely a book for you.

*John M. Lindley is president of the Ramsey County Historical Society and chairman of its Editorial Board. He says he didn't grow up on a farm but always wanted to know what it was like. He holds a doctorate in history from Duke University and is manager of the College and General Publications Department at West Publishing Company, St. Paul.*

#### *Growing Up in St. Paul from page 24*

safety in any measure depended upon him, the cows stopped giving milk and the neighbors moved to Nebraska. His bearing and demeanor would be useful were they visible only to the enemy. He has a face like that of the nailer on Calvary and, while it would disconcert a Jap, it would demoralize all associated with him. His other attributes may not be recited in the hearing of my stenographer. In addition, he was educated at Harvard.

"In the light of my acquaintance with him, I am sure this application should be rejected and he be imprisoned.

"Yours truly, Pierce Butler."

I had, however, taken a more soberly conventional letter to Tucker along with this one. When I handed Tucker the Butler letter, I said, "In case you don't like this letter, I have another one for you."

Tucker read the Butler letter. He chewed on his cigar for a moment. Then he said, "Best damn letter of enlistment I've ever read." Strangely enough, I wound up in the Army where I served throughout the war as a captain—a communications officer.





*The old Adams School, 615 S. Chatsworth Street, around 1900. For the stories of three young men from the school, and their experiences during World War I, see Paul D. Nelson's article beginning on page 16. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society  
323 Landmark Center  
75 West Fifth Street  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

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Permit #3989