

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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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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A Message from the Editorial Board

This 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

Growing Up in St. Paul

'Grandfather Durkee Was a Crusty Gentleman'

Reuel D. Harmon

Editor's Note: Some months before his death in April, 1994, Reuel Harmon, the retired president and chairman of the board of the former Webb Publishing Company of St. Paul, spoke of some of his memories of growing up in St. Paul. His reminiscences are adapted here from the interview he gave Ramsey County History editor Virginia Brainard Kunz.

I have vivid memories of growing up in St. Paul. I was born on February 6, 1904, at 58 Prospect Terrace on St. Paul's West Side in a house owned by my grandfather, Reuel A. Durkee. Grandfather thought that Prospect Terrace would become *the* fashionable neighborhood of St. Paul. He was wrong. Although the area did become an upper class neighborhood, Summit Avenue eclipsed it.

At that time you were born at home and, in my case, in my grandfather's bed. My father told me that he climbed down a long flight of wooden stairs leading from Prospect Terrace to Concord Avenue to meet the doctor, a general practitioner who made house calls and had arrived to deliver me.

Some years later my parents moved to 2284 Commonwealth Avenue in St. Anthony Park. I think that the very first thing I learned to say was "2284 Commonwealth Avenue," in case I got lost and someone asked me, "Kid, where do you live?"

We had some interesting neighbors. The woman next door was pleasant, but slightly eccentric. She felt strongly that sunlight was bad for her, and she never went out in the sun without a parasol. When summer came, she'd move a cot down to the basement and she'd stay there all summer.

One day she noticed some blotches on her skin. Alarmed, she went to her doctor. She told him about the sun and how



Reuel Harmon ready to drive a pony cart at Lake Elmo around 1915. In the back seat: his sister, Bella, and a friend, Wilbur Melson. Photograph from Mrs. Reuel D. Harmon.

she moved into the basement each summer. He looked her over and said, "Well, madam, the only thing that's the matter with you is that you're moldy."

We lived in St. Anthony Park until I was ten. In 1914 my family built a house at Lake Elmo. We lived there during the summers and came into town for the winters. We stayed in places like Mrs. Brown's Boarding House across from the Aberdeen Hotel, then the Aberdeen itself for awhile and at the Commodore Hotel the first year it was open.

Finally the roads were sufficiently improved so we could stay at Lake Elmo all year, but we had to commute to school. My father would drive my sister and me into town and we'd take a streetcar to school—the Neill school first, the Webster school, the St. Paul Academy from 1916 to 1922, when I went off to Harvard. After school we'd take a streetcar down to the Union Depot. Fire had destroyed most of the old depot, so a

make-shift wooden station was used until the present Union Depot was completed.

I saw quite a bit of Grandfather Durkee. He was an amateur farmer and he held all kinds of interesting ideas. He believed absolutely that the canals on Mars were built by intelligent beings and that Mars was inhabited. He didn't know that the old astronomers who looked through the telescopes and saw those lines called them *canalis*—French for canal. He simply thought they were manmade.

He used to make speeches before commercial clubs and other groups. Sometimes he'd take me along. I'll never forget one meeting. It was at a time when an enormous effort was underway to rebuild the Union Depot. There had been many attempts, all of them failures. My grandfather had been telling the meeting that the moon was moving closer to the earth. A man got up in front of the audience and said, "Mr. Durkee, can you give us any assurance that the Union Depot

will be completed before the moon hits the earth?" My respect for my grandfather was somewhat diminished by that experience.

Grandfather ran a wholesale grocery business on what was then Third Street—R. A. Durkee and Company. He had a horse and buggy that he drove every morning from his house on Prospect Terrace to a stable at his grocery house downtown. He'd leave the horse and buggy there all day, then drive it back at night.

Occasionally he'd take me with him. I had a great time poking around among all the boxes. He had a room in the basement with a gas light and he'd hang huge bunches of green bananas there to ripen under gaslight.

Once when I was down in the basement, a huge spider ran out of one of those bunches. It was a tarantula. Everyone thought tarantulas were poisonous and could kill you, but they really are quite harmless. I never was bitten.

Grandfather was a crusty gentleman. Perhaps that's why they named me after him. When I was in my early teens, I became interested in religion, and I began to talk to him about it occasionally. During one of these sessions I asked him, "Grandfather, what is the soul?" He said, "Well, it's you, and everything about you that makes you you."

Then I asked him what happens to the soul when you die. He reached over to a reading lamp on a little table beside him and pulled the chain. The lamp went out. He turned to me and said, "What happened to the light?" I said that it went out. He said, that's what happens to your soul. This was another insight into my grandfather, and the beginning of my long inquiry into religion.

I remember another blotch on the family escutcheon, or so it seemed to me when I was growing up. This concerned an anecdote about a branch of my family who farmed near Hinckley, Minnesota. One night, so the story goes, they heard a fearful roaring that sounded like a huge freight train passing close by. At the same time, the sky lit up. In the morning, they saw a large crater. The ground was frozen, but they dug down and found a meteorite that was still hot. Apparently, it had

crossed the sky and fallen into the field.

Then they were told that only twenty-two meteorites in the world had been seen to fall and were recovered, so this meteorite became a great family treasure. Family members documented it, and it finally came to rest on the hearth of the fireplace in my Sunfish Lake home.

One day a member of the Science Museum of Minnesota saw it there, heard its story and announced that the meteorite really belonged in the museum. I gave it to them and they were most grateful because this was a rare find. In the course of time, museum officials chipped off a small piece of the meteorite and sent it to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington for analysis. The report came back in due course. It simply said: "The material which you sent to us is of terrestrial origin." Apparently I came from a long line of liars.

Then there was my first experience with opera at the Metropolitan Opera House on Sixth Street between Wabasha and Cedar in downtown St. Paul. The star of the opera was Mary Garden. In spite of the fact that she was extremely well endowed, she was singing the part of a shepherd boy. She went flopping about the stage and shrieking and I thought she was ill. That definitely conditioned me against opera.

I remember another visit to the opera house to see a performance by a magician named Thurston. He would invite members of the audience to come up on stage so he could use them as part of his act. I was about eight years old and I was enticed up on the stage. After performing a number of tricks with me, he pulled a live rabbit out of my shirt, put it in my arms and said, "You can go back to your seat now."

When I started to leave, he said, "What's the matter? Are you afraid of me? Come back here." He had me running back and forth, much to audience's amusement, but I was mortified because everyone seemed to think I was timid. I finally got back to my seat, figuring that I had at least got a rabbit out of all of this, when down the aisle came an usher who said, "Kid, give me that rabbit." He took the rabbit and I never saw Thurston again.

Long before I was born, the Dakota

Conflict of 1862 generated a family story that was very much a part of my childhood. My maternal great grandfather Patterson was born in Cornwall, Ontario. He moved with his family down to Ohio, then down the Ohio River, up the Mississippi and up the Minnesota to Mankato and settled in a little town called Judson, just north of Mankato.

There he opened a country store. At that time the Minnesota River valley was the hunting ground of the Dakota bands. The Indians would come into his country store, look around and take whatever they wanted without paying for it. My great grandfather never remonstrated with them, not because he was generous, perhaps, but because he was prudent.

When the Dakota Conflict broke out, with fighting up and down the valley, the Indians by-passed that little country store and didn't harm any of the family. My great grandparents had five boys and five girls. In those days, they had a huge fireplace. Beside the fireplace was an oven for baking bread and roasting meat. It was so large that when there was a threat of an Indian attack, great grandfather hid my grandmother, a little girl at the time, in the oven. Prudence, for him, still prevailed.

Speaking of conflicts, during World War II I wanted to enlist in the Navy. Because I was applying for a commission I needed some recommendations, so I asked my friend, St. Paul lawyer Pierce Butler, Jr., for a letter that would go to Lieutenant Gordon Tucker at the Navy Reserve's aviation base at Wold Chamberlain airport in Minneapolis.

I can still recite Butler's letter verbatim. He wrote:

"Dear Sir: I am told that Mr. Reuel D. Harmon of this city has applied for a commission in the Navy. I have known him and his family for many years.

"It is with mixed apprehension for the good order and discipline of the Navy that I learn that his application is being considered. Mr. Harmon is of Scotch extraction, without all the Scotch extracted but on the contrary continually supplemented. His military background is service as Air Raid Warden of a pasture in Dakota County. Upon learning that their

Growing Up in St. Paul to page 26

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.
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