

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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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

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

The Obscure Plaque on the Wall—

Who Were the Boys from the Adams School?

Paul D. Nelson

The bronze plaque reads:

In Loving Memory of the
Boys from The Adams School
Who Sacrificed Their Lives
And In Honor of Those Who
Served Our Country in
The World War—1914–1918.

Today's Adams school is a public grade school in St. Paul's West Seventh neighborhood, built in 1924, six years after the war's end. The plaque is bolted to a brick wall in an unlit corner of the building, passed unseen every day by hundreds of students. It bears no mark of who erected it, or when, nor any clue to the names of the boys who sacrificed their lives. The plaque has ceased to be a memorial and become instead a curiosity.

Today, with World War I so distant, restoring a sense of living memory to this lapsed memorial would require doing what the sponsors of the plaque deemed unnecessary—giving names, faces and stories to those "boys from the Adams school." Who were they? And what happened to them?

The Adams School of their time, two-and-a-half stories of red brick and tall, elegant windows topped with a bell tower, stood a few blocks east of the current school, just off West Seventh Street. It competed for students with St. Peter's German Lutheran School and with the three Catholic schools in the neighborhood: St. James for the Irish, St. Francis de Sales for the Germans, and St. Stanislaus for the Czechs and Poles. All five schools served the children of blue collar families, hundreds of which devoted their laboring lives to the neighborhood's great source of wealth and work, the Omaha Railroad shops.

Many young men from the neighborhood joined the military when the war

came and more than a few died, but neither their service records nor any published record tells what schools they attended. The first step in identifying the "boys from the Adams School" was, therefore, somehow to link the St. Paul war dead with that building.

In early 1919 a St. Paul publishing company gathered up photographs and biographical data of Ramsey County service men and women for a celebratory book. The result, a remarkable volume entitled *Honor Roll of Ramsey County*, provided the key to finding the Adams boys.

As an historical record, *Honor Roll* is imperfect; incomplete and without apparent order, it consists mainly of page after page of young men in uniform. The photographs are marvelous—row upon row of perfect oval portraits in regular lines, bringing to mind the democratic beauty of a military graveyard. The photographs gave the search a personal dimension: "Are you the one? What happened to you?" But more important than the portraits is the text that accompanies each one. *Honor Roll* is the only published source that gives the soldier's address and parents' names. With the addresses and contemporary maps of the neighborhood surrounding the old Adams building, one can identify those war dead who lived within walking distance of the school. This search yielded ten names.

Ten names, ten families, ten stories, but no easy way to verify which of the ten young men, if any, had attended Adams school and, thus, been honored by the plaque. The most obvious approach, calling the school district and getting access to its records, produced only frustration. The old records used to be in the main administration building, but had been taken to a warehouse, or perhaps to still a different building, and no one could really

History is all around us, waiting only to be revealed through the sight of an intriguing old house, a yellowed letter or an obscure plaque, as was the case with Paul D. Nelson. In submitting this poignant account of the short lives of three young men, Nelson wrote:

"This story came to light because my sons attend the current Adams School, which houses St. Paul's Spanish Immersion program. My older boy, Frank, tells me with great confidence that it was he who pointed out the plaque to me in the Fall of 1993. He is probably right; I recall only that I became aware of it then. I immediately started trying to find out more about the plaque, and quickly concluded that nobody knew anything. It took a year to get the whole story." That whole story is now published here.

Nelson is executive director of the Centro de Estudios Multiculturales. He writes and edits two monthly publications, Palabras, for the St. Paul Public Schools, and The Legend for Catholic Charities, and he is working on a biography of Frederick McGhee, the first African American criminal lawyer west of the Mississippi.

Ramsey County History would like to hear from others whose brush with history awakened their imagination and aroused their curiosity.

say whether any records from that school at that time existed or could be found. The trail went cold quickly.

Every other approach—newspaper death notices, graduation lists, records of the nearby Catholic schools, service records, building records—led to dead ends, too. When one reaches a dead end, the only thing to do is turn back, in this case back to the school district. One more

call there led to a name of someone else to contact, then to another, and finally to Carolyn Mars.

Carolyn Mars works in the school district's student data office. She listened to an explanation of the quest and of the specific task needed: to check 10 names against Adams records from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her response: "Give me the names and dates of birth." After two months of silence, the call came. She had three names: Enoch Spence, Theo Peterson, Jr., and Leon Machovec. These were the Adams boys, but who were they, and what happened to them?

Enoch Wilbur Spence was born February 5, 1896, in Portland, Oregon, to Daniel Spence, a Scotsman, and his wife, the former Isabelle Leith of Wisconsin. The family came to St. Paul soon after Enoch's birth. Records show that they brought property on Bay Street, near the Omaha shops where Daniel worked as a carpenter, in July of 1898 for the sum of \$1,000. This may have been a vacant lot (as it is today), for *St. Paul City Directories* of the period show the family living at 756 Tuscarora until 1906, when they moved to 653 Bay Street, a little house near the railroad tracks leading to the shops and the address of the property they had purchased eight years before.

Of Enoch Spence's childhood we know only where he lived, that he had a brother named John, and that he entered Adams school in the fifth grade in September of 1907, at age 11, and left after completing the eighth grade (Adams was then a grade K through 8 school) to go on to high school. Spence joined the military as a private in the Enlisted Reserve Corps on January 25, 1918, just a few days short of his twenty-second birthday, the last birthday he would see. He did no active military service and probably never left St. Paul. The military discharged him due to ill health (officially, for the "convenience of the government") on October 3, 1918. He died eight weeks later on December 27. Because he never made it to active duty, his name does not appear in the list of war dead inscribed in marble in the Memorial Hall of the Ramsey County Courthouse. Yet he did serve, and his wartime service



Enoch Wilbur Spence. Photographs of these young men are reproduced, courtesy of the St. Paul Public Library, from a non-circulating copy of the Honor Roll of Ramsey County, in the library's Reference Room.



Theo E. Peterson, Jr.

most likely did cost him his life.

The great killers of Minnesota soldiers in World War I had Greek and Italian, not German, names, names like pneumonia, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and influenza. In

this time before antibiotic drugs, the gathering of young men into crowded camps and barracks turned many such places, both in the United States and in Europe, into greater killing grounds than the battlefields of Flanders. Most of the young Minnesotans who died lost their lives not to the Germans but to bacillae. Enoch Spence was one of them. In January of 1918 he was well enough to enlist in the service and be accepted, but ten months later he was too ill to continue, and two months later he was dead. The death certificate says, "Pulmonary tuberculosis, chronic."

The Spence family stayed on in St. Paul for a time. Daniel continued at the Omaha shops for the rest of his working life. Near the end, in 1924, at age sixty-nine, he had risen to the position of assistant foreman. The Spences sold the house on Bay Street where Enoch had lived and died in 1923 and moved to 922 James, where Daniel died in 1927. The house was condemned for a sewer project in 1928 and torn down. By 1931 the Spence family had disappeared from St. Paul. All that remains of Enoch Spence is a grave at Oakland Cemetery, a depression in a vacant lot near Bay and Scheffer where his home once stood, a photograph in the *Honor Roll* and a bronze plaque at the Adams school.

Theo Peterson's family home at 1080 West Seventh Street still stands, though doubtless much altered since his time. There must be molecules of Peterson in the crevices and between the floorboards of that house even now, for the family owned it for eighty-five years. The Peterson family seems, so far as existing records reveal, to embody the stereotypical Scandinavian virtue of resistance to novelty. Theo's father, Theodore Engwall Peterson, Sr., bought 1080 West Seventh in 1882 and lived there the rest of his life—forty years. From at least 1884 until shortly before his death in 1922 he worked as an iron molder at the Henry Orme & Sons Co. foundry (also known as Omaha Iron and Brass), located at 626 Armstrong Street, right across from the Omaha shops and around the corner from home.

Theodore and Lena Peterson had five children: Carl, Theodore, Louis, Pearl

and Theo, Jr. Four of them kept close, very close, to home all their lives. Carl never moved out and died unmarried in 1959. Theodora died four years later, still residing at 1080 West Seventh Street. Louis did move away, but died in St. Paul, unmarried, in 1934. Pearl, the only child to marry, sold the house in 1965. Mother Lena had died there in 1939.

Theo, Jr., was born on July 26, 1889, in St. Paul. He began his schooling in kindergarten at Adams in September of 1894 and continued there through fifth grade. When the time came to enter the world of work, young Theo did not wander far. The 1908 *St. Paul City Directory* shows him working as a clerk in the Omaha shops. By 1910 he had advanced to the post of timekeeper. Seven years later, when World War I reached the United States, the young man's life does not seem to have changed much; he was still unmarried and still living at home.

What he did then may have surprised all who knew him: In June of 1917 Theo Peterson joined the U.S. Naval Reserve. He was nearly twenty-eight years old, and his age must have concerned him, for he lied about it when he enlisted. He gave his date of birth as July 26, 1901. Theo, Jr. became the only one of his immediate family to leave St. Paul; when he did, he never came back. The Navy shipped him to its base at Puget Sound, Washington. He served there aboard a receiving ship, a harbor cargo vessel, and quickly advanced two grades to the rank of yeoman, second class.

Theo Peterson's fateful order came in late February or early March of 1918 when the Navy transferred him to a receiving ship in New York harbor. The last entry in his personnel file reads:

While attached to the Receiving Ship at New York; Died at Ellis Island, 5:15 p.m. March 17th, 1918. Remains forwarded to Naval Hospital, Brooklyn, N.Y. for further disposition. Remains and personal effects sent to Lena Peterson—March 18th, 1918.

Theo Peterson died of influenza. His break with the family tradition of staying home had cost him his life.

Like Theo Peterson, Leon Machovec lied about his age when he enlisted in the military. He had to, for he was just fifteen

years old. When he joined the Army in August of 1917 he gave his date of birth as September 11, 1898, making him almost nineteen; in fact, he was born on that day in 1901. There could be many reasons why a fifteen-year-old boy would burn to join the Army—hope for adventure, a desire to prove himself a man before his time, or just to get away from home. For Leon Machovec the last of those reasons was probably the strongest.

He was the son of James and Annie Machovec. James was an immigrant from Austria-Hungary, born around 1865. We do not know exactly when he came to the United States, but he was living in St. Paul no later than 1894 and working at the family grocery. Like so many others who lived in the West Seventh neighborhood, James eventually found work in the Omaha shops; he was a machinist there from 1904 until the end of his life.

Leon's mother, Annie, was born in 1875; she and James had three children, Frances, Leon and Leon's twin sister Margaret. Leon's earliest years may have been happy, but things began to change when he was not yet five years old. Annie Machovec died of heart failure at the age of thirty-one in August of 1906.

There is reason to suspect that there may have been family troubles even before this event, for though the family lived in St. Paul, Annie died in Sparks, Nevada. What is more, within two months of Annie's death, James was living in the home of Katie Driesch and her daughter, also named Annie, at 766 Logan (now Bayard) Avenue. Annie Driesch was at this time age thirty-four or thirty-five and unmarried. Not for long. James Machovec and Annie Driesch were married on October 1, 1907. At that time, young Leon had just begun his five-year career at Adams, the neighborhood public school. He entered Adams in the first grade and left after the fifth grade in the spring of 1913.

The reconstituted Machovec family may have had some happy years, too. Another child, Helen, came along in 1912, but in that same year, an illness struck James that likely contributed to Leon's eventual determination to leave home. He suffered an "apopleptic at-

tack," probably a stroke, that left him mentally confused for the rest of his life. The stroke probably resulted from the chronic Bright's disease that had afflicted him since 1907.

Bright's disease attacks the kidneys. In its chronic form it eventually reduces the kidneys to scar tissue. With the gradual cessation of kidney function, uremia builds up in the blood, resulting in a host of unpleasant symptoms, including fatigue, lassitude, loss of mental concentration, loss of appetite, hypertension, agitation, even convulsions, stroke, and heart failure.

Many of these symptoms came to trouble James Machovec. The 1912 stroke signaled the beginning of a long and horrifying decline. By the late summer of 1917, when Leon joined the Army, his father had become deranged and nearly helpless. On October 15 Annie petitioned to have James committed to the State Hospital in St. Peter. The commitment petition alleges that James is of unsound mind, incapable of managing his affairs. In the words of the petition, "He cries a great deal can give no reason."

Immediately upon the filing of the petition the authorities took James for a medical examination; the resulting report makes sad reading. When asked about time and place, James replied that it was July of 1864. He knew that he was born in Austria, the son of John and Josephine Machovec, but believed that he had been in the United States just ten years. In fact he had resided in Minnesota for at least twenty-three years. The examining physician, who must have relied in part on information from the family, wrote that James was "Noisy and excitable at times. Nonmanageable at home. Cries frequently without cause. Very emotional. Has spoken of suicide. [Has] disposition to filthy habits."

In the summer of 1917 young men all across the United States were filled with enthusiasm for war and its promised overseas adventures, and many were enlisting in the military. In Leon Machovec's summer of 1917, his mother was dead and his father, though only fifty-two, was a wreck, slowly being poisoned by his own blood. Though the



The current Adams School, around 1924. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

commitment petition says "cries can give no reason," in fact James had plenty of reason to cry and Leon had plenty of reason to want to leave.

And he did. If, in addition to getting away from home, Leon Machovec hoped for travel, comradeship, parades and battle against the evil enemy, he soon got all of that and more. By the end of August the Army had sent him to St. Louis, where he became an infantryman in Company C, First Battalion, 138th Infantry, 35th Division, American Expeditionary Forces.

He trained all fall and winter at Camp Doniphan, near Lawton, Oklahoma. On April 11, 1918, the 35th Division began

moving toward France, first by train to Long Island, then to Hoboken, with a parade through New York City in between. On May 3, sixteen-year-old Leon Machovec boarded an ocean liner bound for Liverpool; he and the rest of the 138th Infantry arrived there thirteen days later. By the end of May they were camped in France.

That spring and summer, while others fought and died, Leon and the 138th traveled, trained and waited. They started near Dieppe, in the northeast, passed through Rouen, Versailles, and eastward, ever eastward, nearer the front. In June they joined French forces in the Vosges forest. In August they got an understudy

role, in reserve at the St. Mihiel offensive, but saw no combat.

No doubt many of the men yearned for action, but they would have to wait a while longer. General Pershing and the other Allied commanders planned a major offensive in the Argonne-Meuse sector of northeastern France, where the Germans maintained their heavily fortified Hindenburg line. On September 24th the 35th division moved to a position just two kilometers west of the Hindenburg line between the town of Verdun and the river Aisne. Ahead of them loomed Vauquois Hill, 100 feet high, 1,000 feet long, bristling with German artillery and machine gun nests.

It is unlikely that Leon Machovec or any of his comrades slept during the night of September 25. A regimental historian described the events this way:

Just at dusk on September 25, the infantry got ready and when dusk fell over the country it started to advance. Each man carried 250 rounds of ammunition in his belt, besides bandoliers swung over his shoulder. Rifle gas grenades and hand grenades were included in their armament. The big guns were roaring and under a canopy of flame and steel the men waited.

It was shortly after 2:00 A.M. that a living hell seemed to break loose. Guns poured streams of missiles through the air. Shells whistled their way across the heavens between the Meuse River and Argonne Forest. The air seemed to be afire. Approximately 3,000 guns were pouring forth their death messages into German lines and probably more than 50,000 shells were fired in about four hours supporting the 35th Division.

The order came before dawn: Attack at 5:30. When the moment came, fog and smoke were so thick that neither the hill nor the enemy nor fellow soldiers just dozens of yards away could be seen. At 5:30 the 138th arose from their dugouts and advanced into the unknown. Many of those who had not slept the night before would never sleep again.

That day the 35th Division advanced nearly six miles into enemy territory, against veteran German soldiers. It was the best day in combat they would have. They spent most of the next three days in brutal, seesaw warfare. After the first day the 35th lost its artillery advantage to the Germans, who were then able to move about freely, locating and blasting American positions with cannon and machine guns. The 138th infantry spent the rest of September on the first or second lines of the front, pinned down or advancing fitfully, taking heavy casualties and withdrawing once again. Whatever glory there may have been occurred the first day—after that it was dig in, hold on and survive.

By the end of the day on September 30, after four days and nights of nearly constant battle, the 35th Division was exhausted and depleted. Machovec's First Battalion, once 400 or 500 strong, had



Leon R. Machovec

been reduced to 182. The Division as a whole had suffered nearly 50 percent casualties and had ceased to be an effective combat force. On October 1 it was relieved and withdrew, never to fight again. The war ended forty days later.

There is no record of precisely what Leon Machovec did during those four days; he may have fought well, or badly, or perhaps not at all. What is known for sure is that he survived the battle and the war, but did not survive the peace. He accompanied the 35th Division south, first to the Sommedieu sector near Verdun, and then, in November, to the outskirts of Commercy. There, on February 1, 1919, he died of pneumonia, and there he probably is buried. He had claimed to be eighteen to get into the Army and get away from home. He got away from home, never returned, and never got to be eighteen.

Leon's father did not live to mourn his son. Less than two months after his commitment, he died at the state mental hospital of an "apopleptic attack." His widow, Annie, lived thirty years more, dying in 1949, residing still at 766 Logan Avenue. Leon's twin sister, Margaret, lived until 1993. A friend who knew her well said that she never mentioned having a brother.

Many things have changed along West Seventh Street since Enoch Spence, Theo Peterson, and Leon Machovec lived there. The old Adams School is gone, the Omaha shops are quiet, the Spence and Machovec family homes have vanished. But if those lads were somehow to return today they would find some reminders of their time; children still attend the very same St. James school; the old Orme foundry building still stands; Machovec's grocery still opens for business every day in the same location as it did then; and in a dark corner of the new Adams School there is a plaque that Spence, Peterson and Machovec would be among the very few to know is dedicated to them.

Sources

Personal information about the soldiers and their families came from: J.K. Jennings, *Honor Roll of Ramsey County*, McGill Warner, St. Paul, Minnesota (1919); War Records Commission files at the Minnesota Historical Society; *St. Paul City Directories*, 1880-1930; St. Paul school records; Ramsey County Probate Court files; Ramsey County real estate documents; Hennepin and Ramsey County birth and death records.

Information about the 35th Division in World War I came from: American Battle Monument Commission, *35th Division, Summary of Operations in the World War*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. (1934); Charles B. Hoyt, *Heroes of the Argonne*, Franklin Hudson Co., Kansas City, Missouri (1919); Clair Kenamore, *From Vauquois Hill to Exermont*, Guard Publishing Co., St. Louis, Missouri, (1919); and Missouri National Guard, *History of the Missouri National Guard* (1934).

Information about the neighborhood and the old Adams school came from interviews with George Jurgenson, Gene Sygvertson, Gary Brueggemann and Dave Bredemus; from many tours through the neighborhood on foot, by bicycle, and by car; and from the map and photo files at the MHS. Information about Bright's disease came from *Encyclopedia Britannica*.



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

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