

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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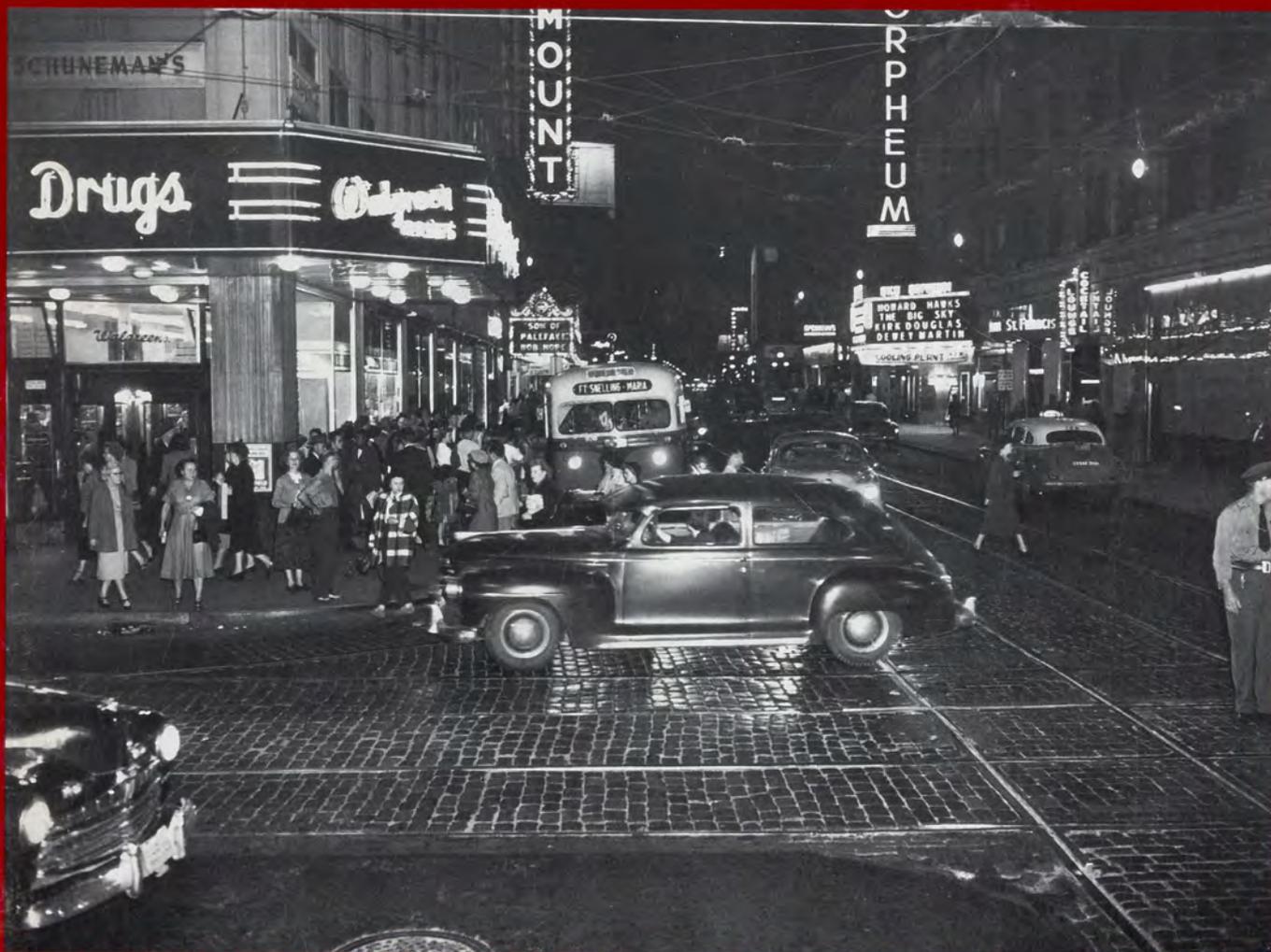
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A brightly lighted downtown St. Paul was photographed on the night of September 4, 1952. This view looks west along Seventh Street from Wabasha to St. Peter. The St. Frances is on the right. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Toward the end of 1996, Ronald M. Hubbs, a long-time supporter of history in Ramsey County, died. Ron not only had contributed a number of fine articles that were published over the years in *Ramsey County History*, but he also was unfailingly enthusiastic in his support for the Ramsey County Historical Society's publication program. The Society dedicates this issue to his memory and to the great value he placed on history. In it we feature a building—the St. Francis Hotel—and a location—Seventh Place—that many residents and visitors know but little understand in terms of their historical significance to St. Paul. A companion piece tells the story of the Saint Paul Building.

John M. Lindley, chair, Editorial Board

Books

Journeys, People and Places

Vincent A. Yzermans
Park Press, P.O. Box 475
Waite Park, Mn.
388 pages, \$23 (paper), plus \$2
for shipping and handling

Reviewed by Thomas C. Buckley

This readable work is an autobiography by one of St. Paul's most prolific writers. In the years between 1951 and 1994, the Reverend Vincent Arthur (Art) Yzermans completed thirty-nine books, edited four periodicals, and wrote numerous articles for some thirty journals and ten newspapers, ranging from the *Albuquerque Journal* to the *New York Times*.

Yet before and after his rise to prominence as a writer, he also served as priest and pastor to several rural congregations in central Minnesota. In his anecdote-filled autobiography, four phases of his life stand out: his youth in St. Paul; his adaptation to, and enjoyment of, parish life in rural Minnesota; his broadened horizons as a journalist-commentator in Rome and Washington, D. C., at the time of the Second Vatican Council; and finally, the battles of the last twenty-six years of his life as he confronted church conservatives, alcoholism, and emphysema.

The first seventy pages of *Journeys* are likely to hold the greatest interest for the readers of *Ramsey County History*, for they recount his experiences growing up in St. Paul. Between 1925 and 1939, he lived first in the Grand and Hamline area, then on the West Side across the street from Humboldt High School.

The coverage of those years doesn't provide many clues as to the promi-



The author as an "urban cowboy," in front of his Humboldt Avenue home in West St. Paul. Photo from the book.

nence Yzermans eventually attained. Rather, it is the story of a boy of seemingly average talent who grew up during the Depression in a family at the lower end of the income scale. The joys of his youth are connected more to his experiences with friends rather than his siblings or his hard-working parents. In addition, his father, an intelligent accountant who moonlighted to meet expenses, had problems with alcohol, was never very close to his son, and would today probably be the subject of scrutiny as a non-caring, non-sharing, insensitive male. Yet in spite of the problems Yzermans notes the youthful pranks, memorable St. Paul sites, and interesting friends, neighbors, nuns, and priests who influenced his journey to

adolescence.

His St. Paul years were interrupted by his high school and novitiate education at the Crosier preparatory seminaries in Onamia, Minnesota, and Hastings, Nebraska, from 1939 through 1945. In January, 1946, he returned to St. Paul to prepare for the priesthood on the historic grounds of the St. Paul Seminary.

From this point on, Yzermans' story becomes quite revealing for anyone interested in the inner story of the renewal and turmoil of the Catholic Church. His vivid indictment of the seminary ranges from the quality of the buildings, dictated by James J. Hill and reflecting railroad architecture, to the uninspiring nature of the instruction. However, his perspective is that of a journalist, rather than a historian. Scant attention is given to the intellectual position of church conservatives from the 1940s to the 1990s. Nevertheless, in those confrontations Yzermans demonstrated restraint and good will.

His recommendation to the seminary came from the bishop of St. Cloud, and it was in that diocese that he was ordained in 1951. For the remainder of his life, except for his work in the 1960s in Catholic journalism and public relations, he was principally associated with central Minnesota. That part of his story is highlighted by his heartening experiences rebuilding rural parishes that had been alienated by the dictates of elderly, ultra conservative priests. Readers from the metro area will gain some insight, perhaps nostalgia, into the neighborly nature of small town Minnesota which once permeated the Twin Cities. But they also will find that many aspects of his story are similar to their own experiences with urban pastors and congregations.

In the 1960s, Father Yzermans' association with Catholic journalism and religious liberalism took him to Europe and the Second Vatican Council. There he built friendships with such prominent Catholic and Protestant religious figures as Hans Kung, Malachi Martin, John Courtney Murray, Martin D'Arcy, Robert Cushman, and Douglas Horton. Those friendships continued and were augmented during the Washington years by Eugene McCarthy, Hubert Humphrey, and Walter Mondale, as well as acquaintanceships with John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Edmund Muskie.

The lad from St. Paul was traveling in high circles, but that wound down in 1967 when he went off to Huntington, Indiana, to take over the editorship of *Our Sunday Visitor*. His two years of frustration with the paper's tight-fisted and arch conservative management was a major factor in his descent into alcoholism and ill health.

The story from that point becomes one of continuous movement from parishes to treatment centers. His hard road to recovery was complicated further by respiratory problems. In those years he went back to research and writing that ranged from the history of the diocese of St. Cloud to that of the Catholic church in Alaska. In addition, he wrote seven parish histories that brought life to the normally dull chronological lists of events, pastors, and parishioners that comprise the usual commemorative booklets about individual congregations.

Vincent Yzermans was one of those kindly chaplains on the front lines as believers made the difficult advance from the triumphant Christianity of the Industrial Age to the more tolerant and less dogmatic religiosity of the Information Age. He was wounded by it, but his life story adds a valuable chapter showing the contribution that another Minnesotan, and St. Paulite, made to that march.

Thomas C. Buckley is an associate professor of history at the University of Minnesota and a member of Ramsey County History's Editorial Board.

From the Hidewood

Robert Amerson
Minnesota Historical Society Press
364 pages, \$32 (cloth), \$17.95, paper

Reviewed by Gail Teas

This is a good book. It is an affectionate account of eight years in the life of an American farm family in a corner of eastern South Dakota known as Hidewood Hills. The non-fiction story will create a blissful nostalgia for many readers who remember that era.

The author opens his chronicle as he and his mother and siblings begin life anew in a rented farm home. They had been forced to find a new place to live when the owner of their last home moved back to it in the depths of the Depression in 1934. The new lodgings were depressingly run down, and in need of major improvements which could not be accomplished without abundant application of ingenuity and elbow grease, almost the only assets this family possessed.

Each chapter treats a person or event in the order in which it happened. Chapter 1, "Overhome" is about Bernice (pronounced "Berniss"), a young German woman who, after having served as housekeeper for a widower and his family, has married him and borne him several more children. These were hard times, indeed, for a woman who was removed from her own family and friends and thrust among people she senses are unfriendly and resentful of her, her ways and beliefs. But in spite of homesickness and frustration, she manages to make a home for her husband and children. The following chapters describe life in the Hidewood Hills from 1934 to 1942.

Recreating dialogue for actual people and descriptions of actual events, Amerson remembers with sadness, humor, poignancy, but always love and after-the-fact understanding of the foibles of this rural community. The never-ending farm chores, the scarlet fever horrors, geese hunting, farm fires, death, the threshing season, and many more common experiences are lovingly

recalled by the author.

Clarence, the author's father, is so reluctant to go into debt that he resists, longer than any of the other farmers the move from "horse farming" to the gradual investment in mechanical farm equipment. His son Robert describes how he understood his father's reluctance at the same time as he was frustrated and somewhat embarrassed by it. Finally taking a few bold steps, Clarence is almost exhilarated at how his new technology has improved life for his family.

Another problem develops as Robert, the only son in the family, completes eighth grade in country school. The question then arises as to whether he, a bright student, should remain at home and help his father or be sent to high school in the nearest town where he can board and room in a private home, attend school for four years, and come home every week-end and for vacations. It was a major decision, with many ramifications, some good, some not-so-good at the time.

From the Hidewood is creative non-fiction at its best. It provides insight into a time and place; it gives voice to the various points of view prevalent in that time and place, and it creates dialogue with a regional dialect and syntax that will be like a whiff of home-baked bread for anyone who grew up in a rural American community in the 1930s. Those who did not may experience vicariously a vital era of midwest history.

Robert Amerson retired in 1979 after a twenty-five-year career with the United States Information Agency. He and his wife Nancy live on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

Gail Teas is a former high school English teacher and administrator of the Pipestone, Minnesota, Community Library.

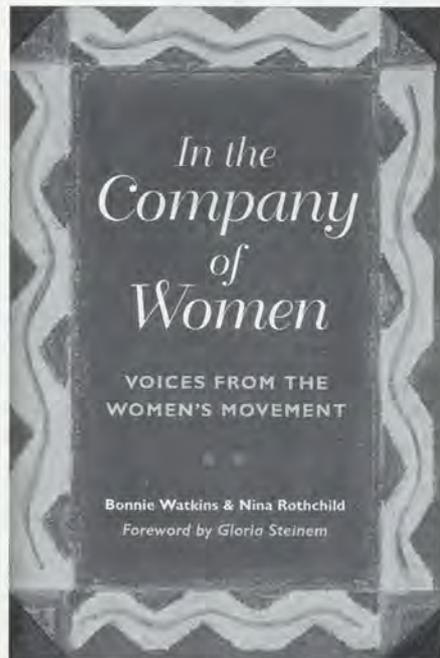
In the Company of Women

Bonnie Watkins and Nina Rothchild
Forward by Gloria Steinem
Minnesota Historical Society Press
378 pages, \$29.95 (cloth), \$16.95
(paper)

Reviewed by Pat Hart

In the Company of Women is a collection of compelling and humorous personal stories of eighty-three Minnesota women written in the oral history-interview style of Studs Terkel and without abridgement, except for some necessary editing.

The feeling of the book is "one-on-one" in a quiet room. "Like all good art," Steinem writes in her Forward, "these stories start from a particular



Cover for *In the Company of Women*,
Minnesota Historical Society Press.

place and become universal." The women whose stories are included in the book represent all different ages, conditions, and types—homemakers, business owners, explorers, artists, factory workers, scientists, prostitutes, police-women—and many of them found themselves in the Women's Movement by accident. The fear that their stories might not be heard, or might be lost, was

the authors' impetus for creating this collection.

Watkins and Rothchild make a strong case for Minnesota women being on the cutting edge of feminism. They were able to break through earlier here, they point out, than in other less liberal states. They found support here, they were able to organize, often within existing institutions, and they found ways to cope on their own—perhaps not easily, but within certain Populist traditions.

This collection of the first-person experiences of a diverse group of women is a small encyclopedia, a reference book which reads like a series of fine short stories. The authors represent two generations of feminists. They worked together on the Minnesota legislature's Commission on the Economic Status of Women where Rothchild was director and Watkins assistant director, and at the Minnesota Department of Employee Relations, where Rothchild was commissioner and Watkins the state's pay equity coordinator.

Pat Hart, a long-time resident of St. Paul, is a member of, Ramsey County History's Editorial Board.

Minnesota Impressionists

Rena Neumann Coen
Afton Historical Society Press
96 pages, 43 color plates
\$35 cloth

Reviewed by Virginia Brainard Kunz

This is a luminous book by Minnesota's leading art historian. It should be treasured not only by the many who love Impressionist art, a style that was born in France in the 1870s and spread throughout Europe and America, but also by those eager to explore an unknown chapter in the history of Minnesota art.

Coen is professor emerita of art history at St. Cloud State University (and filmmakers Ethan and Joel Coen are her sons). She is the author of a number of books, including *Painting and Sculpture*



Anton Gág and his wife, Elizabeth.
Minnesota Historical Society photo in
Minnesota Impressionists.

ture in Minnesota, 1820–1914, now a standard reference that identifies artists of the past century who had Minnesota connections. *Ramsey County History* published excerpts from *Paintings and Sculpture . . .* after the book's publication in 1975.

In *Minnesota Impressionists*, Coen covers the years from 1890 to 1940. She profiles twenty-seven artists, including seven women, who were well-trained, talented, and prominent, at least regionally. Many of them are now obscure or forgotten. Their work is vividly reproduced in stunning color plates, accompanied by black-and-white photographs of the artists themselves and profiles of their lives and their work.

Here we find, among others, Nicholas Brewer, Anton Gág, Alexis Jean Fournier, Clara Mairs, Elisabeth Chant, Edwin Dawes, Alice Sumner LeDuc and Homer Dodge Martin, called the "first American Impressionist." Some settled here and became prominent community leaders; others were passing through. Many worked in a variety of styles. This is a new look at another aspect of Minnesota history.

Virginia Brainard Kunz is editor of *Ramsey County History*.



St. Paul's first public Market House at Seventh and Wabasha, about 1870. It was built by Vetel Guerin, a French-Canadian who was the first settler on this tract of land. Minnesota Historical Society photo. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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