

RAMSEY COUNTY

# History

*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Euphoria Dimmed:  
X-Rays' First Victim

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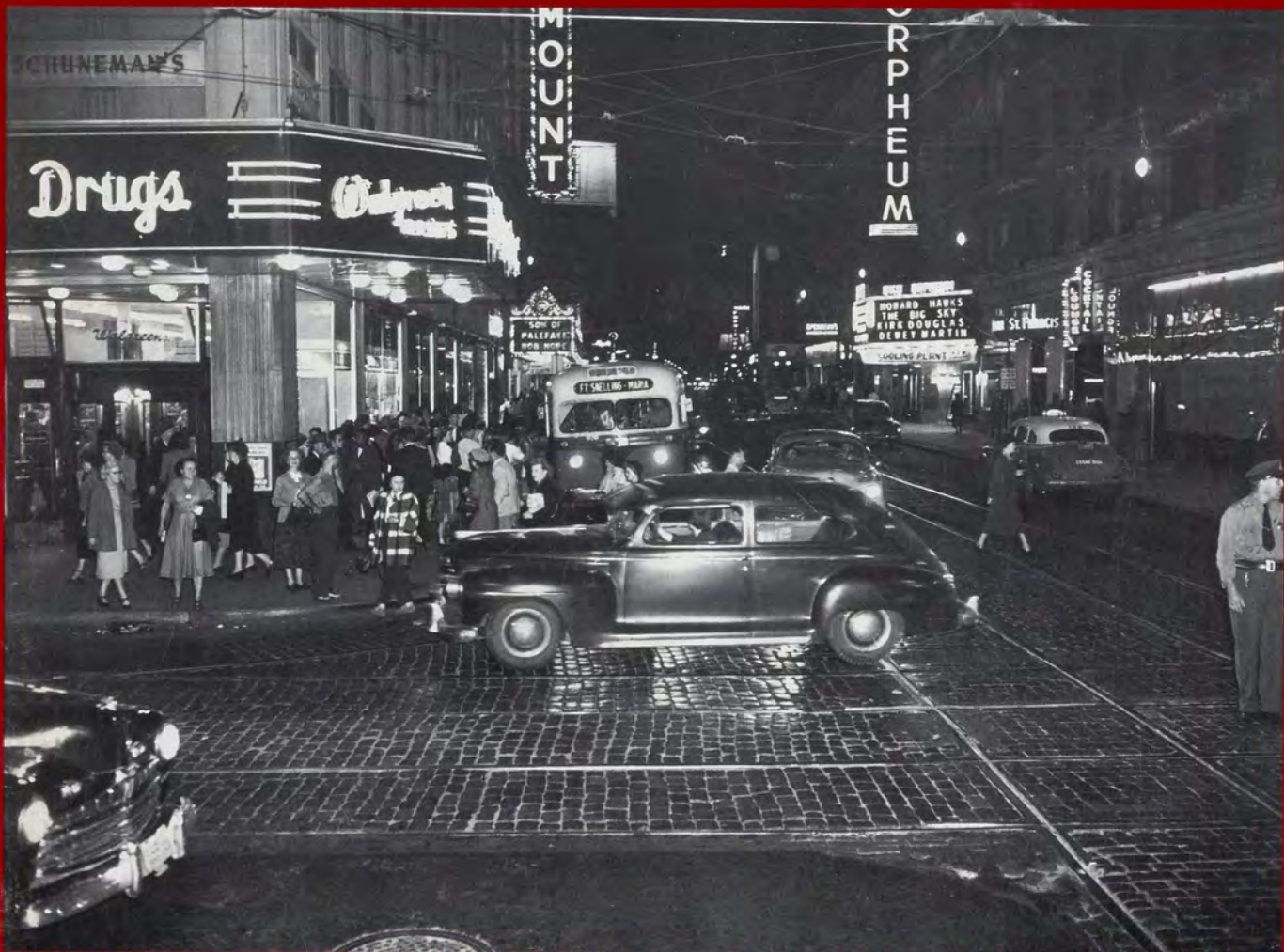
Winter, 1997

Volume 31, Number 4

*Rats, Politicians, Librarians*

Untold Stories of the Old St. Francis Hotel

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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

Volume 31, Number 4

Winter, 1997

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

**T**oward 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*



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## *Rats, Politicians, Librarians*

# The Untold Stories of the Old St. Francis Hotel And the Rich Historical Legacy of Seventh Place

*Paul R. Gold*

The plot of land at Seventh Place (once Seventh Street) between Wabasha and St. Peter Streets in downtown St. Paul figured in several separate histories of the city before the St. Francis Hotel was built there in 1916. Fascinating descriptions of pioneer life, descriptive accounts of St. Paul's first city markets, of one of St. Paul's worst fires, and of a cavalcade of vaudeville performers, movie stars, sports heroes, gangsters and big band musicians all have contributed to Seventh Place's rich historical legacy. The corner quite possibly has more history per square foot than any other location in the Twin Cities.

### **"St. Paul's Best Friend"**

The first white settler on this tract of land was a French-Canadian named Vetal Guerin. In fact, at one point he owned almost half of what is now the downtown district. His wheat field stood where the Radisson Hotel is now located. Today's Sixth and Wabasha was once a swamp and near Assumption Church was a marsh where he cut his hay.

Guerin married Adele Perry in 1841 and when Father Lucien Galtier published their wedding banns, he asked that the settlement be named St. Paul. The Guerins had many children, and their oldest son was the first white child born in St. Paul.

Guerin's land had become so valuable by the 1850s that pioneer newspapers called him St. Paul's first millionaire; yet he continued to live simply. Guerin was a civic-minded settler. When he died on November 11, 1870, still in his cabin at Seventh and Wabasha, his obituary in the *St. Paul Pioneer* read, "For all time to come, among the musty deeds of Ramsey County, [Guerin's] name will be found as one of the principal founders and the best friend of St. Paul. In 1857, almost a millionaire, the Catholic block on Third Street, the Cathedral property on Wabasha Street and the County Court House [site] were his gifts to church and public uses without money or price. Yesterday

he died a poor man."

In 1853 the tract of land at Seventh and Wabasha became the site of the first major public building in St. Paul to serve primarily as a public market. Guerin erected the brick building as the Market Hall and kept it open from 4 a.m. to 6 p.m. every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. St. Paul was then a city of 4,700 citizens, with fourteen physicians, thirty-one lawyers, two dentists, three confectionery shops, fourteen saloons, and two wholesale liquor stores.

When civic leaders saw the need for a city hall, they declared that the second floor of the Market Hall could also serve as such, and decreed that all cultural events in the building be advertised as taking place in the City Hall instead of the Market Hall. "A stranger would very naturally associate the squealing of pigs, gobbling of turkeys and crowing of cocks, as forming part of the music of a concert, [and] refuse to attend a ball for fear of having to promenade all over turnips, potatoes, and cabbage," one newspaper pointed out.

The St. Paul Philharmonic Society held its first concert at the City Hall on January 5, 1853. The admission was fifty cents. Traveling groups of Shakespearean actors would perform their repertoire of plays there for a week or two before going on to another city.

Other 1853 advertisements reveal a variety of acts performed at the "Market Hall" such as Signor Vito and his "Liliputian Family (eight in number)" which had won great renown in St. Louis and other cities. The Fakir of Siva and his "Immense Cabinet of Unparalleled Wonders" came to town. The Fakir initially got great reviews: "The Fakir is a fellow of very humorous ideas. He met with adventures in all corners of the globe which it was his sole amusement to recount." Later newspaper accounts were not as glowing. The Fakir allegedly took the advance ticket money and disappeared. Caught in another venue, he supposedly repaid the ticket holders with counterfeit currency.

### **Rats and Politicians**

In 1881 a larger and more ornate New Market Hall was completed which stretched along Seventh Street between St. Peter and Wabasha. A week after it opened the state Capitol burned down, so during the New Market Hall's first two years it housed the Minnesota state government. The upper floor was used by the state's legislators and the ground floor housed state offices. In 1883 the state government left the premises for a new Capitol and the hall opened up as a full-fledged market with thirty-two stalls. At this time the intersection of Seventh and Wabasha was the busiest corner in St. Paul, with thousands of people milling around when the market was open.

A few old newspaper articles provide some insight into the New Market Hall's atmosphere. A September 24, 1916, *Pioneer Press* article entitled "St. Francis Hotel Site Used By Parties More Than 50 Years Ago" provides an interesting account of the market and the political





The St. Francis Hotel, 9 West Seventh Street, around 1920–1922. Gibson photo, Minnesota Historical Society.

atmosphere during the New Market Hall years.

“The tang of the country met your nose because the ground floor was occupied by market venders, for whose accommodation the building primarily was erected, and the older politicians can recall how rumor oft associated with the cabbages on the ground floor [and] with “election cigars” handed out in the meetings above, for that was long before the politician’s alleged generosity or liberality was made a misdemeanor by the law.”

Besides alluding to votes bought with either cabbages or cigars, the same article reported that the famous politician, William Jennings Bryan, spoke there during his first campaign for the presidency. The New Market Hall was a political election site and a sort of “mini-convention place” for both Democrats and Republicans.

In the 1880s the New Market Hall was also the site of one of St. Paul’s early theaters. An article in the December 31, 1943 *Pioneer Press* reminisced about the 1888 production of “Rip Van Winkle.” The lower floor was occupied by the public market and the rats which infested the fruit and vegetable stalls also made themselves at home in the theater, the article noted. Dramatic scenes on stage were often interrupted by the screams of women in the audience, disconcerted by rats running across their feet. In one scene during “Rip Van Winkle,” “Rip” lay down for his long nap and just as he had stretched out, a huge rat scampered over his chest.

By 1890 other food markets had emerged throughout St. Paul and the city decided to lease the Market Hall’s ground floor to various businesses and convert the upper floor into the St. Paul

Public Library. The history of the library dates back to territorial days, when in September, 1857, the Mercantile Library Association opened. In 1863 the association merged with the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) and in 1882 it was officially declared the St. Paul Public Library. Ten years later, in 1892, the library found a home on the Market Hall’s upper floor. A 1915 newspaper article reported that the library was considered to be one of the best in the country with its collection of 160,000 books and an annual circulation of more than 500,000. The annual cost of maintaining the library was an estimated \$60,000.

### The Great Library Fire

The spectacular fire which began on April 27, 1915, burned throughout the night and into the next morning, taking



twenty-two hours and thirty-one minutes to extinguish. The fire apparently started when some syrup boiled over in the basement of the confectionery store housed in the building. Every piece of the St. Paul fire department's equipment was brought to the site. Photographs of the blaze reveal that apparently the firefighters even used their old-style horse-drawn steamer engines. Still, all of St. Paul's firefighting strength was not enough and additional Minneapolis firemen were called to assist. By midnight hundreds of firefighters were battling flames, smoke, and gas, but they realized the building was doomed.

Certainly the fire was a catastrophe in 1915, but eighty years later newspaper accounts still provided amazingly detailed information about the city library, the stores destroyed in the fire, and how fires were fought in the beginning of this century.

Shops destroyed were Boe's Millinery Store, Boosalis & Papa's Candy Store, St. Paul Book Exchange, Sharrod Shoe Store, the St. Elmo Pool Hall, Blumenthal [Shoe] Shining Parlour, Tromley's Cigar Store and Hess's Barber Shop. Of the estimated damage, \$325,000 was at-

tributed to business property losses and the burned library books. The building itself was appraised at only \$50,000. In a cost context, the disaster was reported in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* which cost two cents (five cents on trains).

Although there was no loss of life during the inferno, eighteen firemen were injured. Some were overcome by illuminating gas, one was hit in the face by an out-of-control nozzle, and two were injured when the fire chief's vehicle rammed into them. The waterworks commissioner was pleased that there was enough water in the system to extinguish the fire. Five million gallons were used.

### **A Snake Named "Taxes"**

August, 1915, was an unusual month in St. Paul. There was a horrific scare at the city's retail meat markets over diseased meat; construction workers were working around the clock to complete the \$1 million St. Paul Speedway; and a \$50,000 grand prize was offered to the best race car driver.

Strange things were happening near the future site of the St. Francis Hotel. An audience of 1,500 moviegoers remained

seated in the Shubert Theater while a fire was put out in the basement. Later, a city ordinance would not allow movie theaters to be so crowded that people could not get out.

Workers demolishing the ruins of the Market Hall and the St. Paul Library were ordered to stop razing the structure because their methods posed dangers to passersby. They tended to think it was funny to throw bricks at the old library bell, which confused the neighbors. (Ironically, the old library bell was at one time used to sound fire alarms in the downtown district.) The chief building inspector reprimanded them, but the workers ignored him. Thus began a series of delays and challenges in the building of the St. Francis Hotel. The winter of 1915-1916 was abnormally harsh and it was only with great difficulty that steel frame work was erected. Strikes created additional difficulties, and so did labor shortages caused by World War I. Yet, despite the problems John W. Norton of J. W. Norton & Co. managed the building project well enough to complete the hotel in less than eight months after the foundation had been laid.



*The great St. Paul Public Library fire, April 27-28, 1915. The building housed the city's second Market House, as well as the state legislature for a time after the second state Capitol burned down. Minnesota Historical Society photo.*



In the meantime, the elusive Wabasha snake nicknamed "Taxes" was finally caught in the barber shop directly across from the St. Francis construction site. After numerous sightings were reported by Wabasha merchants, the "largest serpent ever captured in a busy section of a metropolis" was put in a cage. Several years earlier a traveling carnival employee had accidentally let the infant snake out of a cage and it had been living in basements.

### Birth of the Hotel

The \$800,000 St. Francis Hotel was scheduled to open in September, 1916, in time for the Minnesota State Fair. But while many of the shops and businesses in the building opened in September (90 percent of the 27,000 square feet hotel was under lease before the roof was on the building,) the hotel proper didn't open its doors to overnight guests until December, 1916. What follows are descriptions of the hotel that were published in the local newspapers and from the hotel's own advertising and promotional materials.

The September 3, 1916, editions of *The St. Paul Daily News* and *The St. Paul Pioneer Press* published several pages describing in detail the great comforts and fabulous innovations which the St. Francis Hotel promised. *The St. Paul Daily News* reported that, "The lobby is one of the most artistically lighted rooms of its kind in the Northwest—featuring six large globes of opalescent glass containing seven lights suspended by heavy bronze chains. There were 60 ceiling lights in Doric glass which supplied just the right amount of light in the hallways."

The main color schemes in the hotel were leafy browns, two-tone greens and dull blues which were supposed to provide a "pleasant restful environment." The hotel had a large variety of furniture styles, including Jacobean, Queen Anne, Adams, and William and Mary. Easy chairs were upholstered in French velour and Spanish leather. On the mezzanine floor there were large wicker chairs upholstered in tapestry and wicker writing tables with "clever" lamps.

Elizabeth A. Turgeon visited many

hotels across the country and took notes on color schemes, furnishings, and linens. She had the task of ordering 500 dozen towels, 112 dozen sheets, 150 dozen pillow cases, 350 pairs of lace curtains, 5,000 yards of carpet, 1,200 chairs, 225 beds and fifty dressing tables.

The hotel had a staff of about 100 employees. Twenty maids were assigned to the care of 210 guest rooms; there were ten bellboys in smart dark green uniforms with black velvet cuffs, sleeves, and shoulder straps showing the gold-lettered St. Francis insignia. If a visiting businessman had only one suit, he could give it to a bellboy who would return it pressed within a half hour. Guests could sew on their own buttons with the pin cushion and threaded needles and buttons which came with each room, and they could also send out laundry. The hotel had its own valet and in-house physician.

Most interesting were the wide array of technological innovations that the hotel offered. There were telephones in every guest room. The St. Francis claimed that it had the most modern private telephone exchange (switchboard system) west of Chicago, with a switchboard custom-made to blend in with the hotel's furnishings and connected to 210 "Bull neck desk type" phones.

When the guest left a room, turning the lock automatically turned out the lights behind him. Showers had special "chambers" which mixed hot and cold water so that it was always just the right temperature for a guest. One newspaper article noted that "there will be electric lights in the closets which make the carrying of lighted matches into the closet unnecessary, thus the elimination of one great source of fire."

To minimize fire possibilities, floors were made of torgoment which was deemed fireproof, and there were no wooden windows in the back of the hotel so that a fire next door couldn't spread into the building. Even the window ropes were changed to chains.

The hotel also had a few interesting innovations which helped to run the building more efficiently. *The St. Paul Daily News* noted that, "One of the unique features of the St. Francis Hotel is the system of dummy elevators which are

arranged to reach all parts of the hotel."

All guest halls had linen chutes (still visible), which saved work for the maids who simply threw the used linen down a chute and into the basement where it was counted, sorted, taken to a laundry, and later to one of three large linen rooms. Each floor also had dust chutes where the maid placed rubbish and a compressed air system drove it into the boiler room to be burned. The boiler room had four huge boilers. The hotel also made it a rule to recycle paper; all discarded paper products were sent below in a special fireproof chute where they were compacted into 100 pound bales and sold to paper dealers.

Room corners were rounded to prevent accumulation of dust and make them easier to clean. The hotel used no wallpaper because it was thought to breed bacteria and germs. To make the St. Francis sanitary, the decorators used special stains and paints which only recently had been found to be waterproof.

### New Year's Eve, 1916

The \$800,000 St. Francis Hotel officially opened its doors on New Year's Eve, 1916, as one of the first "downtown entertainment complexes" in the country. One newspaper described the opening as a "memorable orgy of champagne, buffet tables, dancing to the music of three bands and the glitter of a main ballroom, elegant dining salon and the famed St. Francis bar."

Another newspaper reported that, "thousands of lights, using 250,000 watts in and around the St. Francis Hotel are making it one of the brightest spots in St. Paul. Street lights are thrown into the background as a result of the glare from the big building and its stores and shops on the lower floor. This same amount of electricity could be used to serve 500 homes."

A hotel brochure displayed captioned pictures of the lobby, ballroom, coffee shop, the "Gopher Room," suites, guest rooms, barber shop (with five barbers), beauty shop, and the St. Francis cafeteria "which never closes." The pamphlet also mentioned banquet and private dining rooms. All hotel rooms had outside exposure. The St. Francis offered 250 rooms with rates starting at two dollars a night.





The New Strand and Riviera theaters at the corner of Seventh and Wabasha, with the St. Francis just down the street, ca. 1941. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

The theater portion of the entertainment complex (now the Orpheum) opened a month earlier as the New Palace Theater and it staged some spectacular vaudeville acts. Reviews in the *St. Paul Daily News* not only reveal the fascinating shows performed during the New Palace's inaugural year, but also suggest some of the more colorful hotel guests.

Paul Pedrini opens the bill with a performing ape and a mind-reading dog. Henri & Adelaide provide some soft-shoe dancing while Carl & Le Claire have a song and chatter act finishing with a cake walk. The Kerville Family Jugglers—juggle everything from bicycles to billiard balls are accompanied by the Garcinette Brothers who are expert hat throwers and manipulators. A quartet of young men with Dixie Harris will sing “nifty songs” in a “nifty manner” and make a specialty of Hawaiian numbers. Tena's Elephants, an animal act of considerable size and equipment, heads the latter part of the program. Pretty Miss Dawn June dis-

plays the remarkable ability to remain under water while sewing, writing, reading, eating and drinking. Charles Gibbs ends the bill with his imitations of insects, birds, dogs, automobile horns and various instruments with equal fidelity.

The politicians reappeared at Seventh and Wabasha when the Republicans established their new headquarters in the St. Francis Hotel. In fact, Republican campaigns were being directed from the same corner as they had been years earlier.

The hotel's lobby entrance was on Seventh Street and the first floor housed a number of interesting stores. The St. Paul Drug Company was a large pharmacy open twenty-four hours a day. *The St. Paul Daily News* reported that it was paying the highest rent of any business firm in St. Paul. Its company president considered it a department drug store located at “the bright spot of the city.” The corner of Wabasha and Seventh was a choice location anyway since it was a busy street-

car junction.

Inside, the St. Paul Drug Company had the largest soda fountain in St. Paul with a double cooling system to make drinks “ice cold.” “The fountain [was] 22 feet long and [was] absolutely sanitary, with a porcelain lining and other details that make contamination impossible,” the press reported. Next door was the L.H. Weil men's clothing store with its slogan, “Weil For Style,” which offered suits from \$15 to \$35 and shoes at \$7.

The Miller Cafeteria was also in the building. Run by Miller & Joesting Co., it featured green and white furnishings and German silver steam tables. The cafeteria had about fifty employees and could serve 250 customers at a time. All its baking was done in the basement in three large ovens which had a capacity of 300 loaves at a time. The business also benefited from a “special ammonia refrigeration system” which no longer demanded an outdoor supply of ice. A 1917 newspaper ad explained the concept of a



cafeteria: "You do not wish to spend more time eating than necessary. Cafeteria service means quick service and you select just what you want, as you see it before you order. Eat the Miller Way."

There were several meat companies on the ground floor throughout the St. Francis years, but the best-known was Duel's, next to the New Palace Theater, which not only sold sirloin steaks for 15 cents and choice family roasts for 11 cents, but also offered thrift meat shopping in the evenings from 7 p.m. until 11 p.m.

The St. Francis Barber Shop was equipped with fourteen of the latest and most sanitary hydraulic chairs, made of porcelain-enamel with spring cushion head rests, each of which had an electric massage machine, hair dryer, washstand, and manicure bowl. Both straight-back chairs and rockers were in the waiting room.

The St. Francis Billiard Hall, run by Frank Seifert in the hotel's basement, was the largest single room pool hall in the United States when it opened. The 13,500-square-foot space had thirty pocket billiards tables, five regular billiards tables, and one table "for a Canadian game snooker. The snooker table will be the first of its kind in the United States." All the tables were mahogany and custom-made for the hall.

The St. Francis Hotel's original proprietor, Frank Turgeon, was a prominent hotel man. He was president of the St. Paul Hotel and Restaurant Association in 1921 and 1922; president of the Northwest Hotel Men's Association in 1927; and president of the Minnesota Hotel and Restaurant Association in 1928. He sponsored the St. Francis Hotel bowling team which became famous by winning the national bowling championship. An avid sportsman, he also sponsored a yearly twenty-one-day legalized horse racing season and pari-mutuel betting in Minnesota.

The St. Francis stayed in the Turgeon family for fifteen years. Later, Frank Turgeon would remain as proprietor and his sons, Harry and Burt, became the managers. Harry Turgeon began his hotel career as a bellboy in his father's establishment, and many of his memories were preserved in *The St. Paul Dispatch's*

Oliver Towne columns of the 1950s and 1960s.

### **Stars of Stage and Screen**

Charlie Chaplin, W.C. Fields, George Jessel, Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen, the Barrymores (John, Lionel, and Ethel); Harry Houdini, Ben Blue, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Olson and Johnson all were St. Francis Hotel guests. They stayed there because it was close to the New Palace [later the Orpheum] theater and all the other stages in town were nearby. The St. Francis Hotel was considered "a Mecca for the great and near great of the stage and screen—never luxurious but always exciting."

Similarly, famous big band leaders and their musicians were frequent guests during the Big Band era. Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Glen Miller, Guy Lombardo, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Paul Whiteman all called the St. Francis Hotel home when performing in the Twin Cities.

### **Sports Heroes**

Boxers who traditionally stayed at the St. Francis Hotel included Gentleman Jim Corbett, Harry Wills, Mickey Walker, Jock Malone, and Mike O'Dowd. Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig were guests in the late 1920s when the St. Paul Saints were a Yankee farm team. They came to play an exhibition game. Harry Turgeon carried Babe Ruth's luggage up to his room and got him to sign a sack of baseballs for children in an orphanage.

### **Underworld Kingpin**

Although rumors have circulated that Al Capone once rented the entire fourth floor of the St. Francis Hotel, there is no real evidence he ever visited St. Paul. However, the St. Francis was a hub of substantial gangster activity. The gangster boss, Dapper Danny Hogan, was a frequent guest at the Granada Night Club. Located in the basement of the hotel, it was billed as "A Picture of Old Spain at Seventh and Wabasha." During the Prohibition years guests could drink bootleg gin and bathtub champagne and eat cold chicken sandwiches, steaks, lobsters, and shrimp.

During the gangster era of the 1920s

and 1930s, some of St. Paul's law enforcement officials worked in conjunction with organized crime and St. Paul became a haven for criminals. Whenever a mobster hadn't been seen for a while, it was said, it could be assumed that he was either dead or in St. Paul. They were allowed to stay unmolested if they promised to commit their crimes outside the city limits. Some of the big name gangsters who sought refuge in St. Paul include John Dillinger, Baby Face Nelson, Homer Van Meter, George "Machine gun" Kelly and "Ma" Barker and her boys. The St. Paul police gave Dapper Danny Hogan the responsibility of registering of the comings and goings of gangster visitors.

Hogan, who directed the St. Paul underworld for several years, was known as the "king of the heavies." During his reign, St. Paul became the largest "hot" money and "hot" bond mart in the country. However, when the United States Attorney General called St. Paul the "cesspool of our nation," the time had come to clean up St. Paul. In the meantime Hogan had come to a violent end.

On December 4, 1928 he was blown up when he stepped on the accelerator of his car. His subsequent funeral was one of the largest in St. Paul's history, with more than 2,000 mourners and five carloads of flowers. Prominent city figures as well as vagrants were in attendance. As Harry Turgeon looked around the St. Mary's Catholic Church, he said later, most of the people he saw had been the Granada Club's regular customers back at the St. Francis Hotel.

### **Epilogue**

The St. Francis Hotel's years ended in 1955 when its name was changed to the Hotel Capri which has had a much less illustrious history. The building was later renovated into apartments.

*Paul R. Gold first became interested in historical research as a teenager in Sweden. Although an Ohio native, he has lived overseas. He lived in West Berlin from 1988 through 1990. Annette Blazek, who has a collection of vintage St. Francis Hotel postcards, helped research the first Market Hall.*





*St. Paul's first public Market House at Seventh and Wabasha, about 1870. It was built by Vetal 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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