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A Message from the Executive Director

In this issue the Ramsey County Historical Society is honoring Elsie Wildung as a true friend of local history. Born in St. Paul a century ago—on April 30, 1898—and raised there, she and her family are examples of the extraordinary ordinary people who have built our community, the people local history celebrates. Although she remembered the Society in her will with the largest bequest in its history, she was a modest person who lived an unpretentious life and cherished her community. Her fortune came from the community and she has returned most of it to the community. Her legacy will perpetuate the sense of continuity she inherited from those who went before her.

Preserving our history is a way of preserving our common identity, of guiding us as we chart our future. In 1999, the society will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary and the thirty-fifth year of the continuous publication of *Ramsey County History*. And Ramsey County and the Gibbs farm together will celebrate the 150th anniversary of their establishment in 1849, the year Minnesota became a territory. Much of our heritage is kept alive in this magazine, in our archives, and at the Gibbs Farm Museum. We truly are the Society of people like Elsie Wildung; we have much worth preserving.

The Society has just completed a new strategic plan committing us once again to maintaining a tradition of excellence in all we do. There is no better way to secure the heritage we all share than by a bequest or gift to the endowment the Society has established. We are ready to assist any of you who wish to remember the Society in your will, or during your lifetime. Even modest amounts will grow to make a major impact on the future far beyond a modest beginning.

History is a powerful legacy to leave to future generations. Please consider this wonderful opportunity to make a lasting gift to our community by remembering the Ramsey County Historical Society in your will.

Priscilla Farnham

Elsie Wildung Remembers The Society in Her Will



Elsie Wildung
1898-1996

Elsie Wildung was a lifelong resident of St. Paul and her roots stretch deep into the city's history. She was born just a century ago, on April 30, 1898, the youngest of nine children, and she grew up on Dayton's Bluff. All her life she maintained a strong sense of family.

Her parents, Friedrich William Wille and Emma Sophia Volkert Wille, were of German and Alsace Lorraine ancestry, and it was a religious family. Her grandfather, Johann Nicolas Volkert, who was born on February 19, 1822, in Nuremberg, Germany, decided at the age of fifteen that he would like to become a missionary. Accepted by his local Mission Society, he sailed for the United States in 1847 to study for the ministry in Fort Wayne, Indiana. After ordination in the Lutheran church two years later, he served a number of congregations before becoming minister of Emmanuel Congregation, now known as Trinity Lone Oak Lutheran Church of Eagan, Dakota County, Minnesota.

Elsie Wildung's father was a farmer who also worked as a carpenter to help support his family. Her mother was a homemaker. The family attended St. John's Lutheran Church in St. Paul where the Wille children also attended the church school. After she graduated from Johnson High School, and with her brothers no longer at home, Elsie Wille remained there to help her mother with the housekeeping. She was active in

The Legend of Sam Taran: Boxer Bootlegger and St. Paul's "Fighting Tailor"

Paul R. Gold

Everybody knew him. Sam Taran (a.k.a. Terrin) was a key underworld figure in the 1920s, but he also was a man of many parts. Originally a tailor and a boxer, and later a car thief and a major bootlegger, he was known to everyone as the "Fighting Tailor." By 1929 he had earned the distinction of being St. Paul's most arrested citizen, charged with everything from assault to liquor conspiracy. Although he appeared in court often over a ten-year span, it took the Minnesota Supreme Court to finally send him to Stillwater prison. At the time, the *St. Paul Daily News* noted:

"Arrested numerous times on charges of at least 15 crimes and social errors in the Twin Cities, Taran has spent as nearly as can be figured, \$115 in fines and 30 days in the Minneapolis workhouse. In the majority of cases in which Taran has been charged with assault, auto theft, grand larceny, and other misdemeanors, the words 'case stricken,' 'dismissed,' 'no disposition,' and 'not guilty' appear."

Taran likely had far more arrests than the fifteen mentioned here. During the 1920s, police records evidently left a lot to be desired and those records have long since been destroyed. Therefore, Taran's interesting legacy must be searched out through period newspapers, boxing reviews, and the few remaining court documents.

His earliest recorded arrest, on September 4, 1918, was for loitering in front of the St. Francis hotel at Seventh and Wabasha Streets. A *St. Paul Dispatch* article, titled "Fighting Tailor Loses Decision to Policeman," reported a shoving incident with a policeman. Taran claimed the cop had a grudge against him, but agreed not to linger around Seventh and Wabasha. His sentence of fifteen days in the workhouse was suspended.



The intersection of Seventh and Wabasha in downtown St. Paul where Sam Taran (a.k.a. Terrin) was first arrested for loitering. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

The Boxer

His earliest mention in old newspaper boxing reviews was a terse sentence: "'Curt Vogel outpoints Terrin in Mill City.'" (There were many Jewish boxing champions in this era and most of them changed their last names to Anglo-Irish names. Hence, Taran was Terrin in the newspapers.) As Terrin, Taran was managed by Emil Thiry of Chicago, who also managed Jock Malone, the famous St. Paul Boxer. Prior to this, Taran had been known as the "Terrible Tailor," and he made quite an impression on fans in and around Philadelphia before World War I. He was a feared lightweight boxer and potential opponents often refused at the last minute to box with him. While in the Twin Cities, he offered to take on anyone weighing up to 142 pounds. If he didn't find enough slots on the Minnesota fight night cards, he would take extensive tours of the East Coast, offering a full suit of clothes to opponents if they could defeat him.

The *Duluth News Tribune* of March 25, 1920, noted that, "The Sammy Terrin-Soldier McCarthy go is drawing the most attention and on paper it looks to be one of the greatest battles ever to be staged in Duluth. There is no love lost between the two. The last meeting between them in St. Paul resulted in Terrin receiving a nice lacing. Terrin was outweighed by several pounds, but put on such a fight that it saved the card for Promoter Jack Reddy. Promoters have tried to rematch these agents again, but neither would listen to any terms. They had too much respect for each other."

Terrin arrived in Duluth in the "pink of condition carrying his usual line of chatter, ready to give McCarthy the lacing of his life," but McCarthy bowed out right before the highly publicized bout because of an injured hand. Another boxer, Billy Schauer, replaced him at the last minute, proclaiming, "I can trim the fighting tailor and will when I meet Terrin." He did.

The Car Thief

On September 21, 1920, Taran was fined \$5 for speeding—his first recorded auto-related entanglement. On April 23, 1921, he found himself before Judge Hugo Hanft, accused of stealing a Buick Roadster valued at \$1,400. The owner of the stolen car had been riding a streetcar and as it passed the intersection of University and Dale Streets, he spotted his car at a nearby garage. Upon closer inspection, he found brochures from his nut-shelling plant in the car. He called police.

The upshot was that Taran was in court on a charge of car theft. He was released, but with a stern admonishment from the court. A *St. Paul Daily News* article reported that, "Sam Terrin, known to St. Paul boxing fans as the 'Fighting Tailor,' was advised by Judge H. O. Hanft in district court this morning to stick to the tailoring business."

However, about six weeks later, on August 11, 1921, Taran and his wife Florence were remanded to the county jail charged with receiving a stolen automobile. Three days earlier he had been fined \$100 for violating liquor laws.

Bonds were set at \$2,500 for him and \$1,500 for his wife. Sureties for the bonds were Louis Goldstein and Philip Spiegell. Later, Taran would assault Spiegell in an argument over the loan for the bond. Charged with the assault on January 12, 1922, Taran was fined \$10.

On September 21, 1921, Taran's father Alex allegedly sold a car stolen by his son. On August 9, 1922, the "Fighting Tailor" again was held for auto theft and charged with grand larceny. The jury acquitted him.

By May, 1923, Sam Taran had been associated with so many car thefts in the Twin Cities that the Immigration and Naturalization Service denied his application for citizenship. (The 1920 St. Paul census had listed a Harry Taran, born in Russia, who had moved with his family from Pennsylvania to Minnesota. Sam Taran probably was a Russian immigrant who came to the United States as a child. Both of his parents lived in St. Paul in the 1920s.)

Taran would have to apply again at a later date. He was upset with this deci-

sion, explaining that he actually had been pretty good over the past two years and promising even better behavior in the years to come.



The La Salle Wholesale Drug Company building, site of Taran's bold daylight robbery in 1925. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

The Bootlegger

By February, 1924, with the nation in the throes of Prohibition, Taran had begun to receive wide recognition as an important bootlegger. On February 2 of that year, he was caught with liquor in his possession. On February 8 he led a "bold daylight raid" of the La Salle Drug Company, stealing thousands of dollars worth of medicinal liquor and alcohol. The robbery had occurred between 6 a.m. and 7 a.m. and the loot, hauled off in a truck, included thirty-two cases of Old Crow and Old Taylor and sixty-five cases of White Mills whiskey. He made the front pages of the St. Paul newspapers, headlining the raid as "'Fighting Tailor' Held in Liquor Probe; \$85,000 Alcohol Seized; Pugilist Arrested; 'Fighting Tailor' Held in Connection with Daring Daylight Drug Store Robbery;" "Terrin Receipted for Contraband Liquor Is Report;" "New Arrests in \$85,000 Liquor Theft Plot Due;" "Other Twin Cities Men Implicated in Liquor Ring, Thought One of the Biggest in Northwest."

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* on February 23, 1924, noted that, "Sam Terrin, St. Paul pugilist known as the 'Fighting Tailor,' was arrested and 85,000 gallons of alcohol, valued at more than \$85,000 bootleg prices, were seized by Federal agents and police here late Friday in a clean-up declared by authorities to be dis-

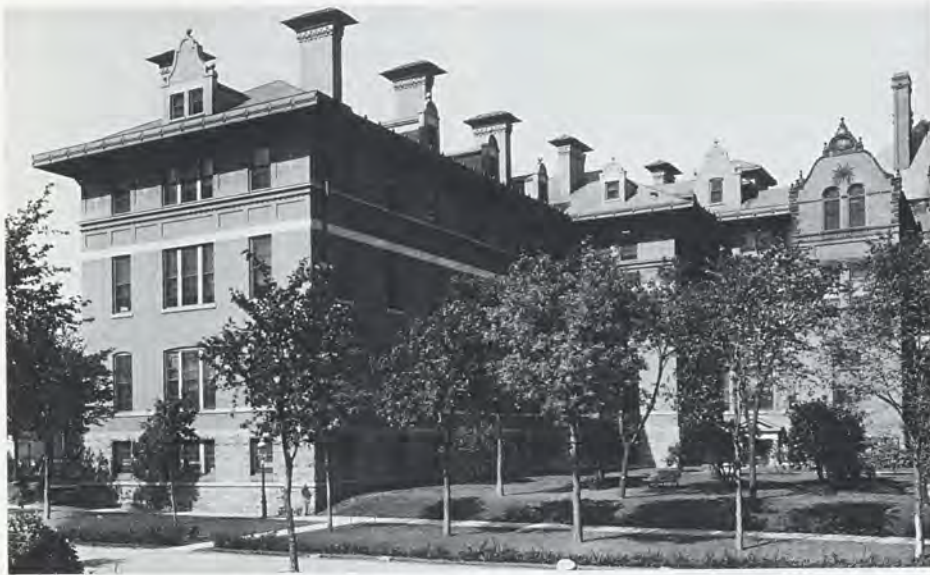
tinctive in Northwest prohibition enforcement history. Search is being made for several other men, and some Twin City retail druggists may be implicated before the investigation was over, it was said."

The *St. Paul Dispatch* also noted that a "ring" composed of more than thirty men in the Twin Cities could be implicated in the La Salle robbery. Dry agents and police discovered liquor in one of Taran's cars at a garage at 155 South Street. Included were ten cases of Old Crow whiskey and alcohol that could be traced back to the La Salle robbery. Dry agents also found another 8,500 gallons of alcohol. Although the bottles were labeled pure grain alcohol (which could be bought legally from the federal government), Prohibition authorities believed that it actually was redistilled rubbing alcohol or "body rub."

Six five-ton trucks loaded to capacity hauled the alcohol to Ballard's warehouse, an entire afternoon's job for the small army of Prohibition agents. Heavily armed guards rode with the drivers while others walked along the streets on each side of the loads.

Taran was picked up by federal agents and police at the Bilbow Pool Hall, 406 Minnesota Street, and taken to the Margaret Street police station. At the same time, the "Fighting Tailor" was found to have been connected to a large amount of alcohol Prohibition agents had found around a warehouse near the railroad yards and carefully disguised by labels and packing to represent legitimate merchandise. The warehouse men expressed surprise when it was revealed that innocent appearing boxes of "books" really held large containers of alcohol. According to authorities, although the alcohol was supposedly pure grain alcohol and was purchased as such by bootleggers, it was nothing but redistilled "body" rub which probably had been distilled twice to do away with all obnoxious odors from the denaturants.

The arrest and seizure gave Prohibition agents an insight into the methods of what they believed to be one of the largest bootleg rings operating in the Northwest. The ring was thought to be supplying contraband liquor on a large scale over a 200-mile radius of St. Paul.



Ancker Hospital, the city and county hospital where Taran recovered from the Christmas Eve attempt on his life and where "Billy" Alexander escaped. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

The detectives also thought that the group specialized in hijacking and robberies as part of its operations in furnishing customers with liquor and alcohol.

As Sam Taran was arraigned in federal court on a technical charge of transporting liquor, Twin Cities Prohibition agents believed, according to news reports, that they were entering "into the second phase of a campaign which they believe is the unmasking of a gigantic liquor smuggling syndicate in the Northwest." With the arrest of the "Fighting Tailor," they felt that they had the "key that may unlock some of the inner secrets of the alleged syndicate."

The rest of 1924 passed relatively uneventfully for Taran. He was arrested on April 26, 1924, for driving without a license. He spent thirty days in the Minneapolis workhouse for assault that took place in July, 1924. The following September he was charged with federal offenses when his truckload of alcohol was seized at 214 West Fourth Street in downtown St. Paul.

On April 24, 1925, he again was charged with possession and transportation of liquor and held without bond. A month later, the charges against him for receiving stolen property were dismissed. That June, however, he again stole the headlines in the St. Paul daily newspapers. His picture and that of his

house at 817 North Wheeler Avenue, where he allegedly distilled alcohol, appeared in the June 27 edition of the *St. Paul Daily News*. The caption below the photo read:

"In this house at 817 Wheeler Ave. federal agents discovered what they say is the redistillation plant where St. Paul's 'genuine Scotch whiskey' is made out of body rub. In the picture at the lower right is shown the steel and barred doors they had to break through to find the 'plant.' At the lower left is Sammy Terrin, the 'Fighting Tailor,' alleged proprietor of the house and the redistillation outfit and alleged 'brains' of an alcohol outfit which has been affiliated with the gigantic alcohol importation ring which figured in the recent Gleeman murder trials."

(As we will see, the Gleeman brothers, Abraham and Benjamin, were part of the bootlegging ring in St. Paul.)

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported on June 27, 1925, that, "Terrin, alleged to have been operating in a small bungalow four blocks from the Hamline University campus a redistilling unit of what officials say is a \$1,000,000 Twin Cities liquor ring, has eluded arrest since the warrant was issued September 9, 1924, in connection with seizure by Federal agents of a large alcohol shipment."

Sixteen cases of "Scotch" whiskey bottled under such thirst-provoking la-

bels as White Horse, King George, Old Parr, and Haig and Haig, formed part of the seizure. The stock of body rub which had not reached the stills included thirty-six one gallon cans, eight ten gallon cans, and two five gallon cans. Four stills, in which a total of 300 gallons of body rub were sizzling, were found by the police when the place was raided. The agents also seized several gallons of Scotch malt which was used for flavoring at a cost of \$40 a gallon.

A large quantity of fake labels, bottles and bottle stoppers, and several capping devices were among the supplies at the house. The agents estimated the cost of equipping the plant at more than \$5,000.

Taran's trial for his operation on Wheeler Avenue took place on October 22, 1925. By then the evidence had disappeared. All but one bottle of the alleged liquor inexplicably had been destroyed by the Prohibition agents themselves. Taran's attorney, Thomas McMeekin, a known attorney for St. Paul's underworld, argued that, "A landlord cannot be expected to know what is going on in his house. If this was the trial of any other man than [Taran], the court would dismiss the case at once." The jury reached a not guilty verdict within twenty minutes.

Liquor Hijacking

A major player in the bootlegging activity in St. Paul during the Prohibition era was a liquor ring known as "the Syndicate," a group that went as far as transporting whiskey and champagne in "lubricating oil trucks" with fictitious company names. The Syndicate also imported railway cars filled with liquor from Cleveland. The biggest worry for the Syndicate bootleggers was not the police and the Prohibition agents but the possibility of other gangsters hijacking their liquor on the way to its destination.

A hijacker named Burt Stevens tried to interfere with the Syndicate's operations and was shot dead near Mickey's Diner. The event brought about public outcry and the Syndicate let the Gleeman brothers be the fall guys for this incident. It was ironic that Bennie Gleeman had been one of the founders of the Syndicate and had recruited his brother as a member but they turned against the Syndicate,

They would have three trials. One witness who worked for the Syndicate, George Hurley, named Sammy Taran as one of the Syndicate's customers. Hurley said that most of the liquor was transferred from Syndicate trucks to customers' automobiles on street corners, often in daylight.

On December 17, 1925, Morris Goldberg, also affiliated with the Syndicate, had 250 gallons of alcohol (worth \$3,500) stolen from him at gun point by hijackers. Goldberg blamed the police for the robbery. Taran apparently had a business relationship with Goldberg. He found out where a thug named Harry "Hop" Carlin lived, accused him of the theft and hit him with the butt of a gun.

That Christmas Eve Carlin and another thug named William "Billy" Alexander paid a visit to Taran's apartment on St. Peter Street with the intention of killing him. Both assailants had pistols and, even though Taran was shot close to the heart, he still managed to get the guns away from his attackers and beat them up. Carlin ran away. Taran threw Alexander down a steep staircase. The police arrived to find him unconscious and Taran semi-conscious. Alexander was sent to Ancker hospital in serious condition with a skull fracture.

Taran, also hospitalized, was released from the hospital three days later. He appeared in court on December 30 to answer to a charge of assault with intent to kill. He was freed. The following week he appeared before a Ramsey County grand jury on charges of "producing grievous bodily harm" to Carlin. He was found not guilty.

At Carlin's trial later that January on charges of attacking Taran, the "Fighting Tailor" testified that he didn't remember who had attacked him and didn't recognize the two guns presented as evidence. Carlin testified Billy Alexander had shot Taran. However, Alexander, an Iron Range rum runner, was still hospitalized. Around midnight on January 21, 1926, and clad only in his slippers, pajamas, and robe, Alexander fled from the hospital in sub-zero temperatures. Police believed that it was a planned escape and that Alexander had friends in a waiting car.

A week later, Taran was back in jail

FORMER PUGILIST SHOT, SERIOUSLY WOUNDED IN APARTMENT ATTACK



SAM TERRIN.

This is Sam Terrin, former St. Paul pugilist, who was seriously wounded shortly before noon today when he was shot by one of two men who attacked him in his apartment at 558 St. Peter street.

News account of "Billy" Alexander's attack on Taran/Terrin and their argument over hijacking. From the newspaper collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

for assaulting Carlin. This time he wasn't able to find bondsmen. His parents offered to put up bail, but the judge declared that was unsatisfactory. Taran was again in court in February on charges of perjury in the assault case, but no deposition exists concerning the charges.

Taran's dealings at the Wynn Motors auto dealership, 706 University Avenue, finally led to his downfall. On February 16, 1927, he was indicted, along with Mark G. Wynn, for defrauding the Otas Finance Company in Minneapolis by forging automobile papers. Reportedly, Taran and Wynn had made a profit of

\$22,000 over a ten-day period. Wynn was convicted of forgery, but Taran chose to appeal his verdict on technical grounds. The case reached the Minnesota Supreme Court and until the court issued its ruling almost two years later, Taran remained out on bond.

As he awaited the court's ruling, Taran's arrests continued. Most notably, he served three days in jail on a charge of possessing a still, the result of a huge raid known as the Rose Hill distillery incident. At the time, Taran was running an operation on the border of St. Paul and Minneapolis. In September, 1927, a federal grand jury indicted Taran and several others. Bars were closed down by Prohibition agents and many people involved were fined.

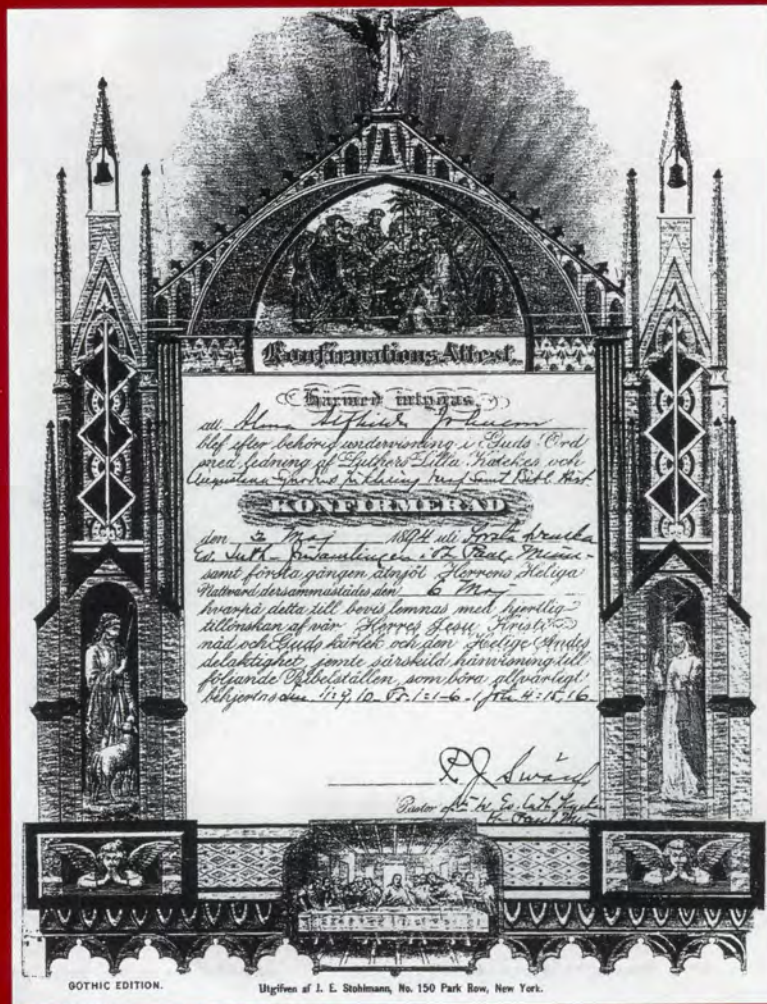
Meanwhile, the Supreme Court was reviewing Wynn's testimony that Taran had used his property and knowledge of auto financing as a basis for issuing fraudulent financial papers. He also maintained that Taran had him either under his direct supervision or under the watchful eye of one of his "henchmen," virtually making him a prisoner. One such "henchman" was James Barret who police said was responsible for a string of St. Paul murders, including those of his own wife and sister-in-law.

When the Supreme Court finally issued its ruling, it upheld the verdict handed down by the Hennepin County district court. Sam Taran was sentenced to a ten-year term in Stillwater prison.

The Epilogue

Whatever happened to Taran after he left prison? There are odd clues. One was a letter from the Immigration and Naturalization Service dated October 1, 1956, asking Ramsey County for Taran's case files relating to his auto thefts. Another was a Social Security Death Benefits record that listed a Sam Taran who lived in Minnesota but died in Florida in 1992.

Paul Gold is the author of "Untold Stories of the Old St. Francis Hotel" which appeared in the winter, 1997, issue of Ramsey County History.



Alma Johnson's certificate of confirmation from the First Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in St. Paul, May 3, 1894. See "Growing Up in St. Paul," page 17.

R.C.H.S.
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