

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

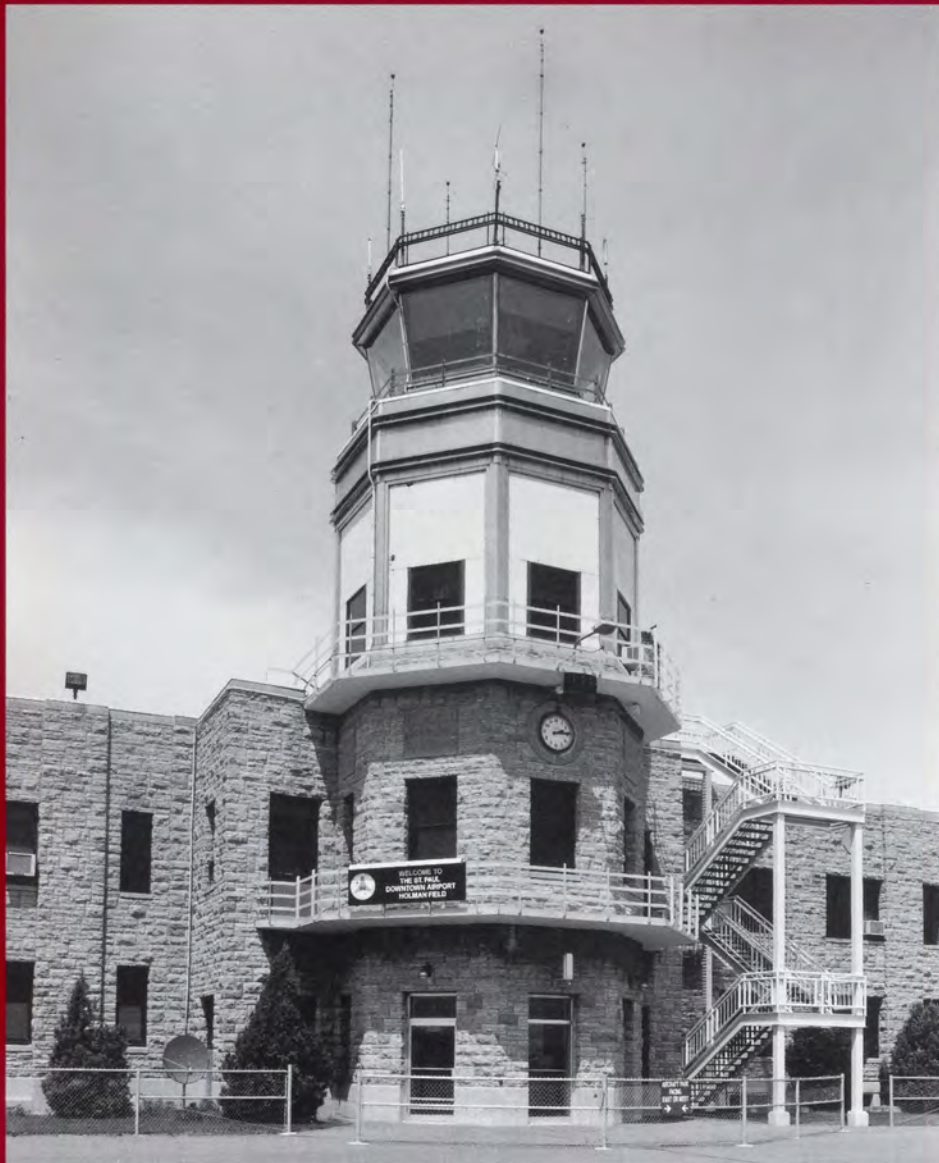
Architect to Kings:
Wigington and His Ice Palaces

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Three National Historic Sites
Clarence Wigington's Architectural Heritage
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The Holman Field Administration Building designed by Clarence W. Wigington in 1939 and built with resources provided by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This is one of the three Wigington buildings that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Photograph by Don Wong, Don F. Wong Photography, Bloomington, Minnesota.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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Winter, 2000

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Message from Editorial Board

The Editorial Board of *Ramsey County History* is delighted to publish in this issue two fine articles on St. Paul's Clarence W. Wigington, who is believed to have been the first African-American municipal architect in the United States. Dr. David Taylor, dean of the General College at the University of Minnesota, is currently working on a biography of Wigington. His article gives us a sense of Wigington as an architect and as a pioneering civil servant at a time in this country when African-Americans faced many obstacles and handicaps to achieving professional careers. Wigington not only rose to a leadership position within the city's Office of Parks, Playgrounds, and Public Buildings, he also was a leader in the local African-American community throughout his working career.

Expanding upon David Taylor's discussion of Clarence Wigington's accomplishments as an architect of many St. Paul buildings, Bob Olsen, the author of our second piece on Wigington, examines the architect's work as a designer of St. Paul Winter Carnival Ice Palaces between 1926 and 1942. Both articles feature photographs of buildings Wigington designed. Olsen's article includes photos drawn from the author's own collection of Ice Palace memorabilia.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

First a Tiny Stucco Starter Home; Then a New Post-War Suburb Beckoned

Joanne Englund

Many changes slide by hardly noticed year by year. It's hard to comprehend the magnitude of life's changes, especially for those who stay in a seemingly familiar and stable location.

Wilson was a St. Paul high school of about 900 students in 1948 when I graduated. I lived three blocks south on Edmund Avenue and could easily walk to school. For me, it always had been there. It opened originally in the fall of 1925 as a junior high and was changed back to a high school in 1938, to a junior high in 1940, then a high school again, and back to a junior high in 1964. In 1975, it was touted to be a new-style open school. In the late 1970s the building was considered outdated and readied for demolition. Residents appealed and it was opened again, operating as Benjamin Mays Fundamental School from 1981-1991. Now it is occupied by Expo for Excellence Middle School. Over seventy-five years, many changes have taken place in educational philosophies and the building's interior, all at the same location and in the same building.

While a student at Wilson, I went with my parents to help at a camp for troubled city youth held at Indian Point Lodge on Big Sandy Lake in northern Minnesota. I met my former husband, Will Englund, at camp while he was working as an aide. That fall he left Johnson High School to enlist in the army and was sent to join the occupation troops in Japan. In between classes and homework assignments, I wrote letters and waited for letters in return. He was discharged during my senior year and we married the following spring after I graduated. Many lives were affected by World War II during my high school years. My high school annuals are

filled with photos of students and teachers who switched to uniform and military duty. The war was a major influence in our school experiences and our futures.

By 1952 Will and I had saved enough from our joint annual earnings of \$5,000, along with a loan from my parents, to purchase our first house, a tiny two bedroom stucco starter, at Nebraska and Payne avenues on St. Paul's East Side. Soon though, it was too small for our family, now including newly arrived Lynn, our first daughter, and Mud, our furry black dog of unknown breed. Within three years, our second daughter, Gayle, announced her coming arrival, and we began hunting for larger quarters.

New Houses Everywhere

We wanted a new house near St. Paul, but in 1956 little new housing construction was available within the city or even the first-ring suburbs. The outer suburbs were sprouting with new houses and quickly becoming heavily populated. The *St Paul Pioneer Press* reported in September, 1950, that Roseville had grown from 4,777 residents in the 1940 census to 11,355 in 1950. At that time, people were moving in at a rate of fifty-five per month; the flow was not stopping. We eventually paid a contractor to build a three-bedroom rambler near the southern border of Shoreview, just beyond Roseville. Gayle was already six months old that October when we actually moved in.

We began the task of making this new stucco-coated wooden box into a home. The treeless yard, part of a former cornfield and still filled with muddy clay clods, was smoothed and covered, roll by roll, with sod brought in by flatbed truck. As pheasants hid in the weedy empty



Joanne and Will Englund, just married, April 22, 1949. Photographs with this article are from the author.

lots, we planted, watered, and nurtured trees, shrubs, flowers, and vegetables. Our rural mailbox was mounted in a cluster of boxes on the other side of the unsurfaced street. On rainy and thawing days, we needed heavy-duty boots to walk the wooden planks over the moat-like edges and slosh through the water-filled clay ruts to recover the mail. In the spring, a network of cyclone fences, installed to slow down children and dogs long enough to count heads and ensure safety, set up new shoots each weekend.

Even though the interior of our house was nicely finished with oak trim and floors and real plaster walls, it needed similar attention. Window coverings, closet shelves, toy boxes, towel bars, tool benches, laundry facilities, basement playroom all competed with building a garage, installing a driveway, and, the most crying of needs, acquiring a swing

set and plastic wading pool. Time disappeared faster than homemade cookies and Koolaid when dozens of children swarmed to the side door.

The closest public transportation was over a mile away and buses were infrequent. For the most part, each family had only one car and dad usually drove it off to work early each morning. For the rest of the day, moms, kids, and pets worked and played together. On our block, the women migrated mid-morning toward one home for coffee while the children, clustering themselves more or less by age, played "in and out of the house" until ordered to stay on one side of the door or the other. If you weren't out of your house by 9:30 a.m., it was likely that you would soon have drop-in company for the morning. A lot of mending, knitting, crocheting, embroidering, cooking tips, hair cuts, home permanents, and recipe swapping was accomplished during this daily episode.

Looking at the isolation of many of today's young working families, I know we were fortunate to have the handy, always available, free counseling and support system that our captive environment provided, maybe demanded. Everyone cared about the children.

We learned parenting and partnering skills from the experiences of each other. Lessons in group dynamics were delivered daily. We let go of frustrations and anger through light cajoling and humor. Someone else's issues usually seemed bigger than our own and, if not, group support was provided until our stresses subsided. We were quite alike in many ways—age, heritage, economics, children, husbands, education, location—and this encouraged familiarity and trust to develop quickly.

In the early years, almost all errands and shopping were done in the evening and on weekends when the lone car was available and one parent could stay home with the kids. In 1954, the Ramsey County Library moved into the empty Rosetown Hall at Hamline Avenue and County Road B, a tiny, red-brick square with squeaky wooden floors and a half-dozen impressive concrete steps lined with metal-pipe railings that led to the single, center-front door. Its small inven-



The author with Lynn, Gayle, and Karen.

tory became our doorway to a welcome supply of children's and adult books.

Neighbors Pitch In

Evenings and weekends were filled, too, with outdoor projects. Neighbors pitched in to help each other with sod and cement, garage studs and shingles, mufflers and mowers—anything that required a temporary extra hand. Cooperative projects often ended with cooperative meals—pot luck dinners or picnics that provided informal social time and friendly relaxation before nightfall. For our family's special treat on a hot summer night, we packed the five of us into the station wagon along with popcorn, Koolaid, a wet wash cloth, a few stuffed toys, and blankets and headed for the Rose Drive-In to watch the latest hit movie. The June, 1958, feature was "Bridge on the River Kwai."

The Hamline Shopping Center, a half dozen stores on Hamline Avenue near County Road C-2, offered our closest strip mall. It was about two miles away and boasted Super-America gas, Country Club groceries and meats, and an assortment of small shops, including fabrics and sewing supplies, pharmacy and novelties, and a Chinese take-out. If I planned well, I could load Gayle and her younger sister, Karen, on the stroller,

take Lynn's hand and walk there and back to pick up a few sewing and food supplies before lunch and naps. The biggest difficulty was walking the roadway as it cut through the swamp where the redwing blackbirds defended their territory. They would call threateningly as we neared and swoop low over our heads as we passed through. It was easy to panic, imagining the pain of getting pecked on the head.

The Roseville Shopping Center opened on Lexington and Larpenteur in 1958. HarMar Mall included forty stores when it opened in 1963 on fifty acres of land at County Road B and Snelling, and Rosedale emerged with glorious fanfare in 1969 at the opposite corner of the same intersection.

Numerous appeals were made for a bus route closer than the single Rice-Edgerton line that ran to HarMar along Rice Street and County Road C. The North Star bus line ran along Lexington Avenue, but its two buses were declared a road hazard in 1962 and the line was closed. It was followed by the Lorenz Bus Service, which still operates between the northern suburbs and St. Paul. With a bus nearby, I could take the girls and stroller a short two and a half blocks and flag one of the hourly busses. This was possible but not convenient. The bus dri-

ver was not at all patient as I herded the small girls up the mountain-sized steps and stuffed a stroller past the folding doors and into the aisle for the half-hour ride to downtown St. Paul. We made it, but we didn't do it often. By the fall of 1960 we had purchased a 1953 Ford and became a two-car-family.

A major influence in buying our home was its prime location in the Roseville school system, just a few blocks from the site of a very-soon-to-be-built elementary school. Lynn began kindergarten in 1958, but the Emmet Williams School did not open until 1964. Meanwhile, all three girls were shuttled to various schools for their early elementary years—Lake Owasso, North Heights, wherever the district happened to have space. Kellogg High School opened in 1963, and these little tykes, from kindergarten through sixth grade, rode the bus and walked the new halls with 350 tenth graders.

Everything had to be developed from scratch. The only way to have your children in Scouts or 4-H was to volunteer to be the leader or assistant. New churches springing up needed volunteers for every role. PTAs formed in partnership with the new-school openings. Political caucuses grew from a few remaining farmers to hundreds of new voters. Each aspect of the community's social structure was built by those people who had replaced the corn.

The Voice of Change

Those early years were too busy for us to be aware of how our family's wants and decisions—multiplied by thousands of others—would have an impact on the metropolitan area's social structure long into the future. HUD assistance and GI loans enabled many returning veterans to buy new housing in the suburbs. Many black families in St. Paul had the same wants and experiences as we did, except when a black family chose to buy in the suburbs, there usually was some subtle reason why it wouldn't work for them, and their options ultimately became limited to the then empty older homes in the city.

Karen was almost kindergarten age before I had time to look beyond the washing machine and food chain and no-

tice our suburb's bland, white, sameness with none of the rich variety of ages, economics, cultures, colors and choices with which I grew up. And even worse, given the general attitudes of the people to whom I talked, it was not about to change by itself. These attitudes had been created by the economics and fears of contractors, and now they were held staunchly in place by the habits, stereotypes and fears of the residents. It seemed the status-quo was here to stay.

In the 1960s, the voice of change was permeating the air, even in Shoreview. I joined the newly chartered League of Women Voters in 1961. The North Suburban Council for Civil Rights was formed in 1964, followed by the Shoreview Human Rights Commission. I was a member. In 1968, a group of suburban residents organized COME—Churches on the Move for Equality. Our block had members from a number of different denominations; I represented the Unitarians. My neighbor, Connie, and I (now with the luxury of a reliable second car) volunteered a day a week at the school and Head Start Center at St. Peter Claver Catholic Church in the inner city, our own children sometimes tagging along.

Something was missing in our suburb—the richness of a multi-racial/economic community—and we, a small group of residents, were about to enrich it. I don't know what the effect was on the community (I remember an inner-city sage saying, "for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction," and that seemed to be the dynamic we set in motion). I know it made a difference for me.

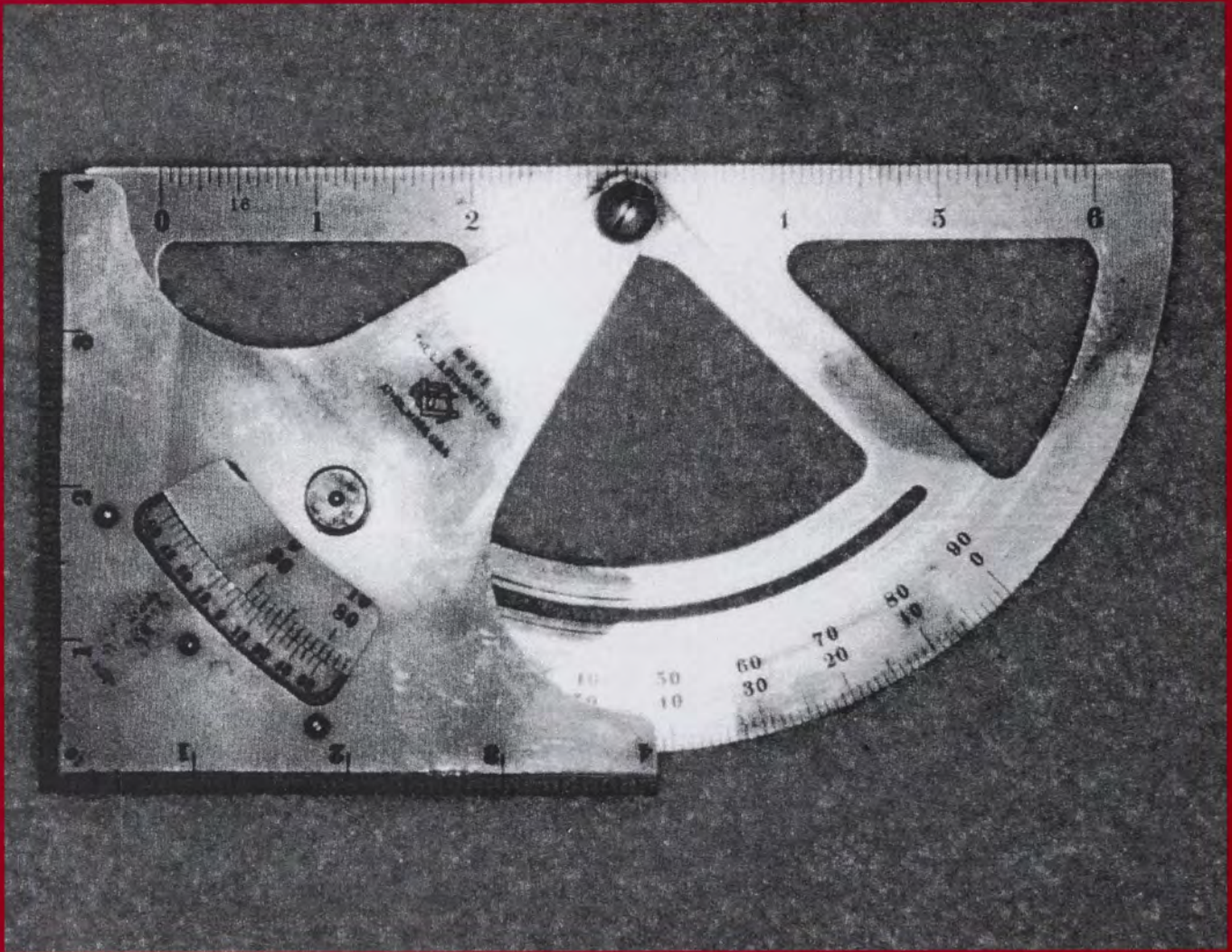
In 1977, I moved back into the diversity of St. Paul and have lived there ever since. My life has been enriched by all the experiences I gained during my suburban years and by my move back to the city. I'm within four miles of my original high school and home, yet it is not the same place at all. But neither is anywhere else.

The streetcars and corner stores are gone. The pedestrian has been replaced by the car. The downtown is empty of the hubbub and hustle from the tight row of dime and department stores along Seventh Street—W.T. Grant, Bannons, Kresge's, Woolworth's, The Golden Rule, and others. We teenagers would stroll past the window displays, be enticed through the glass doors, two sets to a store, and wind in one door and out the other. Here we spent our limited funds on makeup, jewelry, clothes, phonograph records, and other "essentials," keeping just one dime for streetcar fare home. Their smelly perfumes and food counters, bins filled with trinkets, and rows of swivel stools are gone, replaced by the sophisticated suburban malls. Fifty years creates a different world, a different milieu in the same place; neither can be shared in its entirety, no matter how detailed the telling.

Joanne Englund is a lifelong resident of St. Paul, a past president of the Ramsey County Historical Society, and a consultant for non-profit and government agencies. Her memories of growing up in St. Paul's Midway district were published in the fall, 1994, issue of Ramsey County History.



Typically suburban in 1961—a backyard skating rink.



An architectural drafting instrument owned and used by Clarence W. Wigington, the first licensed African-American architect registered in the State of Minnesota. See the article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.

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