

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

James J. Hill and
His Oriental Rugs:
A Practical Millionaire

Page 15

Winter, 2001

Volume 35, Number 4

Attacked by a Starving Wolf
Four Sisters of St. Joseph and Their Mission to St. Paul
—Page 4

U.S.P.R.R. EXP & SURVEYS - 47 & 49 PARALLELS.

GENERAL REPORT — PLATE I.



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J. Bien N.Y. lith.

SAINT PAUL M. T.

St. Paul as it looked in 1853, two years after four Sisters of St. Joseph arrived in St. Paul. This colored lithograph was produced as part of a United States government survey of Minnesota Territory. Ramsey County Historical Society collections.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Our Winter issue presents three diverse articles ranging in time from Minnesota's Territorial period to the turn-of-the-century and on to the 1930s. In our lead article, Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson recounts the story of how four Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet came to St. Paul in 1851 and began their missionary work at this lonely outpost high on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi. Through her access to the details found in the records of the Order and other sources, Sister Ann provides a compelling portrait of these four female pioneers, their religious loyalty and faith, and their persistence in the face of great hardships. This is the story of the enduring influence of these devoted missionaries on St. Paul in its earliest years.

From the poverty and hardships of the four Sisters of St. Joseph, the issue moves on to the opulence and splendor of the mansion that James J. Hill built on Summit Avenue between 1887 and 1891. Writer and historian Lou Ann Matossian focuses on the Oriental rugs that Hill purchased to furnish his splendid home. By examining the available records, Matossian shows that Hill, who could easily have afforded Oriental rugs of any cost, bought many medium-quality rugs that impressed visitors but showed that Hill was what she calls "the practical millionaire." The James J. Hill that emerges from her research is a man who spent only what he needed to on his rugs and avoided any that might have qualified as works of art.

In our third article, John Larson's "Growing Up in St. Paul" tells how he and his family dealt with the serious eye ailment he had in the 1920s and '30s. He also recalls with detail and good humor his experiences as a member of the Vision Class at Webster School. Within the St. Paul Public Schools of that time, the Vision Class consisted of all the students at a particular school who were blind or had other serious vision problems. Although Larson tells his story matter-of-factly, his account is an understated tribute to the caring and well-qualified teachers who helped him (and by inference other students) succeed in their studies in spite of their medical problems.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Books, Etc.

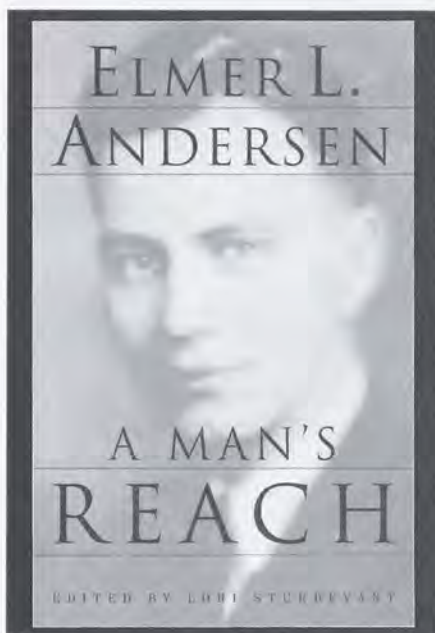
A Man's Reach

Elmer L. Andersen
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
Press
434 pages, index, \$32.05 (cloth)
Reviewed by Charlton Dietz

A *Man's Reach* is more than an autobiography of Elmer L. Andersen. It is an American primer on how a boy can rise from humble circumstances to become a successful businessman and a revered public servant. The book title comes from the Robert Browning line, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's heaven for." Indeed, this is the story of a man who has stretched his reach long and wide.

Elmer L. Andersen, with editor Lori Sturdevant, has produced an exceptional volume which illuminates the philosophy and deeds of the man who was salesman, industrialist, legislator, governor, farmer, publisher, collector, and philanthropist. It is about a man who believes that nothing done to advance a good cause can ever be counted as a loss, no matter the outcome; if a goal has merit, an effort to pursue it is worthwhile, if only to show those who come later how not to proceed. Equally important, it gives an insider's view of significant historical events. It is crisply written in the first person and in a style that makes the author real to the reader.

This autobiography contains intimate revelations. Elmer (the text refers to him as "Elmer") tells us about his early family life, how his parents separated, his early bout with polio, his quest for education, his acquisition and control and management of the H. B. Fuller Company, his experiences in politics and travails as governor, his service as a University of Minnesota regent, love of



"... a book on love, public service, responsibility, accountability, ethical values and optimism for the future."

music and books and marriage to Eleanor Anne Johnson.

The book is organized into four parts: (1) The Early Years, (2) Taking Charge, (3) Governor, and (4) Citizen Andersen. These parts are subdivided into some thirty-seven topics, which makes it easy for the reader to identify with the subject matter.

"The Early Years" covers growing up in Muskegon, Michigan, in a family consisting of his mother, two aunts, two older brothers, and a younger sister. It is a Horatio Alger story of hard work, excellence in school, religious upbringing, and overcoming adversity. His mother died when Elmer was fifteen. He expresses his feelings: "Somehow, I accepted everything that came our way, without anger or depression. It was something that happened that I had to

accept. I did not dwell on problems. Somehow, I believed there would always be solutions." This optimism permeates his autobiography.

He writes with tenderness and intimacy about his marriage. "Eleanor and I developed a way of relating to each other that has suited us well for nearly seventy years. We do not talk about everything. There ought to be a certain mystique about love and marriage. Talking about everything in great detail diminishes mystery. Not all of life, of art, of music, of anything should be thrown out on the table and torn apart and dismembered. It is too precious. You sense music. You sense art. Some parts of life are better just experienced."

Part II, "Taking Charge," recounts how Elmer, as a thirty-two-year-old salesman, became president of the H. B. Fuller Company and embarked upon a business career that made Fuller an internationally recognized industrial enterprise and brought him control of the company. When Fuller was going public in 1968, Elmer spoke with pride to a group of potential investors; one of them spoke up: "That's enough! You have so many [employee] benefits people won't want to buy your stock. They'll want a job."

The material on his tenure in the Minnesota senate will enthrall students of Minnesota politics. He writes of his legislative priorities in education, mental health, welfare, and parks. He describes in fascinating detail his experiences in practicing the art of politics, the horse-trading, the strategy, personal relationships, the patience and compromise that it takes to advance a legislative agenda. Along the way, he became a maverick conservative (there was no party designation at that time), a status that caused him to end his legislative career. "I felt restive," he said, "being

regarded as a leading member of the majority group while disagreeing with them so often."

But this respite from political office was not to last, for in Part III, "Governor," Elmer takes us through his first two-year term as governor, into the 1962 re-election campaign, and through the recount of 1963, which lasted four months until Karl Rolvaag was declared governor by ninety-one votes. Understandably, he extensively examines the charges of faulty highway construction on I-35. It was one of the rare times he lost his cool. At the highway dedication ceremony, he addressed the crowd: "I deeply resent the cheap, dirty politicians who, to get a few votes, have besmirched Minnesota's good name. . . . The reason Congressman Blatnik is not here is because he knows I would be shaking my finger high in his face and asking questions he does not want to answer." Elmer admits that it was the wrong approach. He was too defensive. Later, Elmer showed his usual gentleness in commenting on the victor, Karl Rolvaag: "I had known Karl since my state senate days, and had always appreciated him as a thoughtful, decent, well-meaning human being."

Part IV, "Citizen Andersen," is a series of vignettes about projects and causes that have occupied Elmer's time and attention. He writes with passion about his service on the University's board of regents. "Making university governance as strong as it can be is well worth whatever effort and sacrifice it takes, because no institution is more important to Minnesota's future than the University of Minnesota."

With the purchase of the newspapers that formed ECM Publishers, Elmer embarked on a career that gave him "more personal satisfaction . . . than in almost anything else I have done." With the Minnesota Historical Society, where he served four years as president, he recounts with nostalgia his many endeavors to enhance the preservation of the state's history. The Ramsey County Historical Society receives mention, on page 343, in the effort to preserve the Gibbs farm. Other vignettes include Voyageurs Park, Charles A. Lindberg, the University of

Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, and Sugarloaf.

This book is rich with personal anecdotes about familiar events. He identifies individuals with every event and gives his personal views on the situation. With only two or three exceptions, Elmer's personal assessments are genuinely positive. One exception is Richard Nixon. In 1960 Elmer was seated next to Nixon at a campaign affair when Nixon commanded the attention of the group, except for his wife, Pat, who had not caught her husband's signal. Elmer writes, "Rather sharply he [Nixon] said, 'Pat!' The way he called her to attention bothered me. . . . I thought, I am not going to like this man—and I never did." Of Hubert Humphrey, Elmer states that later encounters with Hubert were "friendly," but "I, of course, had reason not to like him very much. He was the architect of my [1962] defeat." The text contains additional assessments of Humphrey.

From cover to cover, the narration is laced with names familiar to those who know Minnesota politics and history—Youngdahl, Stassen, Burger, Rosenmeier, Cowles, Dunn, Donovan, Devitt, Durenberger, Dayton, Whitney, Hasselmo, Grunseith, Freeman, Heller, Johnson, Lindberg, Mondale, Mooty, Naftalin, Pillsbury, Pease, Popovich, Sheran, Thye, Wright, McCarthy, Gainey, Fraser, Levander, Kunz, Quie, etc.

He reveals publicly some facts for the first time, such as how, at the urging of Chief Justice Oscar Knutson, he facilitated the retirement of ailing Justice Frank Gallagher from the state Supreme Court by suggesting his replacement in the person of Robert Sheran. Historic events take on new meaning with Elmer's first person commentary: the appointment of Edward Devitt to the federal bench; his friendship with Nelson Rockefeller and participation in the 1964 convention that nominated Goldwater; the resignation of University of Minnesota president Malcolm Moos and the subsequent appointment of Peter Magrath and later Ken Keller; how he manipulated the 1957 passage of the daylight savings bill; how he accommodated the eccentricities of Charles Lindberg to gain a personal friend and ally in the establishment of

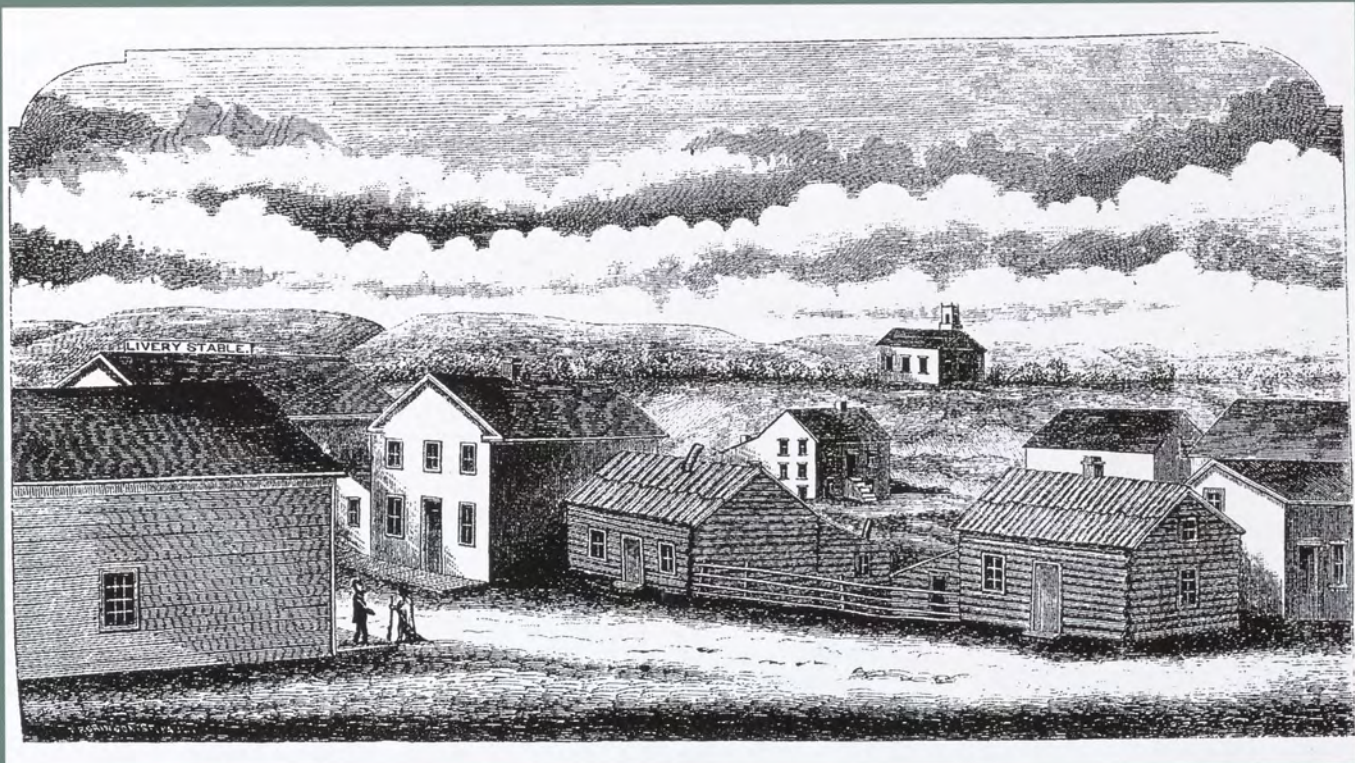
Voyageurs National Park; how he convinced Arne Carlson to change his party affiliation to become a Republican; his summons to Washington during the Cuban missile crisis. And there is so much more.

There is a strong family vein that runs throughout the book. Elmer refers often and with reverence to his mother, and deference to his brothers, Arnold, Marvin, and sister Caroline. Wife Eleanor's parents, Gustav and Elizabeth Johnson, are an integral part of the family in the early years when Elmer was building the Fuller company. The Johnsons' farm on Deer Lake in Wisconsin became the family retreat and site of many family activities, including Elmer's serious dairy farming. Elmer writes with parental pride of son Tony's rise to take the reins as CEO of Fuller. One senses the satisfaction, perhaps relief, when he writes of son Julian's return from academia to manage the family ECM publishing complex. And there is parental pride when daughter Emily takes up the mantra of the Sugarloaf Interpretive Center on Lake Superior.

Of course, *A Man's Reach* will appeal to the historian. It is also a textbook for the political scientist. Perhaps more important, it is a book on love, public service, responsibility, accountability, ethical values, and optimism for the future.

Today Elmer contends with the infirmities of age, failing eye sight and physical debilitation from post-polio syndrome, yet he writes in his epilogue with clarity and insight on current political and social issues. He continues to exude optimism, and concludes: "I foresee a wonderful century. It is certain to be marred by individual failures and terrible examples of inhumanity. But I am confident that the century will bring glorious examples of triumph of the human spirit. . . . If we aim to release and encourage the creative powers of the people, great things are possible. I hope I will be around to see some of them." This is the man's reach.

Charlton Dietz is the retired general counsel for 3M, a former member of the board of directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society, and frequent reviewer for this publication.



A sketch based on one of the oldest photographs of pioneer St. Paul as it looked in 1851 when the Sisters of St. Joseph arrived there. The log house on the right stands at Third and Robert Streets. Minnesota Historical Society collections. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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