

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.



Stanley del.

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.

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

*Executive Director*  
Priscilla Farnham  
*Editor*  
Virginia Brainard Kunz

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Howard M. Guthmann  
*Chair*

James Russell  
*President*

Marlene Marschall  
*First Vice President*

Ronald J. Zweber  
*Second Vice President*

Richard A. Wilhoit  
*Secretary*

Peter K. Butler  
*Treasurer*

W. Andrew Boss, Peter K. Butler, Norbert Conzemius, Anne Cowie, Charlotte H. Drake, Joanne A. Englund, Robert F. Garland, John M. Harens, Rod Hill, Judith Frost Lewis, John M. Lindley, George A. Mairs, Marlene Marschall, Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Richard Nicholson, Linda Owen, Marvin J. Pertzik, Glenn Wiessner, Laurie Zenner.

### EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chair; James B. Bell, Thomas H. Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Pat Hart, Thomas J. Kelley, Tom Mega, Laurie Murphy, Vicenta Scarlett, G. Richard Slade.

### HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

Elmer L. Andersen, Olivia I. Dodge, Charlton Dietz, William Finney, William Fallon, Otis Godfrey, Jr., Robert S. Hess, D. W. "Don" Larson, George Latimer, Joseph S. Micallef, Robert Mirick, Marvin J. Pertzik, J. Jerome Plunkett, James Reagan, Rosalie E. Wahl, Donald D. Wozniak.

### RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Rafael Ortega, chairman  
Commissioner Susan Haigh  
Commissioner Tony Bennett  
Commissioner James McDonough  
Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt  
Commissioner Janice Rettman  
Commissioner Jan Wiessner

Paul Kirkwold, manager, Ramsey County

*Ramsey County History* is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 2001, Ramsey County Historical Society, ISSN Number 0485-9758. **All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher.** The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Fax 651-223-8539; e-mail address admin@rchs.com.; web site address www.rchs.com

# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 35, Number 4

Winter, 2001

## CONTENTS

- 3** Letters
- 4** Attacked by a Starving Wolf  
Four Sisters of St. Joseph and Their Mission to St. Paul  
*Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson, CSJ*
- 15** The Practical Millionaire:  
James J. Hill and His Oriental Rugs  
*Lou Ann Matossian*
- 19** Growing Up in St. Paul  
A Child With an 'Eye Problem' and Those  
Vision Classes in the St. Paul Schools  
*John Larson*
- 26** Book Reviews

Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

## 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*

---

## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

### A Child With An 'Eye Problem' and Memories of the Vision Classes in the St. Paul Schools

*John Larson*

I began kindergarten in the old Longfellow School on Prior Avenue in September, 1928. All I recall from my kindergarten year is that every day at a certain time each child was given a cardboard mat on which he or she was expected to lie down and nap. Napping with a bunch of kids I didn't know seemed odd to me, a new experience for an only child. I had rarely been together with other children.

My memory of myself before kindergarten, as "Johnnie boy," is even more fragmented and unreliable. I no longer know when the eye problem began, when I first found bright sunlight unbearable, when my eyelids were first swollen, or when I first woke in the morning and had trouble opening my eyes.

The family doctor believed I suffered from some kind of allergy and recommended a summer away from the city. My father would have come along when on a Sunday grandfather Larson drove his Model A Ford with mother and me to a farm near Maple Lake, west and north of the Twin Cities, a farm belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Maska, relatives of some family friends or other.

That summer Mother and I lived upstairs in the Maska farmhouse. I was three years old and remember very little, chiefly, that my mother was disturbed by the bats that sometimes invaded our bedroom. She was deathly afraid of bats. Otherwise, I now realize, she had an inner strength that pulled us both through that summer and the several troubled years that followed. No less important, beneath a quiet surface she retained a sense of humor, expressed chiefly in a barely perceptible smile and a twinkle in her eyes, a Danish sense of humor, as I

now think of it, that lightened the load.

Mother and I stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Maska, who had no children, until late summer. The harvest began, the corn was stalked and the stalks became, my mother told me, "corn ladies." But when father and grandfather came one Sunday to pick us up, my eye problem had not improved, and perhaps was worse. The summer away from the city had not helped. In the city, while mother and I had been away, father had our furniture and things moved from an apartment on Dayton's Bluff to the Ingeman Building in Merriam Park. It was within walking distance from his work at Brown and Bigelow.

Now, eye specialists thought my symptoms resembled those of trachoma, a disease of the eye characterized by inflamed granulation of the inner surface of the lids, a disease that often led to blindness. They were uncertain about a cure. Antibiotic drugs were not yet available. One pair of specialists resorted to treatment with ultra violet rays. I vaguely remember being dressed in heavy rubber sheeting for this procedure. Treatment with ultra violet rays did not help.

No other children lived in the Ingeman Building, close to Prior, at 1930 St. Anthony Avenue. My father Walter, my mother Vivian, and my small self, lived

upstairs. A large bay window looked out on the street below and a bakery across the street. Mrs. Ingeman, an elderly Danish lady, lived by herself in an apartment to the rear of the building. Occasionally she looked after me. When I think of stillness, I think of the hours I spent with her, of an early winter evening in particular, with large flakes of snow gently falling past her window, while she quietly read to me from a children's book of Bible stories.

Our apartment was almost as quiet. There was no television, of course, nor did we have a radio. But at Christmas someone gave me a toy phonograph and a single record. I sat at a bench built into the wall next to the fireplace with its gas burning logs and played the record over and over again. On one side "O Susanna" ran down the hill with buckwheat cakes in her mouth. On the other, my favorite, was, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." It was coming for to carry me home.

Shortly after my fourth birthday in May of 1927, I began treatment at the University of Minnesota's Eye Clinic in Minneapolis. With my mother, I visited the clinic twice a week. There, we entered a small room where a friendly young doctor in a white coat and with a round mirror attached to his forehead bent close to my face and peered into my eyes with a sharp beam of light. Each day at home, as recommended by the doctor, my mother put drops into my eyes. Plop, plop, my eyes would smart and I would run to a closet and bury my head in the darkness of a clothes hamper. For some reason my memory of the clothes hamper, and the comforting odor of the family's

soiled clothing, remains particularly vivid. The drops, whatever they may have been, did not help.

University doctors did not give up. In the autumn of 1927 I was admitted to the University hospital. I was placed in an adult ward.

Under the benevolent eye of adult ward nurses and their patients, I enjoyed free run of the place. My parents, on coming to visit me one Sunday, had to search before finding me in the diet kitchen drinking prune juice under the sink while peering out between the white stockinged and sturdy legs of the ward nurse.

I did not understand why I was kept so long at the hospital. In my memory weeks ran into months. I was allowed to go home for Christmas, but was soon returned to the hospital routine. Explanations as to the course of events were funneled to me through my mother. I don't remember how she explained to me that I was to be put to sleep with ether and the inside of my eyelids scraped clean of the infection.

Sounded awful, but, although I grew to hate the smell of ether, I felt no pain, only a sense of snoozing. Perhaps worst was the enforced immobility, being kept in bed for days with bandaged eyes. The operation was repeated. I no longer know how many times. Released from the hospital, my case was taken over by oculist Dr. John F. Fulton who had been practicing in St. Paul since 1882. Mother and I made regular visits to his office in the Medical Arts Building. As I knew him, he was an elderly man with white hair and an uncommonly gentle manner.

When Dr. Fulton died late in 1931, my case was taken over by another St. Paul eye specialist. Gradually my condition improved. I was essentially cured. Still, the disease left its mark. The cornea of both eyes, the windows through which I view the world, were, are, somewhat scarred. It might have been worse and if I don't tell people that I see things differently, they need not know.

\* \* \*

On May 29, 1929, I celebrated my sixth



*John Larson at about the age of four with his mother. All photos with this article are from the author.*

birthday. My mother sent out invitations to the event, five or six of them. "If you are free," they read, "will you come along to tea at 2:30?" Tea! But who might come? There was my Swedish grandmother, my father's mother, who lived at the city's north end. She could come by streetcar. But my Danish grandmother, my Mother's mother, lived in Stillwater. That was too far away. Then there were two young girls, Gertrude and Genie, only a little older than I was, and who were daughters of friends of my parents. I didn't know anyone else close to my own age. In the coming months this

and much else would change and I would find new friends, friends who agreed to call me "Jack," more manly I thought, and more appropriate for a boy already six and going on seven.

Following my sixth birthday, three events radically changed my life. The first occurred early in June. An education advisor contacted my mother who agreed that when I returned to school in September, I would join vision classes taught at Webster School, on St. Albans Street a few blocks south of Selby. Then, too, my father left Brown and Bigelow. He joined up with a man named "Mick," of Russian

origin, who had applied for a patent on a hollow drill for drilling holes in stacks of paper. Together they set up shop across from the Midway Hospital, at 1679 University Avenue, to manufacture the "Mick" paper-drilling machine. Of more immediate consequence and interest to me, we moved in late summer of 1929 into a large upstairs apartment in a Victorian house at 1917 Waltham Avenue. It was close to our old home on St. Anthony, but what a difference. Now, I was surrounded by kids galore.

The house on Waltham belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Snede. They were Norwegian. Mr. Snede was foreman of a crew that worked on the railroad tracks running along the other side of our street. They kept the tracks in good condition. Mrs. Snede kept house and spoke with a strong Norwegian accent. They had three sons. Arthur was a little older than I, John was my age, and Ken, was younger. When Arthur and I discussed the problem of two Johns in the same house, we agreed I would be called "Jack." This was fine with me and made things easier for Mrs. Snede. When she said Yahn we knew she was referring to her son, but when she said Yack we understood she had me in mind. Of course, at school, and within our family, I remained John. Jack was my neighborhood persona.

I never warmed up to the Snede boys. Arthur never missed an opportunity to remind me that I lived in their house and that their father was our landlord. Mrs. Snede told my mother that when Arthur was grown he would probably become a bank teller. My mother was not impressed. No such status considerations interfered with my getting along with the Shock kids who lived next door. Their father was an unemployed barber. They too lived in an old house, but one in poor repair. They still had gas lighting. I understood this to be unusual and thought it keen. Chuck Shock, about my age, eventually became my best neighborhood friend.

Just down the hill from us lived the Green family. There were twelve Green kids and they all had red hair. I never learned what their father did nor even if he was in residence. But theirs was an



*Portrait of a four-year-old with a mysterious "eye problem."*

open and hospitable house. I experienced my first Halloween party with the Green kids. We dressed up crazy and bobbed for apples. Mother and I walked past the Green house when we went anywhere. The boys noted that my mother was thin and one told me in confidence that she should stuff her legs with sawdust. I thought she might be angry when I told her, but she was only amused.

\* \* \*

In September 1929, on my first day at Webster School, my first grade teacher gave me two streetcar tokens. I kept them on a safety pin fastened to my jacket. I understood that one token was for my ride home the other for my ride back to school the next day. Considered too small to make the trips on my own, the school arranged for a guide. I enjoyed riding the streetcar but was embarrassed to be seen with the girl guide. She helped me transfer at Marshall Avenue from the Prior streetcar to the Selby Lake car and she saw that I got off at St. Albans. I sat far away from her at the back of the car. Before long I was able to make the trip on my own.

I remember practically nothing about my first grade "vision" classes. What I do remember is that I sometimes found myself in classes with normal kids. Thinking

back, I wonder if this was a deliberate policy, or the result of a shortage of teachers for children with sight difficulties ranging from totally blind to near normal. What I do know is that after first grade and through seventh grade, we sight-impaired students remained together and were taught together, and we became an odd kind of family.

\* \* \*

First Grade was over, it was summer, and I was seven. Chuck Shock told me about a swimming hole at a secret spot in the broad expanse of nearby Minnesota Transfer. Neighborhood boys horsed around there on hot summer days. Enthused, I told my mother about the swimming hole. She didn't forbid my going there but asked my father if it was wise for me to do so. Father was younger then. He had red hair like the Green kids and nearly as much energy. He made a big thing of our going to search for the swimming hole. He wore his worn leather jacket, and even brought his pipe and tobacco, all things reserved for major outdoor expeditions.

We made our way across uninhabited open space and the railroad tracks of the Minnesota Transfer until we found the swimming hole. Perhaps it reminded father of his own swimming hole days. He said the pond was safe for boys to play in. It was created by an artesian well, was shallow, and not polluted. He did not say so directly, but on this and other occasions, he gave the impression that he believed a boy needed maximum freedom, that lack of freedom could stunt a boy's growth.

Chuck also told me about wonders west of the swimming hole. There the Waldorf Paper Company would give you pocket money in return for bundles of old newspapers. Still farther away, and even more magnificent in the imagination, was the Rainbow Pie Company. There one could get small pies for nothing, or nearly so. Although I did a good deal of exploring on my own, I never got as far away as the paper or the pie company. My favorite place was closer to home, a blacksmith shop near Prior and University.

I often watched while the blacksmith pumped a large bellows to force air into a charcoal fire in which pieces of dead black iron were turned cherry red. He pounded them then, on an anvil, into whatever shapes he needed, most frequently horseshoes. I often found him standing with his back to a horse, holding the horse's foreleg while he filed and nailed a horseshoe into place. The blacksmith became an important part of the little world I explored in the summer of 1930. It was a small world compared to the universe of vicarious experiences now available to children through television, but it was real, with real people doing real things, like shoeing horses.

\* \* \*

In September 1930, wearing the school boy outfit of the day, knickerbockers called "knickers", and knee high leather boots, I resumed my daily streetcar rides to Webster school and began my second year of vision classes. For the most part, the curriculum ran parallel to classes for non-handicapped pupils. It was not so much the content of our education as the tools used to get the content across that differed from the normal.

Memory alone is inadequate to reconstruct my progress through the various grades. Still, certain features were constant. Those of us who could see were taught to read with books printed in wonderfully large letters. I've forgotten the texts but remember two volumes that were adaptations for children of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and a volume I particularly liked, *The Red Pony*. We wrote in large letters on special non-glare buff colored paper with lines one inch apart using a number two Dixon pencil, or with special pens that produced particularly bold, black lines.

The blind children learned to read and write Braille, a system of writing employing sixty-three characters, each created out of one to six embossed dots aligned in a matrix of six positions. The blind read Braille by passing their fingers over a line of these raised dots. They learned to write it using a machine comparable to a typewriter. Entire books and



*The summer at the farm. John, three at the time, shielding his eyes from the sunlight as his mother stands by.*

other Braille materials were made available to them. I was with the blind kids in class and on the playground throughout grade school, but how they read and wrote Braille remained a mystery to me, a mystery that gave them a special status and a world of their own.

Although my memory is an unreliable guide to these early years, my mother saved my grade school report cards. Only a mother would have done so. They are not remarkable but they do reveal otherwise irretrievable information. How else could I learn that in September 1930 I was 50 inches tall and weighed 60

pounds, or that I was neither late nor tardy during the first semester. There are grades for arithmetic, English, handwriting, literature, music, physical education, reading, social studies, and spelling. During my first semester in second grade, I accumulated mostly Cs, a few Ds, and an E in music, of all things.

I can explain the E in music. Nelly Mettling, our second grade teacher, encouraged us to purchase mouth organs in the expectation that we would learn to play the instruments. I seemed temperamentally unable to do so and gave up trying. My only classmate and friend

Hymie, who had one glass eye, did very well with the mouth organ, an accomplishment I admired but did not envy.

Hymie tells me that Miss Mettling was pretty. He is probably right. She appears to have been a competent teacher but for reasons I no longer understand, she disapproved of me, and I didn't like her. I hear her across some seventy busy years as she bends low to meet my face and in an angry whisper asks, "Are you listening to what I say? Do you understand?", and I respond now as then with confusion and suppressed fury. At first Miss Mettling did no more than give me poor grades. Then, as Hymie and I began our second semester in February 1931, her irritation with me reached crisis proportions. She had the advantage, of course, and made sure that my parents learned of the gravity of my deficiencies.

The four-page evaluations we called "report cards" had inner pages reserved for teacher comments on a pupil's progress in the "growth of habits desirable for good citizenship." In effect, Miss Mettling used these pages to tell my parents that I did not use time to good advantage, was not in the right place at the right time for work, did not respond promptly to directions, did not hand in work on time, did not listen when others talked, did not stand for fair play, did not work well with a group, and, to top it off, did not respect law and authority. What can I say?

Even though Miss Mettling and I did not get along, my marks improved. Then, in September of 1931, Miss Mettling moved Hymie and me into 3A without our ever having been in 3B. After skipping a grade, I settled down and Miss Mettling left me in peace. There were no more failing grades and she no longer criticized my behavior. As the smoke of our disagreements cleared, we learned that my strengths were reading, social studies, and arithmetic, my weakness spelling. And so my strengths and weaknesses remained after Hymie and I moved up to 4B and Ann Whitten became our teacher, and later as well when we were taught by Ruth Turnquist.

\* \* \*

## Public Schools

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

*Larson, John*

REPORT OF \_\_\_\_\_

FIRST SEMESTER—GRADE 3A SECOND SEMESTER—GRADE \_\_\_\_\_  
(A CLASS IS FIRST HALF OF GRADE) (A CLASS IS SECOND HALF OF GRADE)

Date 1931 Date Feb 8, 1932

School Webster Union School Webster Union

Teacher Miss Mettling Teacher Miss Mettling

### KEY TO MARKS

A means EXCELLENT      B means VERY GOOD      C means AVERAGE  
D means PASSING      E means FAILURE

	1ST SEMESTER			2ND SEMESTER		
	7 Wks	6 Wks	6 Wks	7 Wks	6 Wks	6 Wks
Attendance						
Half Days Present.....	44	60	70	60	58	60
Half Days Absent.....	16	0	0	0	2	0
Times Tardy.....				0	0	0
Subjects						
Arithmetic .....	D	B	B	B-	B	B
Art .....	C	C	C+	C	C	C
English .....	C	C	C	C	A	A
Handwriting .....	C	B	C	C	C	C
Literature .....	C	C	C	C	C	C
Music .....	D	C	C	C	C	C
Physical Education .....	D	C	C	C	C	C
Reading .....	B	B	A	A	A	A
Social Studies—Geog., Hist., Civ. ....	C	D-	C	B	B	C+
Spelling .....	E	C	B	B-	C+	B

Grade Next Semester 4B      Grade Next Semester 4A

Full Promotion—Placed In.....      Full Promotion—Placed In.....

Trial Promotion—Retained.....      Trial Promotion—Retained.....

A 1931–1932 report card from the St. Paul Public Schools. The author notes that at the age of eight, these grades were "more or less typical—poor in English, poor in spelling, always good in reading."

Beyond the small events that touched me personally, there were big events that touched everyone. The biggest event was the stock market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression. Although I heard about them from adults, I was fully engaged in first grade at Webster School. I experienced no special change in my life because of the Crash, and, at first, of the depression. My father still went to work every day at his shop on University Avenue.

My awareness of the depression grew with the years until 1933 when I became

ten and dimly realized that I was living at a time of momentous happenings. For this I thank Franklin D. Roosevelt, who became president in March. Almost immediately, he declared a five-day bank holiday and a week later he held his first "fireside chat." News of these events filtered down to me through overheard conversations between adults. I read only the comic pages in the newspaper and listened only to afternoon radio programs like "Jack Armstrong," "Little Orphan Annie" and "Buck Rogers." Still, Roosevelt, his fireside chats and

the depression, were always in the background as my school years played themselves out, and so it was for my entire generation.

\* \* \*

Curiously, for a ten year old, the only big event of 1933 that touched me personally was an amendment to the act of 1919 that prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages. The amendment was a cause of considerable adult excitement because it allowed for the sale of wine and beer if they contained no more than 3.2 percent of alcohol. The amendment was to take effect on April 7, 1933.

By chance we moved that day from our apartment in Midway to the North End of St. Paul where we expected to live in a little house next door to my grandparents. The move was carried out with the help of a friend of my father who owned a truck. I rode along in the cab on the last trip and we stopped at a newly opened "beer parlor" on University Avenue where the men could enjoy the novelty of drinking a five-cent glass of beer in a public place.

We sat at a bare table with a sardine can ashtray. I ate from a bag of peanuts and the men drank beer while father described events in January 1920 when beverages containing alcohol had been prohibited. In the final hours before the fateful day, wholesale liquor dealers all but gave their stocks of booze away by the case from boxcars parked on railroad sidings. Grandfather Larson and a flood of his North End neighbors used wheelbarrows, coaster wagons, and sleds to transport the precious, soon-to-be-forbidden, spirits home. Enough booze was stored away in the North End to last through the first year or two of prohibition, or so father said, and by the time their liquor stocks were depleted, grandfather and the others were either making their own moonshine and home brew or knew where to get it.

I learned more about prohibition and its implications later in the day. We would not move into the little house after all, not right away. We would live for the time being with my grandparents. Fed-



*The Vision Class at Webster School, May, 1931. John Larson, age seven, is in the first row, second boy from the left.*

eral agents, I learned, had trashed the little house when they discovered it was being used for commercial-scale bootlegging. Among other things, whiskey mash kept in the upstairs bathtub had been thrown from a window into grandmother's garden. It was not only a scandal; it was a threat to all the amateur bootleggers in the neighborhood.

I liked the neighborhood around my grandparents' house just off Courtland at 83 East Jessamine. The house was one block north of Oakland Cemetery and four blocks from the end of the streetcar line at Courtland and Maryland. Beyond Maryland there were truck farms growing celery and radishes. Except for their battle against prohibition, the neighbors were law abiding, working class citizens, who owned their own homes, and paid their taxes. They might have been used as evidence that America was, after all, a melting pot. I remember Austrian, German, Italian, French, Polish, Norwegian, and Irish neighbors. An African American family lived nearby on Courtland and our Jewish grocer was only three blocks away.

My father had grown up on Jessamine and the neighbors there knew me from my childhood. Now I would play with

sons of fathers who had played with my father when he was a boy. In winter I would ride down the same hills on the same sled that my father had used. In summer I would swim in the same swimming hole down near the railroad tracks where he had swum. After the little house had been cleaned up and we moved in, it became our home, the real home of my boyhood.

\* \* \*

Early in 1933 our vision class, including the pupils, teachers, and all our special supplies and equipment, the whole kit and caboodle, was moved from Webster to Irving School at Grotto and Grand Avenue. Irving School had been built in the 1880s and had all the characteristics of its period—wooden floors and stairs, cloak rooms at one side of each classroom and the pervasive smell of floor wax and chalk dust.

We occupied three classrooms on the second floor. Miss Mettling, in one room, was still in charge of the youngest pupils. Miss Whitten in another taught fourth and fifth grades and Miss Turnquist, who was also our principal, had her room where she taught grades six and seven.



All together, we were fewer than thirty pupils. We had very little contact with the rest of the school. We were autonomous.

In September 1933, Hymie and I were still with Miss Whitten. She was older than Miss Mettling, stocky, and almost gruff. Both Hymie and I were fond of her and she, we intuited, liked us. She was the only vision class teacher who took our physical education requirement seriously. Occasionally she went out of her way to organize a softball game. Once sides were chosen and the other team up for bat, I would head for far left field. There I could be reasonably certain that no vision class batter could see well enough to embarrass me by hitting a high fly ball that I could not see well enough to catch.

We seldom played softball. More often we just fooled around. Sometimes Hymie and I were reduced to using the teeter-totter. Once, when Hymie was at the low end and I was in the air, I slid down to the middle. I should not have done it. The teeter-totter may have been as old as the school. A very large splinter pierced my knickers and lodged deep in the underlying buttock. Embarrassed, I was in no mood to explain my predicament to Miss Whitten or anyone else. Instead, I retired to the boys toilet, bravely felt for and then grabbed the still exposed end of the splinter and pulled it out. I never told anyone.

After Miss Mettling's experiment with mouth organs, no further attempts were made to teach us to play musical instruments. Miss Whitten sharpened our ears to music with singing, our singing. And so we learned "Old Dog Tray" who was ever so faithful; "My Grandfather's Clock," it stopped short when the old man died; and something like "Get along little doggies, get along. I know that Wyoming will be your new home." It didn't matter how well or how loud I sang. I always got a C in music.

Singing was not the end of our music education. Someone gave our vision class a radio, a good-sized rectangular box with knobs in front and on top a large round speaker. Some of us were asked to write notes of thanks to our benefactor. The radio sat on a high shelf in Miss

Turnquist's room and all of us gathered there once a week to hear Walter Damosch's radio lectures on music appreciation. He would explain, for example, the various orchestra instruments by using sound effects. I remember no more than the deep voice of the tuba. I might have retained more if we could have seen the instruments. For that, alas, we would have needed television.

Now that I lived in the North End, I no longer rode the Selby Lake streetcar. Instead, in the morning I boarded the Jackson Stryker car at the corner of Jessamine and Courtland. These were older two-man cars with a motorman in front and at the back a conductor who collected fares, six tokens for forty-five cents, and issued transfers. These cars had cowcatchers out in front and semi-open platforms at the rear. The Grand Avenue streetcars that I transferred to downtown were modern, one-man cars, with no back platform for smoking and chewing tobacco, more appropriate, I suppose, for the finer Grand Avenue clientele.

After school I reversed my morning streetcar routine except that now I made full use of the time allowed by my transfer. I explored the downtown area around my transfer point and discovered the new St. Paul City Hall-Ramsey County Court House. Awed by its magically dark, marble clad, three-story high entrance hall, I revisited it frequently. Then, just before school let out in June of 1936, I was rewarded by the spooky appearance there of a giant onyx figure of an Indian God smoking the pipe of peace. He added a touch of extravagant fancy to otherwise down-to-earth depression years.

By transferring streetcars downtown I could pursue a number of my special interests. Among other things, I collected stamps and sought out downtown stamp dealers to learn what was new. But stamps cost money. I preferred collecting empty cigar boxes. They could be had for nothing. There were cigar stores then at practically every street corner. Once I had acquired two or three boxes, I would leave them in the care of some friendly looking elderly lady waiting for her streetcar and go on to the next store. I finally caught my Jackson-Stryker streetcar when I had as

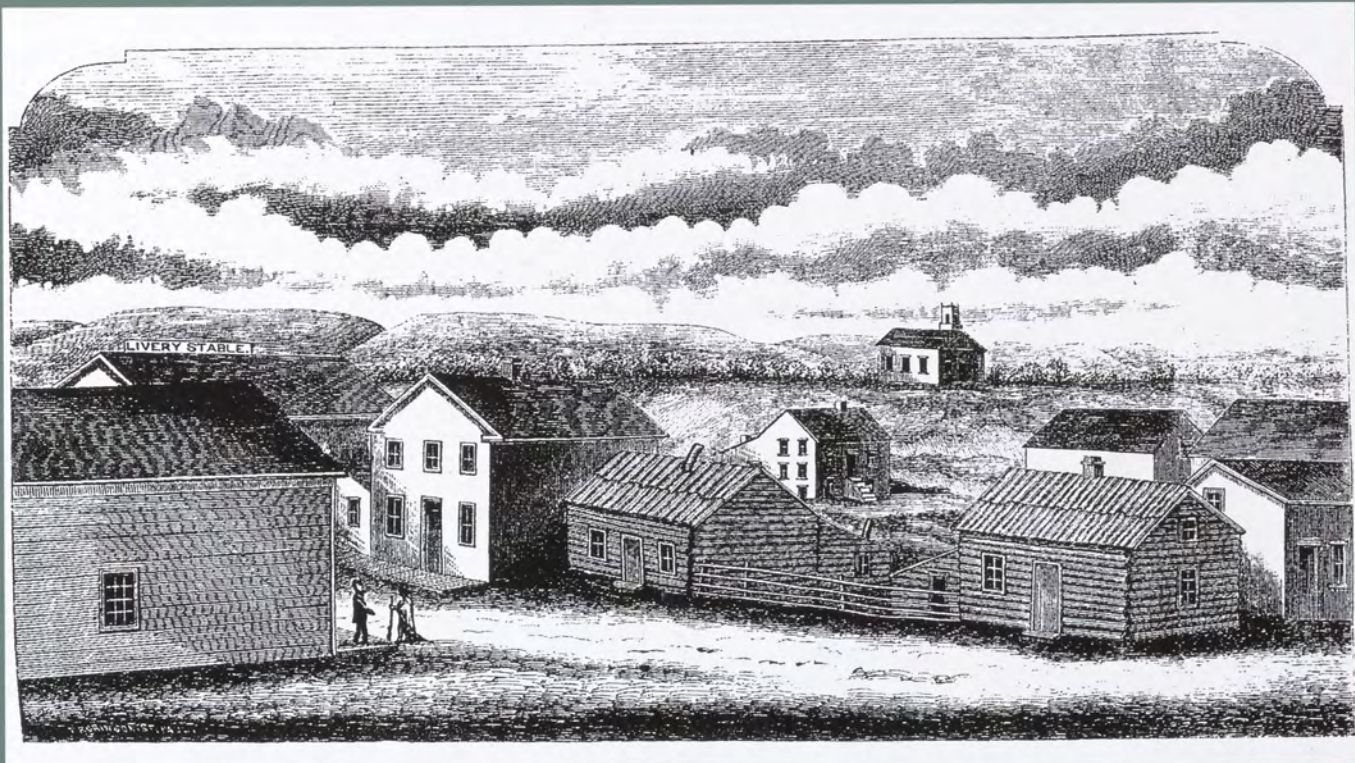
many boxes as I could carry. I no longer know what I did with them all.

Hymie lived at Smith and Ramsey, close enough for him to walk home from Irving school. I sometimes joined him. We usually found his mother in her kitchen where she made, bottled, and labeled kosher horseradish for sale in Twin City stores. Hymie's father worked for the H. Harris Company, manufacturers of ladies coats and jackets. Both parents, I later learned, emigrated from Russia sometime before the First World War and settled in Duluth where they met, married, and had the first three of their five children. Hymie was a year old when the family moved to St. Paul.

I never asked Hymie how he lost his eye. We preferred talking about school and our current interests. Hymie was interested in Fire Station #3 on Leech Street, half a block from his home. He hung out there and the firemen had adopted him as a mascot. We visited the station and he showed me the firemen's upstairs quarters. I was intrigued by the shiny brass poles on which the firemen descended to their fire trucks when an alarm went off.

Once, when we were walking around downtown near Miller Hospital, Hymie pointed out his Hebrew school. I felt somewhat envious. It was the same feeling I had when I saw a Catholic boy wearing a scapular, a small cloth picture of the Blessed Mother Mary that hung from a cord around his neck. Jews and Catholics had something I didn't have, something that made them special. One could be a schoolboy in St. Paul of the 1920s and thirties without knowing that one should dislike Jews or Catholics or blacks or people of any creed or race. It was just as well, for when I moved on to Mechanic Arts High School in February 1937, its near 2,000 students were incredibly diverse in their backgrounds. Being part of that student body was enough to make one feel, well, yes, special.

*John Larson was an historian with the Defense Department before becoming a public affairs officer for the United States Army Corps of Engineers. He is a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History.*



*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.**  
RAMSEY • COUNTY • HISTORICAL • SOCIETY

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society  
323 Landmark Center  
75 West Fifth Street  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

Address Service Requested

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage  
PAID  
St. Paul, MN  
Permit #3989