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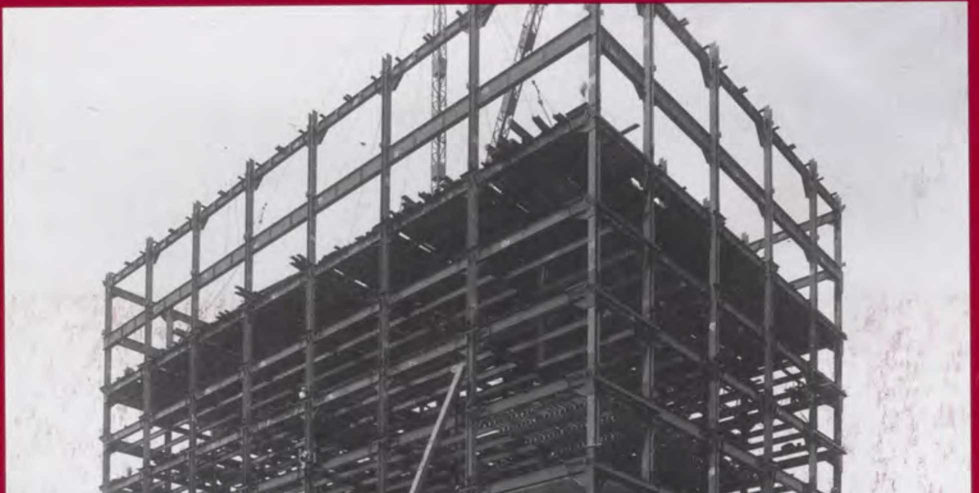

The Merchants Bank building under construction at 333 North Robert Street in 1914. Photo from the Minnesota Historical Society. See article beginning on page 4.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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A Message from the Editorial Board

In this issue Richard Slade, a former St. Paul bank executive who's also an historian of Twin Cities banking, examines the first seventy-five years of St. Paul's banks. Slade's primary focus is on the events and maneuvers during the 1920s that led to the formation in early 1929 of the "Minnesota Twins"—Northwest Bancorporation in Minneapolis and the First Bank Stock Group in St. Paul. During the decade of the 1920s, Minnesota banking experienced significant problems that led to numerous bank failures before the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange in the fall of 1929. As Slade explains, Minnesota's banking problems of the 1920s produced a "combination of enlightened self-interest and fear" that gave rise to the idea of creating a bank holding company as an institutional bulwark against the growing economical and financial uncertainties of the times.

The Ramsey County Historical Society is also pleased to reprint in this issue an excerpt from *Jimmy Griffin: A Son of Rondo, A Memoir.* In the selection reproduced here, Griffin recounts some of his experiences as an African American rejoining the St. Paul police force in 1946, following his wartime service in the U.S. Navy. This firsthand account tells without editorializing of the racism of that era, Griffin's effectiveness as an officer and his unflinching determination to make his way on the force on the merits of his performance on the job.

This issue concludes with another piece of family history from Leo Harris, a local lawyer and historian. In a carefully researched account of his family's iron business, the Harris Forge and Rolling Mill Company, in New Brighton in the 1880s and '90s, Harris gives us a glimpse of the efforts of a small manufacturing firm to prosper in a rural community on the fringe of St. Paul. Despite careful management and a ready market for its iron bar, fire twice destroyed the firm's plant and in 1893 doomed the business, bringing hard times to the Harris family and the community of New Brighton.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Books

The Evening Crowd at Kirmser's

Ricardo J. Brown
Edited by William Reichard
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001
153 pages $21.95 (cloth)
Reviewed by Paul Nelson

Conventional history has a hard time conveying to people what many most want to know about the past: What was it like to live there and then? How did it feel? For answers to such questions we look to fiction, autobiography, and memoir. In *The Evening Crowd at Kirmser's,* the late Ricardo Brown has left us his memoir of what it was like, and how it felt, to be a homosexual young man in St. Paul in the mid-1940s. Brown's book is not just unique but also entertaining, illuminating, and wonderfully well-crafted, the work of a skillful stylist.

Ricardo (Rick) Brown, born in 1926, grew up in a middle class home in Stillwater, the son of an Anglo father and an Italian mother from St. Paul's Little Italy. After graduating from high school, he dashed off to Greenwich Village in hopes of clarifying the mystery of his youthful sexual confusion, but failed. Then he joined the wartime Navy where, after a brief fumbling experience, he achieved a moment of "blinding clarity," crystallized in his sudden announcement to an officer, "Sir, I am homosexual." Dishonorable discharge soon followed. Home in Stillwater after just six months in the military, and without a persuasive explanation for his sudden return, the eighteen-year-old Brown took a job in St. Paul, partly just to get out of the house every day.

Ricardo J. Brown in December, 1944.

Co-workers at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* soon introduced him to Kirmser's, a working-class bar at 382 Wabasha Street, "straight" during the day, a "queer bar" at night. Until that moment Brown, like nearly everyone else who lived and worked in St. Paul, had no idea such a thing existed in the conventional, conservative, and Catholic city. Young Rick Brown had quickly learned the strategies and costs of concealing his secret—the lies, the evasions, the fear of exposure, and the loneliness. Kirmser's, a place where he could drop the lies and evasions a few hours every day, gave him a sanctuary, "a refuge, a fort in the midst of a savage and hostile population."

Though a gay bar in today's parlance, Kirmser's was anything but gay in the older sense of the word. Dark, smelly, uninviting, it hid its nighttime nature from the world just as resolutely as its patrons hid theirs. Even inside, Brown and his compatriots never let their guards down entirely. They never used each other's full names, rarely made open displays of affection. "We didn't always trust one another at Kirmser's, but we did have a feeling of kinship."

Kirmser's introduced Brown to a varied cast of characters, "comrades of sorts," thrown together by their homosexuality and few other common traits or interests. *The Evening Crowd* has two main threads. Scenes from Brown's youth and early encounters with homosexuality, with others and within himself, make up one thread. The other consists of his compelling sketches of the denizens of Kirmser's: Bud, the "All-American boy;" the arrogant and cynical hack artist Clem; "piss-elegant" Lulu Pulanski; the predatory Betty Boop; handsome, self-hating Chester; Dickie, the doomed "celluloid doll;" the "sensitive soul" Mother Jerusalem; the sardonic, self-accepting Flaming Youth, and still others, including the bar's stolid, impenetrable German owners. The author makes them all come alive believably, deftly, mostly sympathetically, with vivid detail and an economy of words.

Most of them, by today's standards, were remarkably conservative and conventional. Though outcasts from the larger world, and by necessity tolerant of a broader range of behavior than most people, most of the evening crowd preferred to keep their own experiences within a narrow compass. They tended to look down on men's room cruisers, and the long-running *ménage-a-trois* they called the "Three Kind Mice" shocked them. "We were never comfortable with one another's perversions."

Differing as they did from one another in work, age, temperament, and outlook on life, the men (and women) of Kirmser's provided young Brown with an array of examples—something like a host of uncles and aunts in an extended family—of how to live, or how not to live, as a homosexual in the St. Paul of his time. They helped him grow up. On one occasion their two reactions to a violent event became a personal turning point for Brown. Two young strangers one evening barged into Kirmser's, asked Flaming Youth if he were queer, then beat him up before getting an answer.

Brown found himself alone in trying to defend the older man. The other patrons not only did nothing, they professed not understand why Brown had intervened. Their lack of solidarity and action, and their cynicism about it, surprised him and put the lie to what he had felt about them being a "brotherhood." It led him into a friendship with Flaming Youth. Brown discovered that Joe (Flaming Youth's real name), though a notorious toilet cruiser and part-time prostitute, was also funny, cultured, sensitive, had a long-term live-in partner and, most important, had accepted himself as he was. Despite his flaws, Joe helped Rick Brown see the possibility of gay manhood without self-hatred.

Aside from the existence of Kirmser's itself, lists of the gay cruising spots of the time (mostly public men's rooms), a memorable scene or two at the Coney Island, and a few glimpses of Little Italy, there is not much St. Paul history in this book. The events recounted could have taken place in scores of North American provincial cities of the time. It is a book of experience, personalities, and memory. (Prospective readers should know that the book contains several instances of frank language and description of sexual encounters.)

Paul R. Nelson is a member of Ramsey County History*'s Editorial Board. His book, a biography of Frederick L. McGhee and titled* Frederick L. McGhee—A Life on the Color Line, (1861–1912), *has just been published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press.*

Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul

Mary Lethert Wingerd
Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001
326 pages, photos, index, $29.95 (cloth)
Reviewed by John M. Lindley

Claiming the City by Mary Lethert Wingerd is an important new book about St. Paul. Complex in its analysis and rich in its interpretation, *Claiming the City* brings new insight to St. Paul's history. In this book Wingerd provides an in-depth exploration of the unusual interrelationship between politics, business, labor, the Catholic Church, and the city of St. Paul between the 1850s and the 1930s. She opens her analysis with a brief account of the Minneapolis truckers' strike in 1934 and points out that when labor war roiled Minneapolis, the workers in St. Paul, even though they were much more heavily unionized than their counterparts across the Mississippi, "turned their backs on the conflict" and showed an "unsettling lack of solidarity between Twin Cities unionists."

What follows is an explanation of why there was an absence of union solidarity between the workers of St. Paul and those of Minneapolis in 1934. Wingerd's thesis is that the peculiar identification, or "civic identity," of St. Paul's workers with their city and its cultural values, especially as those values had been shaped by the local economy and the influence of the Catholic Church, gave them little in common with the striking truckers in Minneapolis in their battle with management. This place-based loyalty to St. Paul, argues Wingerd, resulted in the differences between St. Paul and Minneapolis being far more important than their geographical proximity a few miles apart on either side of the Mississippi.

Beginning with its founding and early days, St. Paul, says Wingerd, had become "characterized as an Irish, Catholic, Democratic stronghold, and Minneapolis noted for its Scandinavians, Protestants, and Republican Yankee 'progressives.'" Out of these differences between the cities developed opposite attitudes toward labor-management relations. While business leaders in Minneapolis pursued an aggressive antiunion stance beginning in the late nineteenth century, St. Paul's business and labor leaders, who were strongly influenced by the position of the Catholic Church in its careful support for workers, were more willing to negotiate and to compromise in their dealings with labor. Leaders in St. Paul found that an attitude of "live and let live" in labor-management relations fostered civic harmony and avoided costly strikes that split the community and crippled the local economy. Consequently, St. Paul became a city where the closed shop was widely accepted while Minneapolis became a stalwart open-shop community and suffered through numerous strikes in the years before World War I.

St. Paul's labor-management concord or "civic compact," as Wingerd calls it, had its roots in the city's declining economic fortunes relative to Minneapolis and in its intense rivalry with its twin across the Mississippi. This civic compact broke asunder, however, when the United States entered World War I. During 1917–18, the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety (MCPS), which had been established by the state legislature to protect Minnesota from espionage, sabotage, and other enemy actions, fell under the control of anti-union business interests in Minneapolis who systematically sought to stamp out any form of public dissent, union activity, or support for German culture as the worst kind of disloyalty to the American war effort. In the face of concerted pressure from the MCPS and the anti-union stance of some St. Paul business leaders, the city's labor-management harmony unraveled.

Once St. Paul's civic compact broke down, the city began to experience a wave of strikes in the early 1920s. By 1924, Wingerd writes, "the policy of live and let live that had characterized

St. Paul business, labor, and politics seemed consigned to history." Yet hard economic times in the latter half of the '20s in St. Paul forced both labor and management to realize that neither radical unionism nor aggressive union busting was going to solve anything for either side. Consequently, by 1934 business and labor in the capital city had developed a set of complicated interdependencies involving the Catholic Church as a provider of construction projects and as a voice for social control. That meant that an open shop in St. Paul was very different from an open shop in Minneapolis and that St. Paul was as parochial in outlook as it had been prior to World War I. In short, St. Paul had developed a "fortress mentality," as Wingerd calls it. Consequently when labor war erupted in Minneapolis, workers in St. Paul chose to remain aloof from the conflict rather than jeopardize their own civic compact.

Claiming the City began as Wingerd's doctoral dissertation, and although much of this new study is similar to the earlier work, the book is expanded in places, bolstered by additional research, and more tightly argued. Wingerd, who is currently on the history faculty at Macalester College, presents a wealth of original research drawn from a wide range of published and unpublished sources. Her analysis of Archbishop John Ireland's relationship with James J. Hill and the Hill family and the archbishop's tempered support for workers is superb. As urban history, *Claiming the City* does an excellent job of tying together so many facets of St. Paul's story. For example, Wingerd's explanation of how the Winter Carnivals of 1916 and 1917 functioned to support the civic compact between management and labor is both perceptive and persuasive.

As labor history, *Claiming the City* raises questions for further research. How did these labor-management issues affect St. Paul's African-American community? Since most of St. Paul's handful of unionized black workers were members of the railroad unions, such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, were they an exception to the civic compact and thus remained apart from the events Wingerd chronicles? West Publishing Company, one of St. Paul's largest employers from 1900 onward, was also one of the city's most consistent advocates of the open shop. Yet as a printing and publishing company that employed a large number of skilled workers, West's sustained effort to preserve an open shop in a city friendly to the closed shop is only briefly mentioned. Perhaps the situation at West was more complicated and paradoxically provided additional support for the civic harmony that was so eagerly sought in St. Paul. Similarly, how did the effort to preserve the civic compact affect growing St. Paul employers such as the Seeger Refrigerator Company (founded in 1902) and 3M (moved to St. Paul in 1910) in the 1920s?

Anyone who wants to go beyond the surface to learn more about the history of St. Paul will find *Claiming the City* a challenging and provocative book. Mary Wingerd has also shown that urban history today is a complex undertaking that involves an interdisciplinary approach. As a consequence of her high standard of analysis and explanation in *Claiming the City,* we all benefit.

John Lidley is a freelance researcher, writer, and editor and chairman of Ramsey County History*'s Editorial Board.*

Painting the Dakota: Seth Eastman at Fort Snelling

Marybeth Lorbiecki

Forward by Eastman descendant Lori K. Crowchild

Afton, Minnesota: Afton Historical Society Press

104 pages, 50-full color illustrations, index, $14.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Virginia Brainard Kunz

This book for young readers traces the story of the army officer who served two tours of duty as commandant of Fort Snelling and left behind a vivid record, through his remarkable paintings, of life at the frontier fort and among the Dakota people in the region. The book, however, is not only about Eastman's years at Fort Snelling. Narrative and colorful reproductions of his paintings trace his life and his career as an artist from his stint as a student at West Point from 1824 to 1829 to his death from a stroke in 1875 as he sat at his easel working on an oil painting of West Point for the United States Capitol.

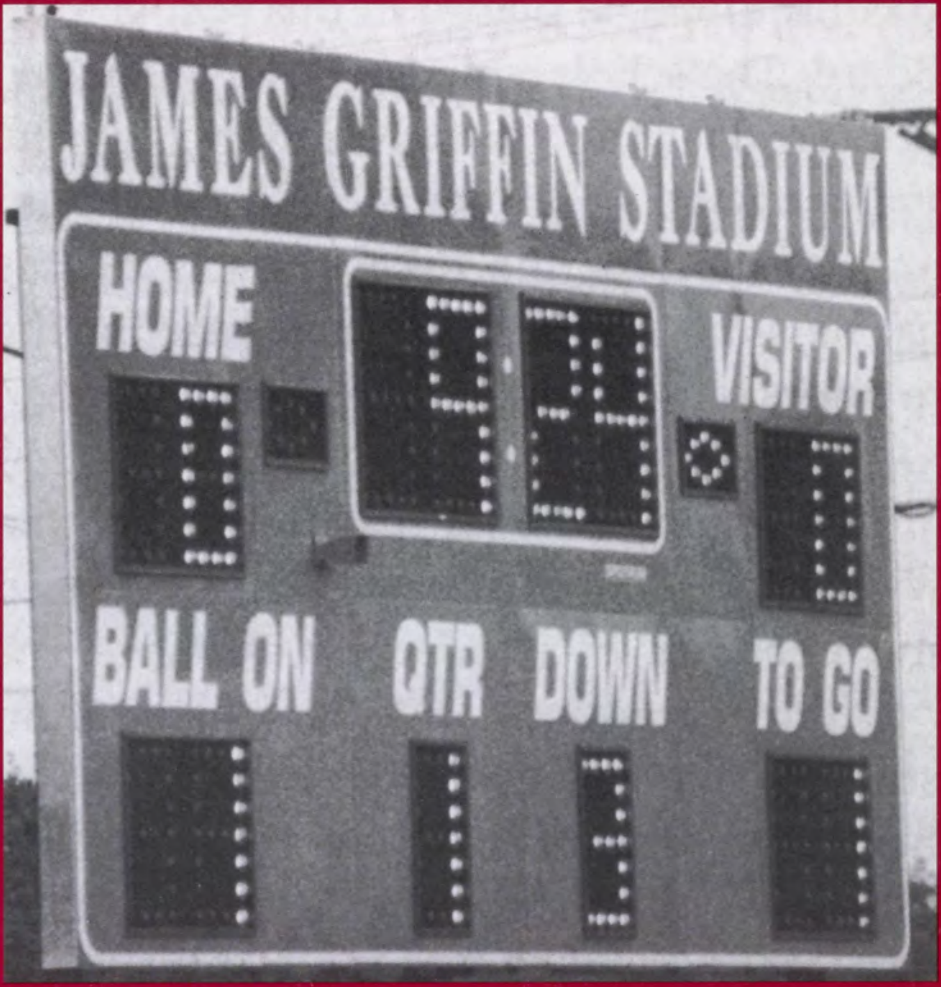
Recognized as a leading pictorial historian of Native Americans in the nineteenth century, Eastman first arrived at Fort Snelling, the northwestern-most United States army post in 1830. He filled his sketchbook with drawings of his keen observations of life among the Dakota at a period of rapid change.

He married, according to Indian custom, a young Dakota woman, *Wakaninajinwin* or Stands Sacred, the daughter of *Mahpija Wiscasta,* or Cloud Man, chief of the Dakota village established in 1829 at Lake Calhoun in today's south Minneapolis. Their daughter, *Wakantankawin* (Great Spirit Woman) but known to history as Nancy Eastman, was born about 1831. Reassigned by the army, Eastman left Fort Snelling in 1832 to survey land for railroads in Louisiana. He served again at Fort Snelling from 1841 to 1846 and returned one last time in 1857 to survey the old fort in preparation for its sale by the federal government to private interests.

Eastman's memory lives on today, however, in members of the Shakopee Mdewakanton Dakota Community who are descendants of Eastman and his Dakota wife.

The real strength of the book, of course, lies in the reproduction of the Eastman paintings. Fifty-six of his watercolors were exhibited for the first time in March, 2001, at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in New York.

Virginia Kunz is editor of Ramsey County History.


JAMES GRIFFIN STADIUM
HOME
VISITOR
BALL ON
QTR
DOWN
TO GO

Griffin Stadium Scoreboard and Signage. See excerpts from Jimmy Griffin's memoir beginning on page 13.

R.C.H.S.
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