

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

A Memoir:
Jimmy Griffin Remembers
His Years on the Force

Page 13

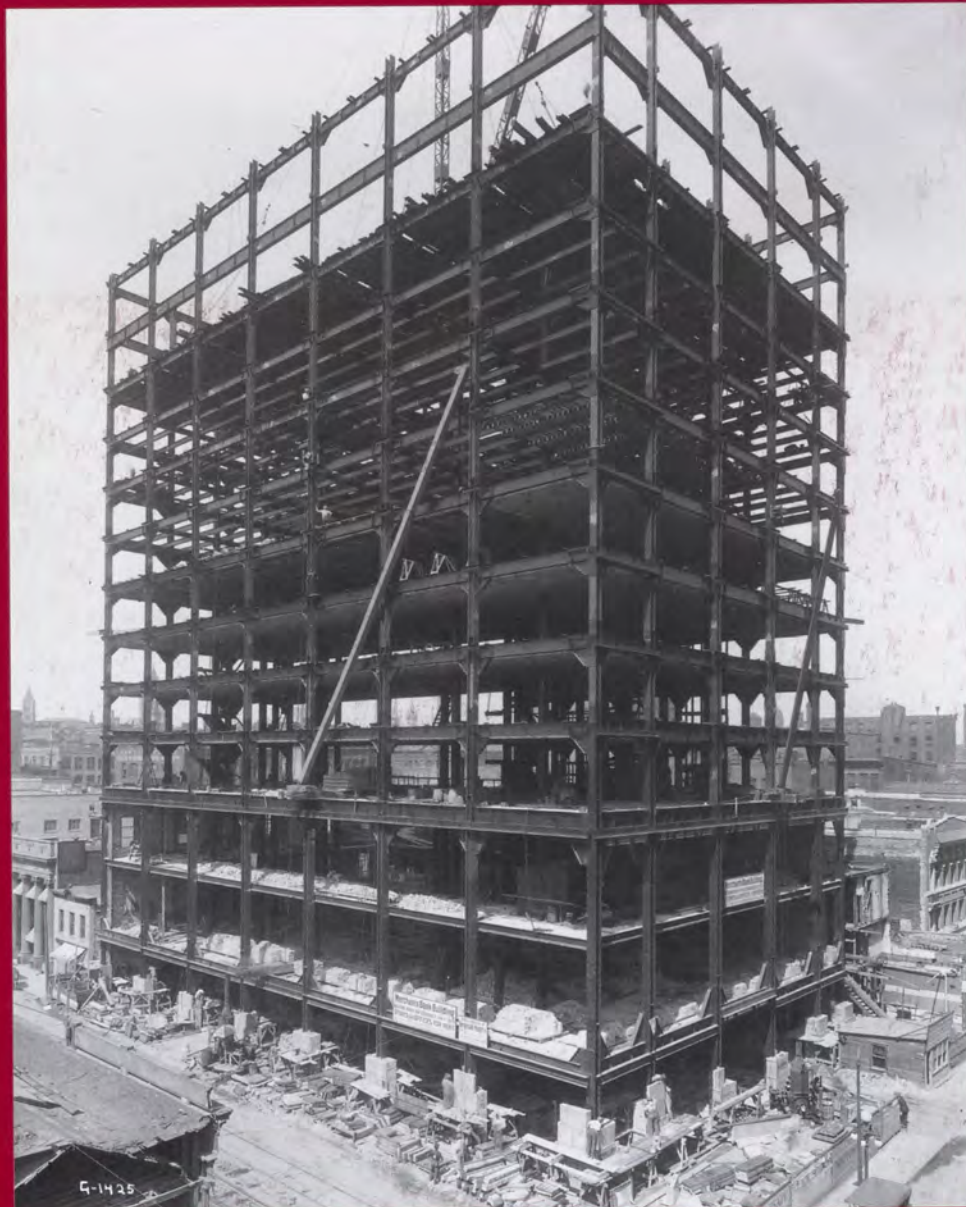
Winter, 2002

Volume 36, Number 4

Crises and Panics and Mergers and Failures

St. Paul's Banks and How They Survived 75 Years

—Page 4



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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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

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

Tubal Cain in New Brighton

The Harris Forge and Rolling Mill Company¹

Leo J. Harris

They were a family of entrepreneurs. Marks Harris (1847–1921) and Abraham Harris (1861–1937) emigrated, along with three other brothers and two sisters, from Russian Poland. Living briefly in Chicago and then in Dubuque, Iowa, they finally had settled in Minneapolis by the middle 1880s. Their initial business activity, located at 329 Tenth Avenue South, was simply listed as “junk.”² An older brother, Moses Harris, remained in Chicago, and founded The Chicago House Wrecking Company, the world’s largest national wrecker of world’s fairs and expositions. This Illinois company was also the seller, through mail order catalogues, of pre-owned building materials.³

Why Abraham and Marks Harris, and their brother-in-law, Abraham Goldman, were to conceive of and start an iron rolling mill in a northern Twin City suburb is not known to surviving family members, nor is it documented elsewhere. And how these immigrant brothers were able to finance building of the rolling mill is also an unanswered question. However, within a short period of time (1891–1893) they organized and operated the Harris Forge and Rolling Mill Company (the “Company” or the “rolling mill”), a concern which at its height employed more than 200 workmen, an enormous number of employees at the time. This is the story of how that business was established, flourished, and, in the space of barely two years, twice burned to the ground before it forever closed its doors.

It is believed that the Harris rolling mill was among the earliest, if not the earliest, of its kind in Minnesota, oriented primarily to turning scrap metal into iron ingots. Alfred D. Arundel (1856–1943), an English immigrant with apparent expertise in iron technology and fabrica-

tion, was hired to assist in establishing and operating the new business.

Site for the Mill

Minneapolis investors Thomas Lowry and Charles Pillsbury were among others who acquired 1,000 acres of land in New Brighton in 1887. They organized two large beef packing houses at the site, and the new Belt Line Railroad was built to connect the stockyards with the Minnesota Transfer Railroad and the Great Northern and Northern Pacific.⁴ This development provided the impetus for other businesses to locate in New Brighton, in western Ramsey County.

The company found ample space for operations within the present-day boundaries of New Brighton. Its site was at the northeast corner of the intersection of County Road H and Long Lake Road. At the time, however, the location was known far more simply: “located on a spur of the belt line, about a mile north of the Minneapolis Stock Yards.”⁵ By wagon, the rolling mill was reached by traveling north on Long Lake road.

Building the Facility

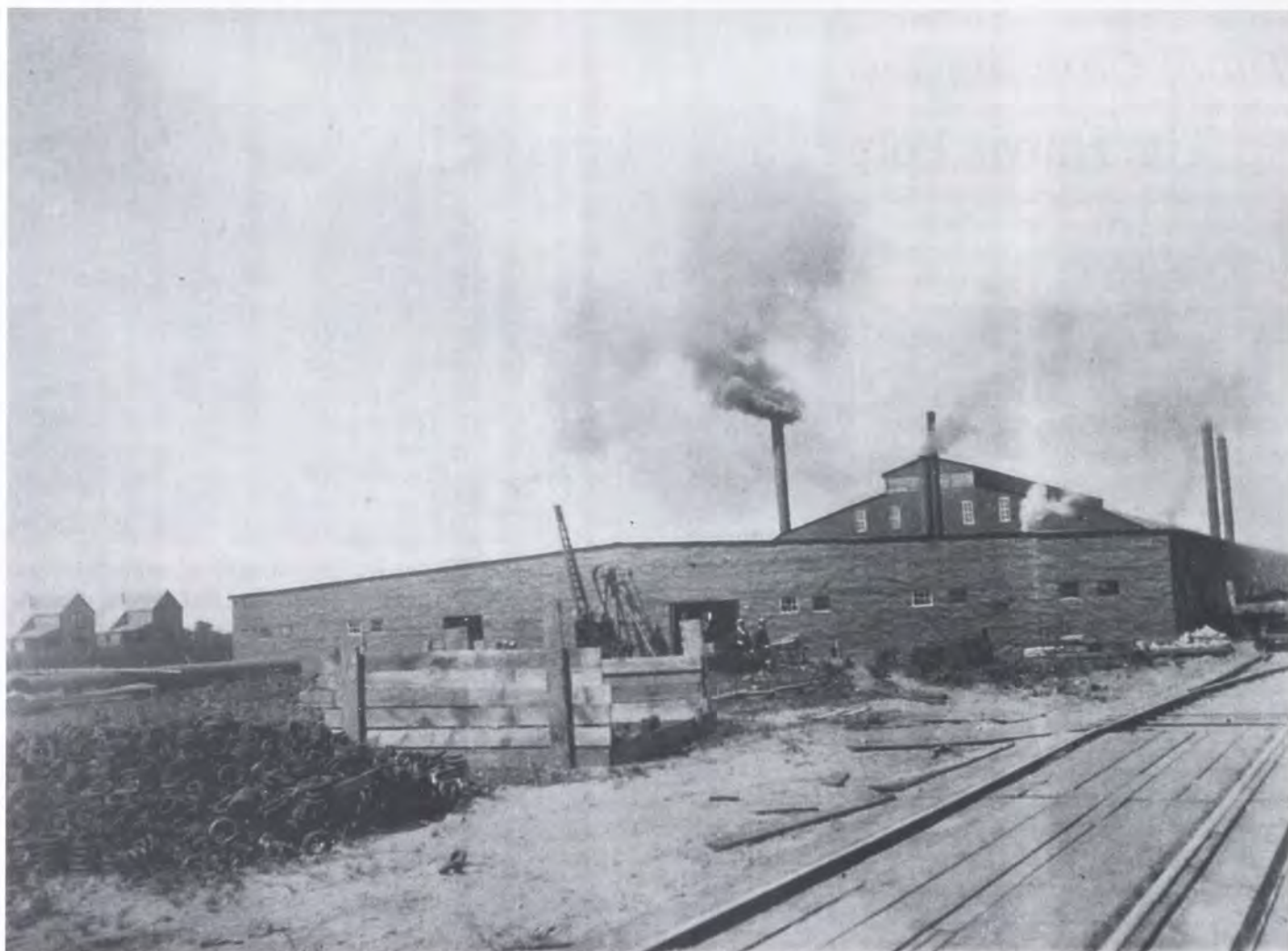
An early article in the *Twin City Live Stock Reporter* provides information about the construction of the mill.⁶ The framework of the principal building was heavy timbers; the north half of the building had a high, arched roof which was well arranged for ventilation. The roof was covered with corrugated iron. Water connections were made to the nearby Long Lake. The warehouse and office building, to the south of the works, was a two-story brick veneered structure. Adjoining this building was a large Buffalo scale for weighing railroad cars of iron “at draught.” There were three spur tracks for the loading and unloading of

iron. The premises included a total of six acres of land; the main building (380 feet long by 160 feet wide) covered approximately one acre. A 200-horsepower engine supplied the power. Streets were, finally, being graded and along the avenue east of the mill houses for the workers were planned.

By April of 1891 the rolling mill was near to completion, and there were nearly fifty carpenters at work on the buildings.⁷ Water was an important commodity in the production of iron. The mills would use fifty gallons of water every minute, day and night—30,000 gallons every ten hours. To obtain this water, artesian wells were drilled, and at the time had reached 300 feet, but with inadequate flow. The company was therefore thinking about running pipes to Rice Creek, a distance of about 1,200 feet, and pumping additional water from there for supplementary uses.⁸ The rolling mill had, by the spring of 1892, three sources of water: Rice Creek, the artesian wells, and a system of smaller wells to rely upon in an emergency. The lake, north of the mill, which went dry the previous summer, was rapidly filling up with wastewater from the mill.⁹ The rolling mill, finally, used an electric motor for pumping water from Rice Creek.¹⁰

The mill was enclosed by a high board fence. As the company had much valuable property lying about the works, this was done to protect the same as well as keep off all loafers and others having no business at the works.¹¹

When the new wagon road to the mill running along the west side of Long Lake was finished, it was said to be one of the best roads in the town. It had a uniform width of forty feet, and was to be surfaced with slag from the mill.¹²



The Harris Forge and Rolling Mill in New Brighton. This view dates from around 1892. Photograph from Sigmund Harris, Jr.

Operating the Facility

Early on, the Harris brothers incorporated their mill. The new company was formally known as the Harris Forge and Rolling Mill Co., with its headquarters at Irondale.¹³ To facilitate the buying of scrap metal and the selling of the final product, the company rented the use of a telegraph wire to the Twin Cities, and employed the services of a telegraph operator who had formerly worked at the stockyards.¹⁴

By March of 1892 the rolling mill was running at full capacity, night and day, with a crew of more than 200 men, and were turning out nearly 130,000 pounds of iron each day. The company soon expanded its sales efforts countrywide. It secured, for example, a contract for a large iron bridge at Tacoma, Washington.¹⁵

The October 22, 1892 issue of the *Twin City Live Stock Reporter* noted that the company had good reason to be proud of its progress. The previous Wednesday, 70,000 pounds of finished iron was the actual capacity for a single "turn," as it is technically called, and this from a single finishing mill. This was thought to be the best record in the country. The previous Friday, 31,000 pounds were produced in 10½ hours from a single furnace.

Housing and other Amenities

When the Iron Workers' and Packers' Building & Loan Association was organized with a capital stock of \$2 million, its stated purpose was to encourage the savings of the workers by offering them a safe and paying investment for their earnings and helping them build homes of

their own by loaning them money.¹⁶ The name "Irondale" was quickly applied to the rolling mill area.

According to the *Twin City Live Stock Reporter*, "The location of the various mills and factories in that section have drawn many people there already, and they must of necessity have homes. Their number is constantly being increased and the demand for improved property is consequently growing." The article announced the organization of the Iron Works Land Company, soon to be active in real estate development. Among its shareholders were prominent men of wealth and enterprise in Minneapolis, such as J. S. Pillsbury.¹⁷

Fifteen houses were started near the rolling mill plant, and twenty-five more were to be erected shortly.¹⁸ By June of

1891 several families had moved into these cottages¹⁹ and with the demand for housing increasing, the contract had been let for the erection of ten houses at once, with ten more built that fall.²⁰

The two-story Irondale elementary school also was built. Constructed of wood, it was located south of the rolling mill, on the West Side of Long Lake Road, and it was in use for more than fifty years.²¹

Some Other Synergisms

The building of the mill brought to the New Brighton community a number of desirable developments, as the local newspaper noted:

A. J. Shey, of South St. Paul, was putting up a saloon building near the rolling mills, and would soon be ready for business.²²

Property adjacent to the rolling mills was rapidly enhancing in value. "A large iron foundry and machine shop are negotiating for ground and buildings adjoining the mill property, a hotel is to be erected at once, and before snow flies there will be any amount of activity at this point."²³

An artesian well was drilled, both to serve the mills, and to provide the adjoining community with the best possible drinking water.²⁴

There were three round-trip trains daily between the stockyards and the mills, and Minneapolis.²⁵

Rolling Mill Employees

The "Pencilings" column in the *New Brighton Bulletin* reported on various events involving the mill employees. For instance:

Charles Martin, a foreman at the rolling mills, died suddenly yesterday at the Hughes Institute for the cure of drunkenness, at Minneapolis, of delirium tremens (*sic*). Martin was recently discharged for drunkenness, but was a good workman.²⁶

The employees at the rolling mills were represented by the Amalgamated Association of Iron & Steel Workers, which hosted a number of picnics and other events.²⁷ Through the union, word spread nation-wide about employment opportunities. The newspaper noted that "A couple of 'locked-out' iron workers from Carnegie's Homestead



Some Harris family members. The three principals of the rolling mill are, left to right, Marks Harris, Abraham Harris, and Abe Goldman. Photo from the author.

Mills applied for work at the Irondale Mill yesterday. They 'tramped it' all the way from Pittsburgh."²⁸

The Democrat precinct meeting at Irondale "... proved to be one of the most sombre and glooming political gatherings ever held in this vicinity. Huddled together on a few wooden benches in a barn-like storehouse dimly lighted by 2 or 3 torches, the unfortunate audience shivered with the cold and presented a grim and gruesome spectacle. The structure quickly became full of smoke from the torches and the platform scarcely visible to the majority of those present had all the appearance of a band of conspirators ..."²⁹

An employee of the rolling mill by the name of Ward assaulted a foreman, named Simon. Ward fled, leaving his wages and personal effects behind.³⁰

The 'Satanic Embrace of the Fire Demon'

Then catastrophe struck, as the *Twin City Live Stock Reporter* described it: "People at Irontown were awakened from their slumbers by the bright light and roar of flames and noise of falling timbers, and iron, and could see the iron works wrapped in the satanic embrace of the fire demon."³¹

The October 29, 1891 fire occurred at the time the shifts were changing, at 3:30 a.m., and oil in the bolt and nut works

caught fire. The fire spread rapidly through the building's ventilation system. Employees barely had time to escape, and most left their tools behind. Even if a fire department had been on hand, it would not have been able to prevail since the framework of the building was of iron and wood, enclosed with corrugated iron. Of the structure, only the blackened smokestacks remained after two hours, but the heavy machinery and furnaces were not seriously damaged.³²

The mill had just begun to get into smooth running order with a day and night crew of more than 200 men turning out fifty to sixty tons of finished iron daily. At the time of the fire, the mill had a capacity of 150,000 tons yearly, and enough orders on hand to run for a year. They had just secured a contract for 600 tons of finished iron. For a typical day's production, the mill used forty tons of coal a day.

The destruction of the mill resulted in a loss of approximately \$15,000 but the plant was insured for \$56,000.³³ The press reported that the Harris brothers, with the insurance proceeds, intended to rebuild at once and expected to have things in readiness to start up inside of sixty days, if the weather allowed.³⁴

According to the *Twin City Live Stock Reporter*, "it was a dreary looking spectacle to see groups of workmen looking on with faces that betokened disappointment

and ill luck." Aware of this, "we intend to keep our men employed with some kind of work in the meantime," said Harris, "and shall strain every nerve to resume business as soon as possible."³⁵

Rebuilding the Facility

The rolling mill was to be rebuilt of brick and iron and work promptly commenced. The mill was to be 200 by 400 feet and better equipped than ever. Crude oil was to be used as fuel and boilers were being built for this purpose.³⁶ The material for the mill was arriving daily and work was being pushed rapidly in fine weather.³⁷ One engine had been started. The mill was running the dynamo that supplied lights so that a night force could work on the building, which was rapidly nearing completion. The bolt works were soon to start up.³⁸ By February, 1892 the mill was up and running with day and night crews.³⁹

Ominous Signs

The company's superintendent of works, Alfred D. Arundel, resigned as of December 1, 1892, and accepted a similar position with the new Minneapolis Rolling Mill Company. Early in January, 1893, the Harris brothers entered into discussions with Thomas Lowry, an important businessman in Minneapolis,⁴⁰ concerning the possible merger of the Harris Company with the Minneapolis Rolling Mill Company, Lowry's new business venture which was being established in nearby Columbia Heights. A letter from the company to Lowry noted that the cost of fuel needed for iron mills was high, and bar iron was then being freighted into Minnesota at "cut throat" prices. Hence, the letter concluded, it made economic sense to combine the two companies in order to purchase scrap iron more cheaply, sell bar iron at a better price, and use their respective facilities more efficiently. The suggestion made by the Harris brothers was a merger. The company's plant, its good will, and its land contract with the Iron Works Land Company would be contributed, while Lowry would be expected to put up \$100,000 in cash for working capital.⁴¹ The offer was never accepted, presumably due to the next development.⁴²



Alfred Arundel. Photo courtesy of Edward M. Arundel.

Another Fire

During the night of February 3, 1893, the rolling mill burned to the ground. "They seem to be doomed by the fire fiend . . ." said the *Minneapolis Live Stock Reporter*.⁴³ The fire was first discovered about 10 p.m., and the destruction of the mill structure, containing the bar iron rolling plant, was soon complete. The mill was not running at the time of the fire. It had been shut down on account of extremely cold weather. The exact origin of the fire was not known, but it probably came from one of the furnaces. New Brighton historian Gene F. Skiba suggests, however, without citing any source, that the fire may have been deliberately set.⁴⁴ The loss was placed at about \$132,000, the building having cost \$12,000 and the plant itself \$120,000. The insurance was \$88,000.

There was no fire department in Irondale, and though assistance was dispatched from the Minnesota Transfer Railroad, it arrived too late. The flames fortunately did not destroy the adjoining warehouse and its contents.⁴⁵

The Harris brothers decided not to rebuild the facility. According to Sigmund

Harris, Jr., salvagable equipment and fixtures were taken to yards located at the southwest corner of University and Washington avenues in Minneapolis and resold.⁴⁶

Postscript

The second fire was a blow to the new Irondale community, putting a number of men out of work with little else to do, so many of the affected families left the community. For New Brighton, generally, the bubble had begun to burst. The soon-to-follow Panic of 1893, which resulted in the closing of the Minneapolis Stock Yards and Packing Company, was even a greater blow to the local economy. In fact, the name of "Irondale" was the only memento of the rolling mill to last to this day. A number of the workers' houses eventually were moved to other sites in New Brighton.⁴⁷

The roller coaster of building up a new business and, twice, having it brought down by ruinous fires, had its personal costs. Marks Harris, more of a silent partner in the venture, had contributed, and quickly lost, according to Sigmund Harris, Jr., the sum of \$20,000. That Marks Harris was not pleased can be understood. He eventually established, alone, a new business specializing in the sale of used machinery, and this business, run with his sons, and then by his grandson, and currently by his great-grandson, became the Harris Machinery Company. Through time this concern, located in the 500 block of 30th Avenue S.E., Minneapolis, specialized in the sale of canvas, tarpaulins and tents, funky '50s and '60s clothing, as well as new and used machinery.

Abraham Harris continued with his Harris Brothers business selling scrap iron and steel, but eventually he faced further adversity. His home burned down and, later on, he was forced to enter into personal bankruptcy.⁴⁸ He explained it thusly: "I have given to my business the best years of my life and have been compelled for quite a long time to contend with poor health and strength. I have weathered the serious business panics of the last quarter of a century and it pains me more than I care to say, that I am unable to close my business life with the

same ability to promptly and fully discharge my legitimate obligations. Misfortunes of various kinds have crowded in upon me. . . .⁴⁹ Yet, Abraham Harris lived on for an additional thirty-four years, seeing his two sons build and operate a company which dredged the swampy river bottom area around Holman field, creating St. Paul's downtown airport, and which also dredged Lake Calhoun in Minneapolis, among other large projects.⁵⁰

Leo J. (John) Harris, an international lawyer and a small press publisher, writes for a hobby. He has authored books and articles on law, philately, and postal, local and regional history. His article on "Taxes, Assessments and Fees Between 1856 and 1904: A Snapshot of the Lives of the Flanagan Family" appeared in the Fall, 2000, issue of Ramsey County History.

Acknowledgements

The author, grandson of Abraham Harris, wishes to acknowledge the enthusiastic assistance of Sig Harris, Jr., Jerry Bensing, Ray Greenblatt, and Edward Arundel.

Endnotes

1. Genesis 4:22. Tubal Cain was the first worker in iron.
2. *Minneapolis City Directory, 1888-1889*.
3. Leo J. Harris, "Wrecking to Save—The Chicago House Wrecking Company," *Journal of the West*, October, 1999, p. 65.
4. Goodrich Lowry, *Streetcar Man. Tom Lowry and the Twin City Rapid Transit Company*, Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company (1979) 77.
5. *Minneapolis Journal*, October 29, 1891, p. 5.
6. *Twin City Live Stock Reporter*, May 20, 1891. A great deal of information about the rolling mill came from this local newspaper. Unfortunately, significantly earlier copies simply have not been preserved.
7. *Ibid.*, April 29, 1891.
8. *Ibid.*, September 8, 1891.
9. *Ibid.*, March 11, 1892.
10. *Ibid.*, May 18, 1892.
11. *Ibid.*, June 19, 1891.
12. *Ibid.*, October 5, 1891.
13. *Ibid.*, February 25, 1892.
14. *Ibid.*, February 25, 1892.
15. *Ibid.*, May 23, 1892.

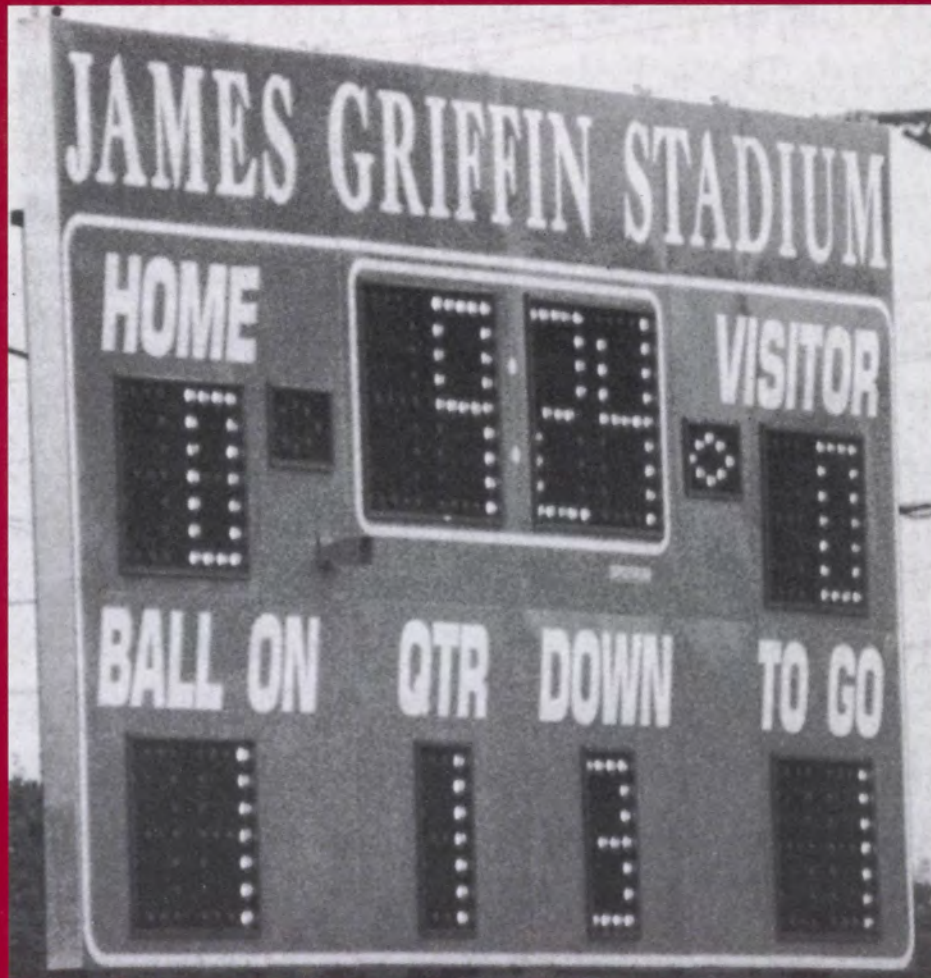
16. *Ibid.*, April 21, 1891.
17. *Ibid.*, April 30, 1891.
18. *Ibid.*, April 29, 1891.
19. *Ibid.*, June 15, 1891.
20. *Ibid.*, October 20, 1891.
21. Gene F. Skiba, *A Centennial History of New Brighton, Minnesota*. New Brighton: New Brighton Area Historical Society, 1987, p. 91.
22. *Twin City Live Stock Reporter*, May 26, 1891.
23. *Ibid.*, July 9, 1891.
24. *Ibid.*, August 18, 1891.
25. *Ibid.*, August 18, 1891.
26. *Ibid.*, April 22, 1892.
27. *Ibid.*, September 3, 1892.
28. *Ibid.*, October 5, 1892.
29. *Ibid.*, October 31, 1892.
30. February 1, 1893.
31. *Ibid.*, October 29, 1891.
32. *The Iron Age*, November 5, 1891, p. 796.
33. *Minneapolis Journal*, *op. cit.*
34. *Twin City Live Stock Reporter*, October 29, 1891.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, November 11, 1891.
37. *Ibid.*, December 10, 1891.
38. *Ibid.*, December 23, 1891.
39. *Ibid.*, February 27, 1892.
40. Lowry was the principal owner of the Twin City Rapid Transit Company and the Ryan Hotel, and held other major investments in Minnesota.
41. Letter dated January 10, 1893, addressed to Thomas Lowry, in the files of the author.
42. The Minneapolis Rolling Mills Company continued on with its business and was listed in the 1895-1896 *Minneapolis City Directory* as having offices at 120 Temple Court, with its mills being located in Columbia Heights. J. F. Conklin was president, and Alfred D. Arundel was general manager.
43. *Minneapolis Live Stock Reporter*, February 4, 1893.
44. Gene F. Skiba, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
45. *Minneapolis Journal*, February 4, 1893, p. 4.
46. Grandson of Marks Harris, in an oral history reporting session with the author.
47. Gene F. Skiba, in a conversation with the author.
48. Tombstone bankruptcy announcement, dated July 15, 1903.
49. Form letter to creditors, dated June 22, 1903, in the files of the author.
50. They built (as the Minneapolis Dredging Company), among other things, the Geo. P. Kingsley Dam in Ogallala, Nebraska, at the time of construction the second largest earth filled dam in the world.

Griffin (continued from page 18)

St. Paul police officers would also be used to assist the U.S. Marshall in transporting prisoners to federal institutions. As a rule, the means of transportation was by automobile. On one trip, Manley Rhodes, a black Deputy U.S. Marshall, and I picked up a prisoner at the Ramsey County Jail in St. Paul to return him to Springfield. En route to Springfield we were to pick up a federal prisoner in Austin, Minnesota, who was also slated to go to Springfield. This trip was made by car with a heavy screen between the front and back seats. Federal regulations also required that their prisoners had to be handcuffed along with wearing heavy leg irons. At that time U.S. Interstate 35 was open only as far as Ames, Iowa. In Ames, there was a large cafe, a gas station, and other business establishments nearby. We went into the cafe and uncuffed the prisoners so they could eat and use the rest room. This was done one prisoner at a time.

A few minutes after leaving the cafe, we were pulled over by two deputy sheriffs. They asked for identification and wanted to know why we had two white men in chains. Rhodes introduced himself as a Deputy U.S. Marshall and identified me as a sergeant with the St. Paul Police Department. Rhodes produced the papers that authorized us to transport these prisoners to a criminal facility in Springfield. We asked them the reason for stopping us. They said that a citizen had complained that two black men had two white men chained up in a car with Minnesota license plates, going south from Ames. As soon as this situation was clarified, we proceeded to Springfield with no further problems. I wonder if this citizen would have called the police if two white men had two black men chained up in a car?

Jimmy Griffin, A Son of Rondo, A Memoir, was published privately and in a limited edition in 2001 by the Ramsey County Historical Society, with assistance from The St. Paul Foundation. The excerpt here is reprinted with permission. The book is available by calling the Society at 651-222-0701.



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

R.C.H.S.
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