

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*Growing Up in St. Paul—
Diamonds, Gravel Roads,
And a Little Chevrolet*

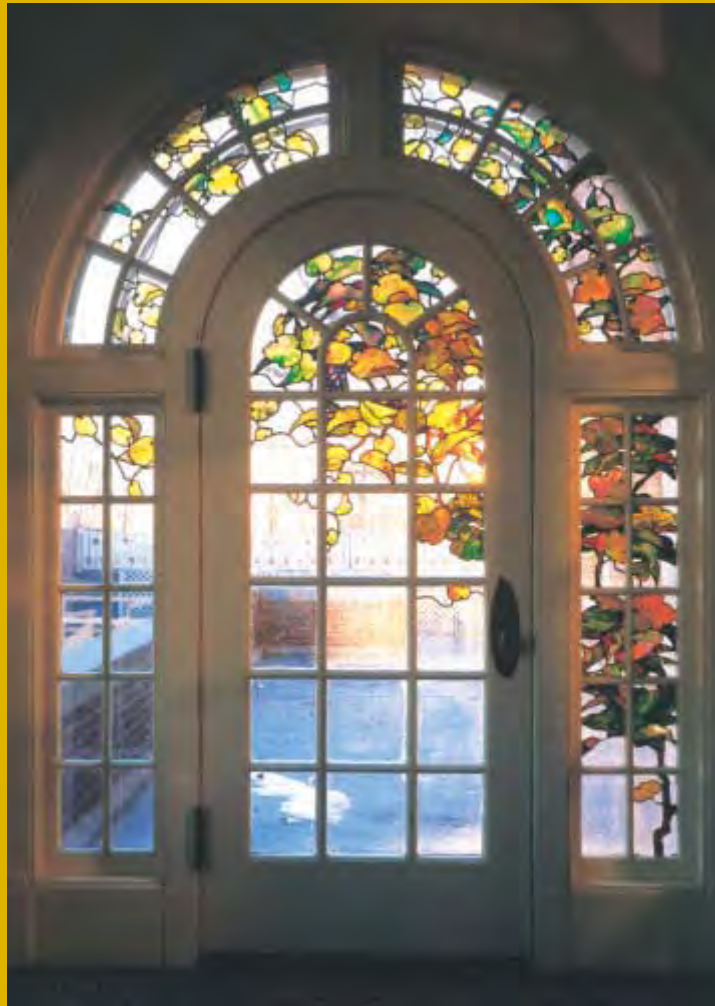
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Winter, 2003

Volume 37, Number 4

The History Behind the Louis Hill House

New Settlers, Real Estate Boom, and Speculation
—Page 4



The stained glass window Louis J. Millet designed for James J. Hill's house on Canada Street in Lowertown and later installed in Louis W. Hill's house at 260 Summit Avenue. See article beginning on page 4. This beautiful window was photographed for Ramsey County History by George Heinrich.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 37, Number 4

Winter, 2003

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Our winter issue opens with Eileen R. McCormack's fascinating account of the history of the house that stands at 260 Summit Avenue, known to many St. Paul residents as the Louis Hill House. Today Richard and Nancy Nicholson and their family live there and have restored the house to the splendor that it had in the days when the Hills lived in the house, while also adapting it to the conveniences of contemporary living. What emerges from Eileen McCormack's research is a glimpse of a bygone era of St. Paul's elite and of the personality of the home the Hill family built.

Moving from an elegant residential property to a modest commercial and manufacturing part of the spectrum of St. Paul buildings, historian Matt Percy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recounts the history of the building at 333 Sibley Street. This commercial structure is today's Corps of Engineers Centre, which has its origins in the history of Gordon & Ferguson Company, a famous St. Paul furrier. Alan R. (Buddy) Ruvelson, a well-known St. Paul entrepreneur, contributes a "Growing Up in St. Paul" story that begins with his maternal great grandfather's home at 545 Sibley, in Lowertown, not far from the Corps' present headquarters. Publication of an old photo of the rabbi's house in David Riehle's article in the fall issue of *Ramsey County History* prompted author Ruvelson to trace his family's roots to Rabbi B. Rosenthal's home in the area that the plat maps called "Borup's Addition." Fortunately for us, Ruvelson has had a varied and unusual life as a dealer in diamonds, an entrepreneur, a venture capitalist, and public citizen. Whether elegant like the Hill home or modest like the home of Rabbi Rosenthal, St. Paul's built environment can tell us much about who we are and how our city has changed over the years.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Books

The Rooftops of St. Paul: A History of the Thomas Finn Company, 1898 to 2002

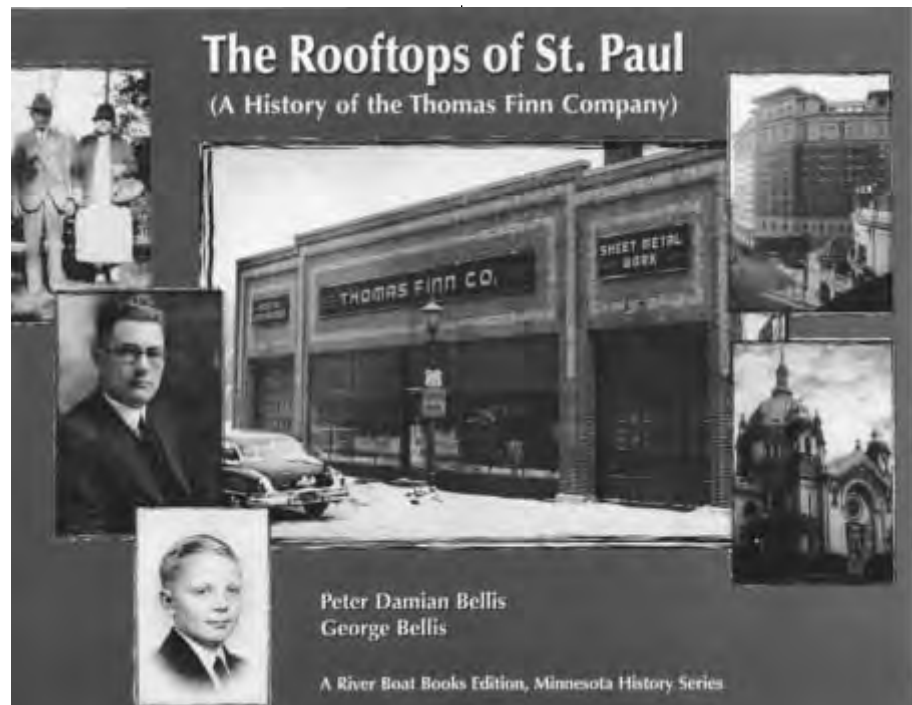
Peter Damian Bellis and George Bellis
St. Paul: Thomas Finn Company, 2002
131 pages; 82 photos; index
(Copies are available from the Thomas Finn Company at 651/227-6536 or tfinn86@AOL.com)

Reviewed by John M. Lindley

Early in this readable account of the history of the Thomas Finn Company, a St. Paul roofing contractor, the authors explain that the firm has been the “ultimate family business.” By that phrase they mean that for more than 100 years the Thomas Finn Company has been owned and managed by members of a single family, all of whom have been related to the company’s founder, Thomas Finn.

Thomas Finn was born in County Galway, Ireland, in 1869 and came to St. Paul about 1888, where he learned the trade of tinsmith. In 1898 Finn formed a partnership with another tinsmith, whom he later bought out, to do iron work, roofing, skylight work, and portable bathtubs. By 1906 the firm was known as Thomas Finn Roofing, Sheet Metal, and Furnace Work and was located at 468 St. Peter Street. Gradually the Finn Company began to specialize in roofing and expand its business.

Because St. Paul’s population was rapidly growing in the first two decades of the twentieth century, building construction was also booming in the city. As a consequence, the Thomas Finn Company won contracts for the roofing of the new St. Paul Hotel (1909–10), the Lowry Medical Arts Building (1910),



the expanded St. Joseph’s Hospital (1910), and the installation of the copper roof on the fourth Cathedral of St. Paul (1914–15). Because the Cathedral roof is so great in size and the interior space it covers used for public gatherings for worship, one of the themes running through this history is the ongoing repair and service work that the Finn Company has done on the Cathedral roof from its installation to the end of the twentieth century. Local readers of this book will also be interested in the chapter that describes the work that the Finn Company did installing the roof and interior catwalks in the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse (1930–32).

When Thomas Finn died in 1936, neither his widow nor their daughter wanted to run the family business, so they handed the management of the firm to Richard E. Walsh, a nephew who had

been working as the company bookkeeper for twelve years. Richard Walsh steered the company through the last hard years of the Great Depression and slowly guided its growth until 1970, when he retired due to ill health. Walsh’s son, J. James Walsh, has led the firm since then. Since its modest beginnings in 1898, the Thomas Finn Company has grown into a regional roofing contractor that made over \$3 million in annual revenue in the late 1990s. Most of this firm’s revenue comes from what the authors call “bread-and-butter” roofing jobs for schools, churches, homes, and commercial properties in the greater St. Paul area. In addition to describing many of the more notable buildings in St. Paul that the Thomas Finn Company has worked on over the years, the book describes some of the problems encountered with difficult roofing jobs,

the company's involvement with roofing contractors trade associations, and the handling of various labor issues through the years.

The Rooftops of St. Paul is also a nice example of a family-owned business that has taken the time and committed the resources necessary to tell its story. By making this story available in book form with the many photos that enhance the text, members of the public now know more about the work that has gone into the construction of some of St. Paul's best-known buildings and the many contributions of a family that has always taken pride in a job well done, no matter how big or small the project.

John Lindley is a freelance editor, researcher, and writer, and chairman of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Editorial Board.

The American Auto Factory

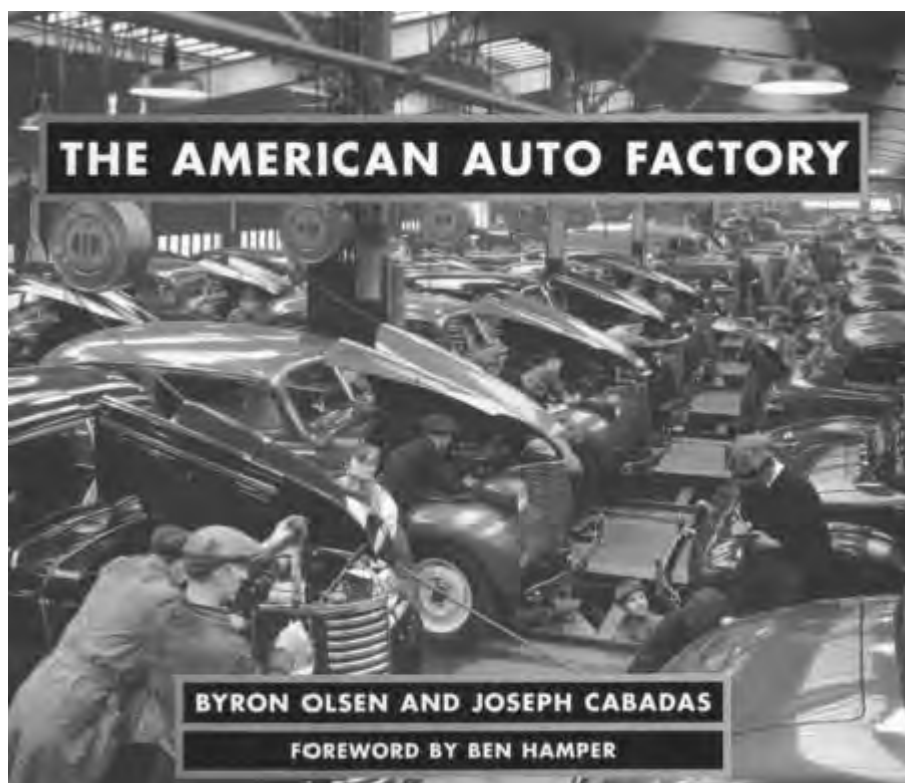
Byron Olsen and Joe Cabadas
Foreword: Ben Hamper
St. Paul: MBI Publishing Company,
2002
192 pages, \$35.95

Reviewed by Bob Garland

This reviewer highly recommends *The American Auto Factory* by St. Paul automotive history expert Byron Olsen and Detroit auto writer Joe Cabadas. Featuring many striking photographs with well-written captions and an interesting text, the book tells the story of automobile manufacturing in the United States from the first primitive garages to today's giant automatic plants.

The story proceeds chronologically from the earliest "craft method" manufacturing, through the assembly line system, to today's "lean production of just-in-time" car building. This is the story of men, cars, machinery, and factory buildings.

The manufacturing processes are well described, beginning with those which were virtually all handwork, to those which are now entirely auto-



ated. As an added insight, the book does a good job of explaining the processes for moving raw materials, sub-assemblies, and the cars themselves through the factory. These processes are just as important as the actual fabrication steps performed by workers and their machines.

There are chapters on unionization and on the auto companies' role in manufacturing war materials during World War II, a time when more and more women and minorities entered the work force. The regrettable story of the way in which minorities were initially relegated to the most unpleasant and low-paying jobs is told in both words and pictures.

The book is not without humor. For example, there is one picture caption in which the author describes what should have happened when an over-decorated 1958 model was posed inside an enormous press.

There is ample coverage of the famous automobiles themselves; of the pioneer owners and executives of auto manufacturing, such as William Durant, Ransom E. Olds, Henry Ford,

Walter Chrysler, and A. P. Soan; and of the leaders of the autoworkers, including Homer Martin and Walter Reuther. However, for this reviewer, top billing goes to the many photographs, especially the older photos in black-and-white, showing the workers and their machines actually performing the manufacturing processes. Twin Cities people with connections to the St. Paul Ford Assembly Plant, a steady employer through the years, should be interested in this book. So should anyone interested in automotive history, or in manufacturing in general.

Bob Garland, a member of the Ramsey County Historical Society's board of directors, is a frequent contributor to Ramsey County History. He also is the author of three mysteries, Slaying the Red Slayer, Derfflinger, and R.I.P. 37E.

Also In Print

Stephen R. Graubard, editor, "Minnesota: A Different Place?" *Daedalus* vol. 129, no. 3 (paperback, \$7.95), the

quarterly journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, devoted its entire summer 2000 issue (334 pages) to an insightful and engaging analysis of the state of Minnesota. Scholarly journals such as this one often devote a single volume to an important topic or subject, but rarely has an academic journal placed so much attention on the state of Minnesota.

Editor Stephen Graubard explains in his "Preface" that the idea of analyzing Minnesota began in Europe with European perceptions of the United States. The image of the United States that Europeans have is almost always based on our nation's media coverage or on firsthand travel in this country, which has most typically concentrated on the great cities of the East and West Coasts, Florida, and, to a lesser degree, the great national parks of the West. Thus, as Graubard writes, most of what Europeans know about the United States from the media or their own travels has meant that the "great Midwest and Southwest were being largely passed over." How politely and tactfully Graubard raises the idea of Minnesota as "fly-over country."

Out of this awareness, the editorial board of *Daedalus* conceived of doing separate issues focused on the two American states at opposite ends of the north-south highway—Interstate 35—that connects Minnesota and Texas. The editorial goal, as the editors planned it, would be to see if regional differences in the United States had given way to a kind of national cultural homogenization with Texas and Minnesota as case studies. After all, Texas has been the home state of three United States presidents and Minnesota the residence of two vice presidents since 1960. The editors expected that publication of these two volumes would help demonstrate whether regional differences are still alive in the United States and they would also raise the awareness among Europeans of the shape and variety of this vast nation.

So far, only the Minnesota volume has made its way into print. Fortunately the thirteen different essays written by

seventeen experts go a long way toward the editorial goals. Most, but not all, of the essayists are based in academe. They know Minnesota well and write with convincing insight about our state. The opening essay by the eminent historian Rhoda R. Gilman begins an examination of Minnesota with a brief account of the history and peopling of the state. Subsequent essays touch on Minnesota's landscape, the differences between the state's metropolitan area and its rural communities, and the different circumstances of the state's American Indian population. Other essays focus on the religious traditions, politics, social services, corporate philanthropy, arts and theater world, and internationalism of Minnesota. Each essay stands largely independent of the others in the volume; yet collectively they provide as a whole much more than the sum of their parts in explanation and understanding of our state.

Keeping in mind that Minnesota only gained statehood in 1849, these essays remind us of how far Minnesota has come since its pioneer days. Some essayists, such as Joe Dowling, artistic director of the Guthrie Theater, provide badly needed perspective on topics such as the arts and theater scene. Other writers, such as Jon Pratt and Edson W. Spencer, analyze the dynamics of corporate philanthropy with the knowledge and insight that only those who are involved in this part of the state's culture would have. Jon Pratt is executive director of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits and Edson Spencer is retired chief executive officer of Honeywell, Inc.

In terms of corporate philanthropy, the pending merger of Honeywell with General Electric later in 2001, and the gradual passing of executive leadership of Minnesota's largest corporations to a new generation of leaders, many of whom are not Minnesotans, underscores just how unusual the style of Minnesota corporate philanthropy has been and how it may be changing as ownership of these corporations moves away from Minnesota. This book is not a "puff" piece for Minnesota that reads like a tourism or chamber of commerce brochure. It's not a search for the "true"

Minnesota either. Instead it's a volume of serious scholarship full of careful analysis of what has happened in Minnesota, especially since the Great Depression and World War II.

Although the topics covered in this book are diverse and wide ranging, all the authors address in their individual ways and styles how Minnesota has changed in the past fifty years or so. Part of each essay addresses the question of the events, forces, circumstances, conditions, and leaders that have assisted in these transformations. Because these essays were written long before the U.S. Census Bureau uploaded the results of the 2000 census in Minnesota onto their web site, these authors didn't have this data to use when they made their analyses. Yet anyone who reads the newspaper reports on the census in Minnesota or consults the census web site will find statistical data that goes a long way toward supporting many of the conclusions these authors present about the transformation of Minnesota's agriculture, industry, population (especially minority populations), settlement patterns, housing, transportation, and politics since World War II.

John S. Adams, professor of geography, planning, and public affairs at the University of Minnesota, has contributed an essay to this volume on Minnesota's landscape and people. Adams identifies Minnesota as a "work in progress." As such, he sums up most fully just where the state is as it begins the twenty-first century:

Despite troubling trends toward some form of cultural convergence, Minnesota's cities and countryside remain different and agreeable places, still displaying evidence of deep roots in a conservative culture, and reflecting a distinctive mix of Scandinavian cooperative thinking with practical New England town hall sensibilities. It handled the twentieth century reasonably well, and seems poised to confront the twenty-first with a large measure of competence and confidence.

John M. Lindley



John LaFarge's stained glass window, retrieved by James J. Hill from his Canada Street house for use by his son Louis W. Hill at 260 Summit Avenue. See article beginning on page 4. Photograph by George Heinrich for Ramsey County History.

R.C.H.S.
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