

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

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

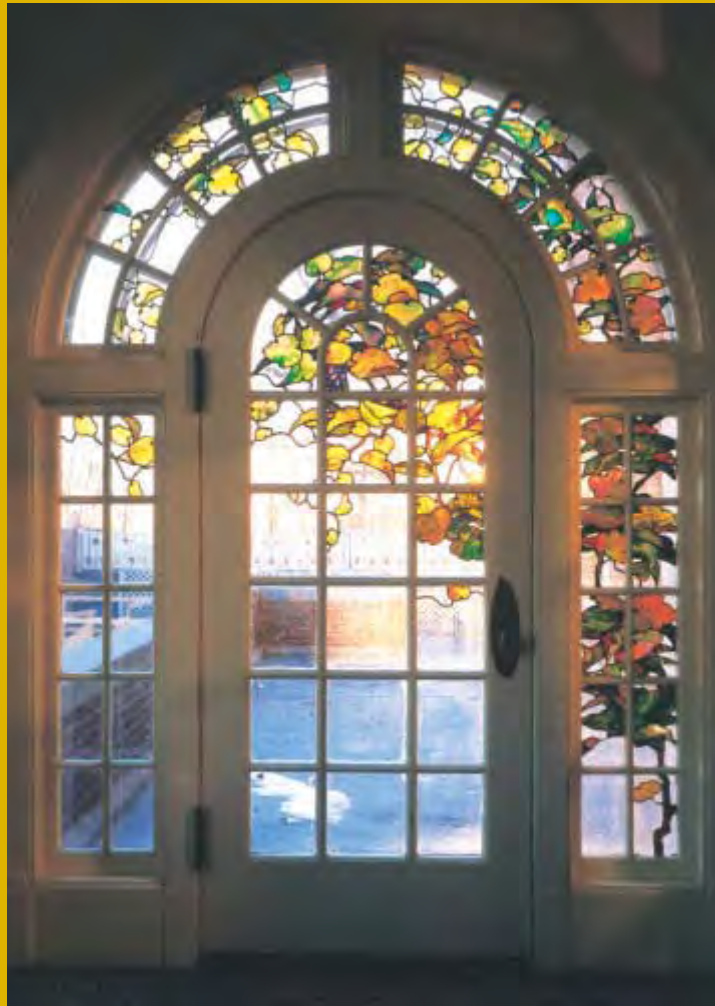
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The History Behind the Louis Hill House

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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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

Slunky Norton: The Chimney Sweep Who Rocked the Rafters with His Buglers

Albert W. Lindeke Jr.

By the late 1800s coal had almost completely supplanted wood fuel to ward off winter's chill in Minnesota homes. Hard coal, known as anthracite, mined in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, began arriving at the port of Duluth via the Great Lakes in the holds of ships that had gone east carrying grain and iron ore from Minnesota to ports on Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. This cargo exchange allowed fairly reasonable rates for shipping coal to the North Star state, and by the early 1900s most homes in Minnesota were dependent on coal entirely. Part of my family was in the coal business, and when temperatures plummeted in Minnesota, they were always wreathed in smiles. When January's thaws arrived, smiles were less frequent.

The extreme danger of fire and loss of entire buildings due to creosote build-up in chimneys from the constant burning of coal and wood was well understood at that time, and, depending on how cold the weather was, this awareness required the periodic employment of that important professional known as the "chimney sweep."

By the late 1920s and 1930s, however, oil began to supplant coal as the main fuel for both commercial and domestic uses, and in the late 1930s natural gas—the cleanest and most efficient fuel—slowly supplanted oil. As a result of these changes, professional chimney sweeps virtually disappeared, but their stories linger in old timers' memories to this day.

Slunky Norton—a hard-working, loquacious character, probably of Irish descent—was a well-known chimney sweep in the Hill District of St. Paul in the early decades of the twentieth century. An interesting facet of his career was that, in addition to his professional duties, Norton acquired a small group of professional buglers to accompany him on his rounds on special occasions. One of Norton's favorite times and places to appear "in con-



Gaslights on Third Street, 1880s. Photo from Minnesota Historical Society

cert" with his troop of buglers was during the holidays on Lower Summit Avenue.

Louis W. Hill of the Great Northern Railroad had a particular fondness for Slunky Norton and his buglers, and, with his help, Norton rented or somehow acquired a hook and ladder truck to transport his crew. As the Christmas season was an unusually frigid time of year and riding in an open vehicle required warm clothing, Hill saw to it that the buglers were warmly clad. Their costumes were full-length red wool coats and peaked red caps trimmed with white, Santa Claus-style; footwear was black boots, probably felt-lined. They were an impressive bunch.

Hill probably knew or was recognized by almost everybody in town due to his name and his leadership role in developing the St. Paul Winter Carnival. During the holiday season he loved to accompany Slunky Norton and his boys as they made the rounds of the city looking for well-lit houses and signs of festive occasions where they might make a surprise visit, perform on their bugles, and receive a cheering cup.

Clearly etched in my memories of childhood was one Christmas Eve at our family home where the traditional large holiday dinner for about thirty friends and relatives was in progress. Suddenly our front door was thrust open and in burst Hill and Norton and at least five or six of his red-coated men. The buglers put their instruments to their lips and let forth a shrieking blast. I don't remember any particular tune they were playing, but the noise was deafening.

Slunky's crew exited with shouts of laughter and went on their way to find another unsuspecting target for invasion. They barely had time to take on local refreshments during their stay, but mounted their truck in the winter chill and proceeded on to another surprise rendezvous. The only casualty of their holiday visit to our house that night was that our canary swooned and died in his cage, presumably of a heart attack, as a result of the alarming blast that had rocked the rafters.

Albert Lindeke is a retired investment advisor and a lifelong resident of St. Paul.



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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