# RAMSEY COUNTY STATE OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Building Permits—
Oh the Stories
They Can Tell
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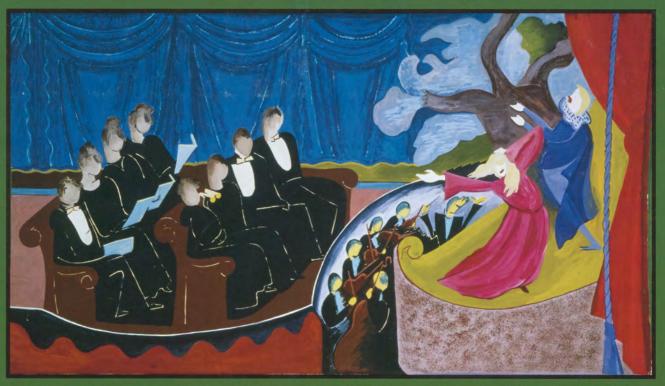
Winter, 2005

Volume 39, Number 4

Curtain Up in 1933

The Legacy of the St. Paul Opera Association

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"Attending the Opera," a gouache by painter Miriam Ibling (1895–1985). This was a 1938 study for a WPA mural at St. Paul's Galtier Elementary School. From the Minnesota Historical Society archives.

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### H1story

Volume 39, Number 4

Winter, 2005

the mission statement of the ramsey county historical society adopted by the board of directors in July 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

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#### A Message from the Editorial Board

Beginning in 1933, the St. Paul Civic Opera Association played a vital and enriching role in the city's arts and cultural life. When in the mid-1970s financial problems caused the St. Paul organization to merge with the Minnesota Opera, local pride in the city's ability to stage and present this grand art form gave way to the realities of what it actually cost to deliver any sustained program in the arts at the end of the twentieth century.

Historian Steve Trimble tells the story of the St. Paul Civic Opera Association with insight based on substantial research, interviews with a number of individuals who were involved in the Opera Association, and sensitivity to the complexity of opera as an art form. Despite the differences of opinion on whether operas should be done in their original language or in English; use homegrown talent for key roles or hire outside, professional voices; or select works for a given season that include Grand Opera, light opera, or musical comedy, the depth of commitment of opera supporters in St. Paul was steadfast until funding problems made all other issues secondary. What shines forth from Trimble's account is how hard many people worked to sustain their belief in the importance and value of the arts as an integral part of civic life in St. Paul.

Juxtaposed to the fantasy and delight of Grand Opera in our winter issue is a detailed examination of the birth, life, and death of the DeLoop Parking Garage on Cedar Street in downtown St. Paul. On the surface, Bob Garland's analysis of the paper trail left by a deservedly forgotten and otherwise unremarkable St. Paul building whose life span paralleled many of the same years when the Opera Association flourished seems not only mundane, but also incongruous.

Yet the painstaking research Garland did in this case study makes a powerful point: the proper preservation of the paper records of the city of St. Paul is essential if historians are going to be able to recount the city's history accurately and in detail. Just as families need to learn how to preserve their own letters, photographs, and other paper records, so cities need to learn how to properly archive their many records. Fortunately, in the case of St. Paul's building permits, in 2003 the city turned these records over to the Ramsey County Historical Society and the Society is working hard to make them more accessible to all who want to search them for answers about St. Paul's built environment.

John Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

## 2004 Donor Recognition Roll

The Ramsey County Historical Society extends warmest and most sincere thanks to all supporters of the Society in 2004, who allow us to offer high quality programs to the community.

A special thank you goes to the Board of the Ramsey County Commissioners for their continuing and loyal support. Their patronage through the years gives the Society a solid foundation on which to build. Thanks to Victoria Reinhardt, Chair; Tony Bennett; Jim McDonough; Susan Haigh; Rafael Ortega; Janice Rettman; and Jan Parker Wiessner. Special appreciation goes to County Manager David Twa and countless members of his staff for their excellent professional assistance.



If you would like to become a member of RCHS or make your own contribution to the organization, please call (651) 222-0701, or visit our web site www.rchs.com.

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From Joanne Englund

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In honor of Blanche Weaver who lived over 101 years. She was a lifelong poet and recorder of her history. A member of Writers' Unlimited for 30 years, Blanche was a role model completing her autobiography, "My Century" shortly before she died.

In memory of Kent Schonberger — For 30 years as Assistant City Engineer, Kent managed the care and safety of Saint Paul and its river.

In memory of Richard Broeker — Dick was Mayor Latimer's "elf," always working behind the spotlight on ideas and projects to benefit Saint Paul.

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Mrs. W. Homer Sweney, known to family and friends as Mary Glyde Griggs, a founder of the St. Paul Opera Association. Portrait is by St. Paul artist Carl Bohnen (1871–1951), and is reproduced here courtesy of her daughter Pat Hart. Bohnen, an opera buff, was nationally known for his portraits, including seven governor portraits in the Minnesota State Capitol. Border taken from the Mary Molton Cheney Papers (1872-1950) in the collection of the Ramsey County Historical Society. See article on page 4.

### R.C.H.S.

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