RAMSEY COUNTY History

A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Winter, 2005 Volume 39, Number 4

"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.

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.

CONTENTS

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 orga-
nization 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 As-
sociation, 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

Union Park in the 1880s—
Band Concerts, Balloon Ascensions Once Lured 10,000 People in a Single Day

When service on the Milwaukee Short Line started on November 15, 1880, it opened up a vast new area for home sites in which is now called the Macalester and Merriam Park district but was then outside the city limits. Two enterprising gentlemen, Herman Grote and John O. Hinkel, also saw it as an opportunity to start an amusement park which would draw patronage from St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Union Park, as they named it, covered about thirty-three acres, and included the district now [in 1958] bounded by University, Fairview, Prior, and the Short Line tracks. In its natural state, with low wooded hills surrounding Lake Iris, it undoubtedly was a beautiful spot, even though the lake was not large enough to float a boat.

When Grote and Hinkel purchased this tract in 1880, they surrounded it with a high board fence. The entrance from University was through an arched gate. Near the center, just south of the lake, was a large pavilion, 60 by 149 feet, for dancing. Adjoining this was a bandstand and scattered about were refreshment stands, swings, and a merry-go-round. South of the pavilion was a bowling alley and an 85-foot-high observation tower. On the University Avenue side were sheds for horses, and a small enclosure containing a few deer. A zoo was planned, but apparently never got beyond a few small animals.

At the beginning, the park was rented only to church organizations and clubs for private picnics, but in 1883 it was thrown open to the public, and entertainment of various kinds was provided. Siebart's Great Western Band of twenty pieces played on Sundays and on stated days during the week. Lottie St.Clair made balloon ascensions every afternoon, and in September the Charest family of high-wire walkers gave exhibitions; some of their featured stunts consisted of walking the wire with baskets on their feet, and riding a bicycle on the wire.

The Merriam Park station at Prior provided access to the park for those who came by train from either city, the roundtrip fare being 15 cents. Admission to the park was 25 cents for adults and 10 cents for children. Sometimes as many as 10,000 people visited the park in a single day, it was claimed.

When the park was opened, Lexington Avenue was the St. Paul city limits, and Union Park was considered "way out in the country." Within a few years, the rapid growth of the city made it apparent that the site soon would be surrounded by houses. Grote, who also owned the Tivoli saloon at Bridge Square, did not seem interested in going into the real estate business, for late in 1883 he sold his share in the park to Hinkel, who immediately platted it for building lots. In doing so, he retained a park-like appearance by adapting the streets to the natural contour of the land and curving them around Lake Iris. Even the street names are suggestive of a park area—Lynnhurst, Feronia, and Oakley.

Being an isolated plat at the time and not connected to any other streets, the street forming the park's western boundary was first named Westwood; the street

on the east Ponoma. After the intervening spaces filled up, these streets became part of Prior and Fairview respectively. Within eight months after the project was started, thirty-six houses had been erected in Union Park. Hinkle showed his faith in the district by building the fine home on Feronia for himself at a cost of $13,000. The house remained standing until the 1960s when it was torn down to make more room for the Episcopal Home.

The records contain no information on the origin of the name Lake Iris. There is a legend that on a quiet night the rumble of bowling balls and the laughter of the crowds of long ago still can be heard echoing across the little lake. However, with the modern roar of traffic on University Avenue, nights in the neighborhood no longer are quiet, so there is no way to learn if this is true.

This short history of Union Park was adapted from an article in the files of the Junior Pioneers, an organization which has since disbanded but has turned over its files to the Ramsey Country Historical Society.

John O. Hinkel's home on Feronia, Minnesota Historical Society photo.

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.