

RAMSEY COUNTY

History

A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Winter 2012

Volume 46, Number 4

*At Home and Abroad,
St. Paul's Impresario
Cut a Swath*

How Nettie Snyder
Put the City
on the Musical Map

Roger Bergerson

—Page 14

From Boom Times to the Great Depression

Two Stolpestad Men in St. Paul Real Estate, 1886–1936

James A. Stolpestad

Page 3



A roadside directional sign points the way to Stolpestad, a farming community located near Ringsaker in north central Norway. There the homestead of Stolpestad East Farm, center, marks the place from which Andrew Hansen Stolpestad emigrated to St. Paul in 1884. In the photo on the right, a fourth-generation descendant of Andrew, James A. Stolpestad, right, did family research on his Norwegian roots with his cousin, Signe Lund, in 1999. All three photos courtesy of James A. Stolpestad.



RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Executive Director

John M. Lindley

Founding Editor (1964–2006)

Virginia Brainard Kunz

Editor

John M. Lindley

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Paul A. Verret

President

Cheryl Dickson

First Vice President

William Frels

Second Vice President

Julie Brady

Secretary

Carolyn J. Brusseau

Treasurer

Thomas H. Boyd

Immediate Past President

Anne Cowie, Nancy Randall Dana,

Joanne A. Englund, Howard Guthmann,

Richard B. Heydinger, Jr., John Holman,

Kenneth H. Johnson, Elizabeth M. Kiernan,

David Kristal, Carl Kuhmeyer,

Father Kevin M. McDonough,

Nancy W. McKillips, Susan McNeely,

Laurie M. Murphy, Robert Muschewske,

Richard H. Nicholson, Jay Pfaender,

Jeffrey Slack, Ralph Thrane.

Directors Emeriti

W. Andrew Boss

Richard T. Murphy Sr.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Anne Cowie, *chair*, James B. Bell,

Thomas H. Boyd, John Diers, John Milton,

Debra Mitts-Smith, Laurie M. Murphy,

Paul D. Nelson, Richard H. Nicholson,

Jay Pfaender, David Riehle, Steve Trimble,

Paul A. Verret, Mary Lethert Wingerd.

HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

William Fallon, William Finney, George

Latimer, Joseph S. Micallef, Marvin J. Pertzik,

James Reagan, Rosalie E. Wahl.

RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Rafael Ortega, chair

Commissioner Tony Bennett

Commissioner Toni Carter

Commissioner Jim McDonough

Commissioner Jan Parker

Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt

Commissioner Janice Rettman

Julie Kleinschmidt, manager,
Ramsey County

Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, MN 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 2012, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758. **All rights reserved.**

No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Fax 651-223-8539; e-mail address: admin@rchs.com; web site address: www.rchs.com

RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 46, Number 4

Winter 2012

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

CONTENTS

- 3 *From Boom Times to the Great Depression*
Two Stolpestad Men in St. Paul Real Estate, 1886–1936
James A. Stolpestad
- 14 *At Home and Abroad, St. Paul's Own Impresario Cut a Swath*
How Nettie Snyder Put the City on the Musical Map
Roger Bergerson
- 27 *Louis Hill to Henry Ford: "No Deal!"*
Henry Ford and the *William Crooks*
Brian McMahon

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

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin has observed that a person remains alive as long as others continue to remember him or her with stories. In this issue we have some of those stories. Jim Stolpestad recounts the family history of Andrew Stolpestad, a Norwegian immigrant who built a successful real estate career in St. Paul during its boom years of the 1880s, and his son, Annar, who worked as a real estate officer with the Hill family at Northwestern Trust, forerunner of First Trust. Roger Bergerson presents the tale of Nettie Snyder, an energetic and colorful personality who brought opera to St. Paul in the early 1900s. And Brian McMahon reminds us that artifacts have stories, too. Who knew that the *William Crooks*, the first locomotive used in Minnesota, almost left the state to join Henry Ford's collection in Michigan? We're lucky these stories have been preserved; we hope they will strike a chord as you revisit some of your own memories.

Anne Cowie, Chair, Editorial Board

At Home and Abroad, St. Paul's Own Impresario Cut a Swath

How Nettie Snyder Put the City on the Musical Map

Roger Bergerson

When Enrico Caruso and the stars of the New York Metropolitan Opera Company took the stage at the brand-new St. Paul Auditorium in the spring of 1907, the arias soared and so did civic pride.

“The great building was filled for every performance and the audiences made a brave display in the way of costumes and jewels,” the *St. Paul Dispatch* enthused. “The assemblages were representative of the whole Northwest—representative of its riches and of its culture. Life in the Minnesota capital seemed suddenly to develop a new charm and a new fragrance—something that had been diffused but now was brought together in a congenial setting.”¹

Credit for making this lustrous event possible went to a forty-six-year-old dynamo, Mrs. F. H. (“Nettie”) Snyder, rapidly building a reputation as the only female concert promoter in the entire country. A “breezy, enthusiastic Western woman, with the manner that immediately makes a friend of the most diffident,” was how a New York writer described Mrs. Snyder. The hometown press weighed in with, “A live-wire; . . . a “living contradiction of the eight-hour idea. . . .”

Mrs. Snyder was a master of public relations before the term was invented. In advance of the New York Met’s arrival, she sternly informed a newspaper reporter that she did not like what she was seeing at the box office. “I have already sold more season tickets in Minneapolis than in St. Paul, and a whole lot of enthusiasm seems to be in the outlying towns rather than here at home,” Mrs. Snyder said. “St. Paul must remember that it is getting more grand opera—three performances—than Milwaukee, which will have but one night, and many other important cities.”

The chiding paid off. Large crowds turned out for each performance over that



When Nettie Snyder, seen here in a sketch from the St. Paul Daily Globe, studied voice in Florence, Italy, in 1891, she left her new husband behind. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

April’s two-day opera “season,” the term used for such visits, no matter how short their duration. Governor John Johnson, and prominent families such as the Hills, the Kelloggs, and the Ordways, as well as the Heffelfingers and the Peaveys from Minneapolis, all purchased boxes. The newspapers marveled at the fashions “. . . and the diamonds!” Reserving a box for herself and her friends, Mrs. Snyder was resplendent in black lace over ivory satin, her opera cloak a mandarin robe of black satin embroidered with gold. She was on friendly terms with many of the lead performers, including Caruso, “the world’s greatest tenor,” who St. Paul was seeing for the first time.

Her husband, Fred, was likely at her side, although he was something of an invisible man, avoiding the limelight as as-

siduously as his wife sought it. As he had previously in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Mankato, Minnesota, Fred Snyder operated a successful hotel in downtown St. Paul. Named the Frederic, probably in honor of its proprietor, it catered to the opera stars, music hall performers, actors, and vaudevillians of the day. The couple lived there and Mrs. Snyder maintained a studio in which she gave voice lessons, held recitals, and hosted gatherings for her artistic friends and visitors to town.

The spring of 1907 was a very good time for Mrs. Snyder. She brought grand opera back to St. Paul after an absence of almost a decade, served as the business manager of the newly formed St. Paul Symphony Orchestra, and booked top performers for her own promotions. And construction had started on the Snyders’ impressive country home, The Crossroads, out in Rose Township at the intersection of Snelling and Larpenteur Avenues.

This was also a time of transition for her. While continuing to teach voice, Mrs. Snyder was gradually ending her own appearances as an operatic soprano. But the array of contacts she had developed at home and abroad served her well as she concentrated more on the business aspects of music. Several personal qualities also made her well suited for this managerial role, including resiliency and a steely resolve. Warm and friendly as she was with friends and allies, Mrs. Snyder became an implacable foe when crossed.

Although she left behind no personal papers, much of Nettie Snyder’s life played itself out on the pages of various newspapers. There, she was remarkably forthright about a wide range of issues, including her lifelong mission to foster an appreciation for good music. It was a journey that began in Reedsburg, Wis.,

many years before. Over time, she tended to shave a few years off her age, but it appears that Electa Anette Root was born on December 9, 1859, near Point Bluff, Wisconsin. She was raised in Reedsburg, about fifty miles northwest of Madison. The Root family likely struggled financially, because her father was wounded in the Civil War and never fully recovered.

She showed an interest in the performing arts early on: at the age of ten, she appeared in a school play at the Reedsburg town hall and at fifteen directed a children's concert in La Crosse. After her father's death in 1875, the family may have dispersed. At any rate, by 1879 she was living in Albert Lea, Minnesota, and had become acquainted with John E. Fuller, a young photographer with a studio in nearby Spring Valley. They married just after her twentieth birthday in December 1879, and she gave birth to a son, Harry Victor, in October of the following year.

The marriage must have come apart rather quickly, because by late 1883 Mrs. Fuller had moved to St. Paul, supporting herself by taking a "church position" and pursuing her dream of a singing career. It is possible that her young son remained with in-laws in Albert Lea at this point, although he subsequently lived with his mother. In an early public concert in St. Paul, Mrs. Fuller sang a difficult aria with so much style and expression that one member of the audience, W. Nelson Burritt, the leading voice teacher in the city at the time, was amazed to learn that she lacked formal training. By then she already was in her early twenties, seemingly getting a late start on a singing career.

Her first performance rating a newspaper mention was at a "musical soiree" at the conservatory of a Miss Geist, with whom she studied. In the following years, she went off on her own, appearing in a variety of local productions and quickly becoming a favorite. After she appeared at the Grand Opera House, the *St. Paul Daily Globe* reported, "Mrs. Nettie Fuller next sang 'Many Miles Away' with a touching pathos and delicacy of expression that sent a thrill through every heart. Mrs. Fuller's voice was in excellent quality and she sang with a faultlessness

that bespeaks her a most accomplished artist. She received a lovely floral lyre as a testimonial and responding to a most generous encore, sang 'At the Concert' with a chic and vivacity of expression that was absolutely charming."²

Mrs. Fuller also made frequent out-of-town appearances, returning on several occasions to Albert Lea, where she once sang before an audience of 3,000 attending a Civil War veterans' jubilee. Robert Tallant Laudon, professor emeritus of Musicology at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, explains it was common for churches at the time to have quartettes rather than choirs, often with a lead singer. Mrs. Fuller was lead soprano for various churches and synagogues; the most prominent among these was the People's Church at Chestnut and Pleasant Avenues, in the vicinity of today's United Hospital complex. Organized in 1888, the huge non-denominational church featured a 2,000-seat auditorium renowned for its superb acoustics. For the better part of fifty years it was one of St. Paul's primary cultural centers.

Although she continued her own training, Mrs. Fuller began to teach voice in her rented living quarters. She could not have been particularly well fixed financially, because she also sold sewing

machines for a time. After John Fuller took his own life in a Minneapolis boarding house in early 1886, she grew close to a traveling salesman named Fred Handy Snyder. Employed by a dry goods company, Snyder was a native of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, where his father was a hotelkeeper.

The two were married in April 1889 by a minister at Fuller's home on Wabasha Street in St. Paul with friends and family present. Evidence that there would be a degree of independence in the marriage came early, with yearlong absences in 1890–1891 and 1892–1893 as "Mrs. Fuller Snyder" pursued voice studies in Florence, Italy. This was an era, says Laudon, in which it was considered necessary for Americans who were serious about professional careers to obtain advanced musical training in Europe.³

It may have been the singer herself who provided the *St. Paul Daily Globe* with the translation of a review of one of her concert performances in Florence: "The Signora Snyder, an American soprano of pure blood, sang with all the breadth, all the soul, all the warmth of an Italian. Seldom have I heard an artist (and a foreigner) with a method of singing so perfect, a voice of such sympathetic quality, of such great range and so well



Mrs. Snyder booked many performers into the 2,000-seat People's Church, located at Chestnut and Pleasant Avenues, seen here about 1900. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

managed, with sentiment so exquisite and beautiful.”⁴

During an interlude back home, Mrs. Snyder let it be known that she was receiving offers from eastern promoters to appear on the operatic stage. It's not clear why she chose not to pursue them. Later in life, she implied that the responsibilities of marriage and homemaking forced her to put aside her own ambitions, but that does not ring exactly true. Given the fact that she was now in her thirties, it may have simply been a case of time passing her by.

Another puzzle is how Fred made the transition from traveling salesman to hotel manager, although he may have been able to cite experience working in his father's hotel. At any rate, in 1894, accompanied by his wife and stepson, he took over the Cataract Hotel in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The Cataract had been refurbished a few years earlier and was regarded as the town's primary meeting place and the hub of activity.

As she would do elsewhere, Mrs. Snyder plunged into the social and musical life of the town, bringing in artists, including Teresa Carreno, an internationally known pianist. She also gave her own performances and on several occasions was joined by a dear friend with the improbable-sounding name of Gertrude Sans Souci. It was a convention of the time for performers to adopt names designed to convey a sense of the foreign or exotic. For example, Olga Samaroff, whom Mrs. Snyder would later book into St. Paul, was actually Lucy Hickenlooper, a Texas native. Sans Souci, however, was an authentic family name.⁵

Fred Snyder's four-plus years at the Cataract apparently were successful, and by the fall of 1898, he was ready for another challenge. He leased Mankato's Saulpaugh Hotel, a four-story, 100-room edifice that was regarded as one of Minnesota's finest. How far he had come in a short time was reflected in the newspaper description of him as “one of the best known and experienced hotel men in the northwest” and one who understood the needs of business travelers.⁶ His wife was also received favorably. Commented the *Mankato Daily Review*, “Mrs. Snyder is known in Mankato and her removal to

this city will be welcomed by those especially interested in art and music, as the lady possesses rare musical ability that has won for her an enviable reputation.”

Again, Mrs. Snyder established the hotel as one of the centers of cultural life in the community, inviting Sans Souci and others to join her in concerts there and bringing orchestras to the Mankato Theatre on several occasions. She opened a voice studio in the Saulpaugh, where one of her students was eleven-year-old Florence Macbeth, who would go on to opera fame. And she managed the hotel's Moorish Café. No wonder, then, that Mrs. Snyder made an impression on town folk, including a young girl who would grow up to be Maud Hart Lovelace, author of the enduringly popular Betsy-Tacy series of children's books. The character of Mrs. Melborn Poppy, wife of the hotel proprietor in the books, is believed to be partly based on Mrs. Snyder.⁷

During this period Mrs. Snyder became an active member of the Minnesota State Music Teachers' Association, a group that lobbied college trustees and school boards to place more emphasis on the teaching of music. This organization and others led by women, such as the Schubert Club in St. Paul, sought to encourage their respective communities to favor serious music, based on European classical forms, over what they perceived to be low-brow, popular styles.⁸

A leader in this movement and probable role model for Mrs. Snyder was the formidable Anna Schoen-René, who had arrived in Minneapolis from Europe in 1893. During the ensuing sixteen years, Schoen-René organized and directed a choral group at the University of Minnesota, staged music festivals, and brought in internationally known performers, orchestras, and opera companies. She, too, taught voice and in 1898 may have been the first female orchestra conductor in the country. Her work laid the foundation for Minneapolis to become the first city of its size to establish its own professional orchestra, the Minneapolis Symphony, in 1903.⁹

In that same year, Fred Snyder's lease at the Saulpaugh Hotel expired. It is not clear why it was not renewed, but he may have demanded more liberal terms,

given his strong performance. Recalled the *Mankato Free Press* later, “While the hotel is one of the leading hostelries in Southern Minnesota, it has not proved a gold mine to any of its proprietors, except Mr. Fred Snyder, who conducted it several years ago. . . . Mr. Snyder was a thorough hotel man and had the ability of conducting a first class house and at the same time making money.”

The Snyders left the Saulpaugh at the end of April 1903 and in mid-summer departed for Europe. At some point during their four-month stay, Mrs. Snyder was invited to sing for the internationally renowned Nellie Melba and reported that the operatic superstar had been highly complimentary about her performance. If Mrs. Snyder still was clinging to her dream of a stage career, it must have been an increasingly tenuous grasp, since she was now forty-two, several years older than Melba herself.

Returning to Mankato in late fall, the couple announced they would winter in Seattle, Washington, and likely re-settle there. Instead, they were back in Mankato within a month, still with an eye out for a good business opportunity. In early 1904, it presented itself in the form of a new hotel in St. Paul under construction on the northeast corner of Fifth and Cedar Streets, to be ready for occupancy on July 1. Fred Snyder signed the lease and announced that the Frederic would be a “European” hotel. There were ninety rooms, elegantly appointed with mahogany furniture, forty of them with a bathroom en suite. Every room had hot and cold water and a phone, and rates started at \$1 a day.

Mrs. Snyder opened a voice studio in the Frederic, and, after a decade's absence, the *St. Paul Dispatch* predicted, “her return to the city's musical life will be hailed by a large number.” She joined the St. Paul Choral Club and performed regularly at the People's Church, both as a soloist and with others. The church was also the setting for Mrs. Snyder's first promotional endeavor in St. Paul, the booking of Ignacy Jan Paderewski, “the most distinguished of all living pianists,” according to her advance publicity, in February 1905.

A writer for the *St. Paul Globe* sug-

gested that perhaps there was the need for a local impresario [technically, in this case an impresaria] to bring in talent. "The city will owe Paderewski's appearance here to Mrs. Fred Snyder and should his recital secure the patronage it deserves, Mrs. Snyder's effort may encourage her to repeat the experiment. . . ." The pianist drew good crowds and Mrs. Snyder was on her way.

As a founding contributor, Nettie Snyder also played an important role in helping St. Paul establish a civic

nesslike and thoroughly capable manager in Mrs. F. H. Snyder—one who has the success of the organization so much at heart that she does not exact or look for any remuneration for her work; the directors may well congratulate themselves of having her assistance."¹⁰

Apparently the testimonial was a veiled reference to an internal disagreement at the symphony, because in early January 1907, Mrs. Snyder abruptly resigned her position. One paper hinted that tickets were too expensive and that

lacked, but a much needed boost to civic pride at a time when St. Paul was clearly lagging behind the progress of its rival, Minneapolis.

Millett has particular praise for the ingenious interior arrangement of the Auditorium. He writes that it was "one of the most sophisticated multipurpose auditoriums of its day in America . . . which allowed it to be configured in three distinct spaces, depending on the type of event being hosted, with seating from 3,000 to 10,000."¹¹ The facility was built for about \$500,000, half of it raised through donations from the public, and this quickly became a sore point.

In late February, the *St. Paul Dispatch* revealed that it would cost \$250 to rent the building for a night, in the paper's words, "a prohibitive price." Critics, Mrs. Snyder among them, argued that the building had been constructed with tax dollars and donations and was intended to improve the appreciation of the arts, not to make money. And money was always an issue with grand opera. The cost of staging these productions, with their elaborate sets and casts of highly paid stars—Caruso earned \$2,500 per performance, about \$55,000 in today's dollars—was enormous and touring was fraught with difficulties.

In March 1907, Mrs. Snyder signed a contract with Heinrich Conried, manager of the New York Met, to bring the company to St. Paul the following month. She had hoped that the opera's performances would coincide with the official opening of the new building, but that was not to be. Instead, the dedication on April 2, 1907, included a concert by the St. Paul Symphony and a grand ball. But these festivities in no way diminished anticipation of the Met's upcoming arrival.

In this pre-Hollywood era, the lives of opera stars, their comings and goings, romantic entanglements and indiscretions excited enormous interest and were followed avidly. For example, when Caruso was accused of pinching a woman in New York's Central Park, the St. Paul newspapers carried stories for weeks. And now a collection of these exotic creatures was coming to town. At the Union Depot, travelers, workmen, and idlers watched as the trains



Fred Snyder leased the new Frederic Hotel at Fifth and Cedar Streets in 1904. It was patronized by many of the entertainers who visited St. Paul and Mrs. Snyder maintained a studio there where she taught voice. Fire destroyed the hotel in 1961. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

symphony, an aspiration ever since Minneapolis had started its own in 1903. In August 1906 she was introduced to the public as the manager of the new St. Paul Symphony. Much was made of Mrs. Snyder's wide acquaintance in the world of music and her ability to bring in top performers to appear with the orchestra in its first home, the People's Church. And that she did, starting with Ruggero Leoncavallo, the composer of *Pagliacci*, in November.

That's why an item appearing in the *St. Paul Dispatch* midway through the inaugural season seemed to be answering an unasked question: "The orchestra has been very fortunate in having a very busi-

nesslike and thoroughly capable manager in Mrs. F. H. Snyder—one who has the success of the organization so much at heart that she does not exact or look for any remuneration for her work; the directors may well congratulate themselves of having her assistance."¹⁰ Apparently the testimonial was a veiled reference to an internal disagreement at the symphony, because in early January 1907, Mrs. Snyder abruptly resigned her position. One paper hinted that tickets were too expensive and that

lacked, but a much needed boost to civic pride at a time when St. Paul was clearly lagging behind the progress of its rival, Minneapolis. Millett has particular praise for the ingenious interior arrangement of the Auditorium. He writes that it was "one of the most sophisticated multipurpose auditoriums of its day in America . . . which allowed it to be configured in three distinct spaces, depending on the type of event being hosted, with seating from 3,000 to 10,000."¹¹ The facility was built for about \$500,000, half of it raised through donations from the public, and this quickly became a sore point. In late February, the *St. Paul Dispatch* revealed that it would cost \$250 to rent the building for a night, in the paper's words, "a prohibitive price." Critics, Mrs. Snyder among them, argued that the building had been constructed with tax dollars and donations and was intended to improve the appreciation of the arts, not to make money. And money was always an issue with grand opera. The cost of staging these productions, with their elaborate sets and casts of highly paid stars—Caruso earned \$2,500 per performance, about \$55,000 in today's dollars—was enormous and touring was fraught with difficulties. In March 1907, Mrs. Snyder signed a contract with Heinrich Conried, manager of the New York Met, to bring the company to St. Paul the following month. She had hoped that the opera's performances would coincide with the official opening of the new building, but that was not to be. Instead, the dedication on April 2, 1907, included a concert by the St. Paul Symphony and a grand ball. But these festivities in no way diminished anticipation of the Met's upcoming arrival. In this pre-Hollywood era, the lives of opera stars, their comings and goings, romantic entanglements and indiscretions excited enormous interest and were followed avidly. For example, when Caruso was accused of pinching a woman in New York's Central Park, the St. Paul newspapers carried stories for weeks. And now a collection of these exotic creatures was coming to town. At the Union Depot, travelers, workmen, and idlers watched as the trains

discharged performers and crew. The *St. Paul Daily News* described the arrival of Caruso: "His black stiff hat, with dome-shaped crown and tight-rolled brim, his glistening hair, his swarthy complexion, proclaimed him a foreigner. His debonair air, his long line of attendants proclaimed him Caruso. 'Caruso!' exclaimed the half dozen people and the depot truckmen gathered a little closer to the smiling Italian. No man was asleep at the switch this morning. They were all watching the Caruso whom they had read about, talked about, joked about, perhaps, [an apparent reference to the pinching incident] during the recent winter."

As would become her habit, Mrs. Snyder met the opera company's trains and was greeted by Caruso. (The two were said to know each other from their days as students in Italy, a questionable claim.) "Ah, mio, signorina! So vera glad, Signorina Snyder," he cried. "You the great artist, the impresario. It is this you tell me, you bring me to your hotel? How many things you be?"¹²

Horse-drawn carriages conveyed the performers, maids, valets, and baggage to the hotels. The more lowly performers in the chorus and orchestra set off for uptown boarding houses and hostleries on foot. Many of the stars stayed, of course, at the Frederic Hotel and the newspapers provided what insights they could as to how they spent their time there, including what they had to eat. For example, several of the big names consumed a dinner one night that included steamed oysters, mutton chops, salad, and French pancakes. The sturdily built Caruso discussed business with Mrs. Snyder over a "light" breakfast of soft-boiled eggs, cold roast beef and ham, country sausage, dill pickles, potato salad, rolls and coffee.

Although it was not made public until later, what was to become an ongoing feud between Mrs. Snyder and the Auditorium's management had already begun. Her request to sell standing room tickets was flatly refused. This rankled, particularly in the case of the sold-out Caruso matinee. Still fresh in people's minds were the jammed aisles that contributed to more than 600 deaths in Chicago's Iroquois Theatre fire only



A photographer for the *St. Paul Dispatch* took this photo of Enrico Caruso, the famous tenor, enjoying a "light" breakfast at the Frederic Hotel while discussing business with Mrs. Snyder, left. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

a few years earlier, so the management position was understandable. But Mrs. Snyder would have none of it, contending that the aisles of the new building were spacious and the structure fireproof. (She was particularly incensed when she found out that standing room was sold for a police benefit several days after the opera's close.)

That aside, the mid-week opera performances were warmly received and large crowds saw *Tannhauser*, *La Boheme*, *Pagliacci*, and *Hansel und Gretel*. But that did not necessarily mean that a great deal of money was made. During this era, it was customary for a major opera company visiting St. Paul to demand a guarantee of \$40,000. Mrs. Snyder would sign up local businessmen who pledged to make up any shortfall. Following each

opera "season," the papers typically predicted that the production had probably broken even or made a slight profit beyond the guarantee. This never proved to be the case, as expenses were just too high. With praise for her efforts still echoing, Mrs. Snyder relocated her voice studio and business activities to her new home in the country, The Crossroads, where she would spend the summer of 1907 and many more to follow.

Despite the artistic success of the Met's visit and Mrs. Snyder's diligent efforts, St. Paul went without grand opera for the next three years, with the exception of a single performance by the second-tier San Carlo Opera Company in 1908. The Met declined to return, citing the high Auditorium rent and ban on general admission sales. Mrs. Snyder's

negotiations with Oscar Hammerstein, manager of the New York Manhattan opera company (and grandfather of the Broadway lyricist), led nowhere.

Meanwhile, she was hardly idle, bringing artists such as Jan Kubelik, the violinist, and pianist Olga Samaroff (née Hickenlooper) to the People's Church and Park Congregational Church, respectively, in the 1907–1908 season. And in May 1908, she resumed management of the St. Paul Symphony, booking appearances the next winter by Paderewski and diva Emma Eames.

At the age of forty-eight, Mrs. Snyder finally put aside her own musical aspirations. Her last known public performance was at a December 1907 Schubert Club concert where she sang a half-dozen songs.

The following March, she again resigned from the Symphony position. "So many people think I get a fat salary for the work I do for the orchestra," she told the *Pioneer Press*. "Let me tell you, and I don't mind if you print it, that I have never received a cent for any of my services . . . I have done the work because I love it. It is fascinating and interesting

and I am glad to be the means of bringing these great artists to St. Paul, and if I do say so myself I know that I can bring them here for less money than most anyone else."

The impresario admitted to some frustrations, several having to do with the city's proud new civic building. "If we had an orchestra hall, seating about 1,500, so that we could be closer to the artists instead of being scattered about through our huge Auditorium, we would have much more successful concerts," she said. "The trouble with a too large house is that you cannot force a sale. People do not have to buy their seats in advance when they are sure there are plenty of seats left on the day of the concert. Then, of course, if the weather is bad or if they feel the least indisposed, they pass up the concert, where if they had already bought their tickets they would feel that they ought to use them."

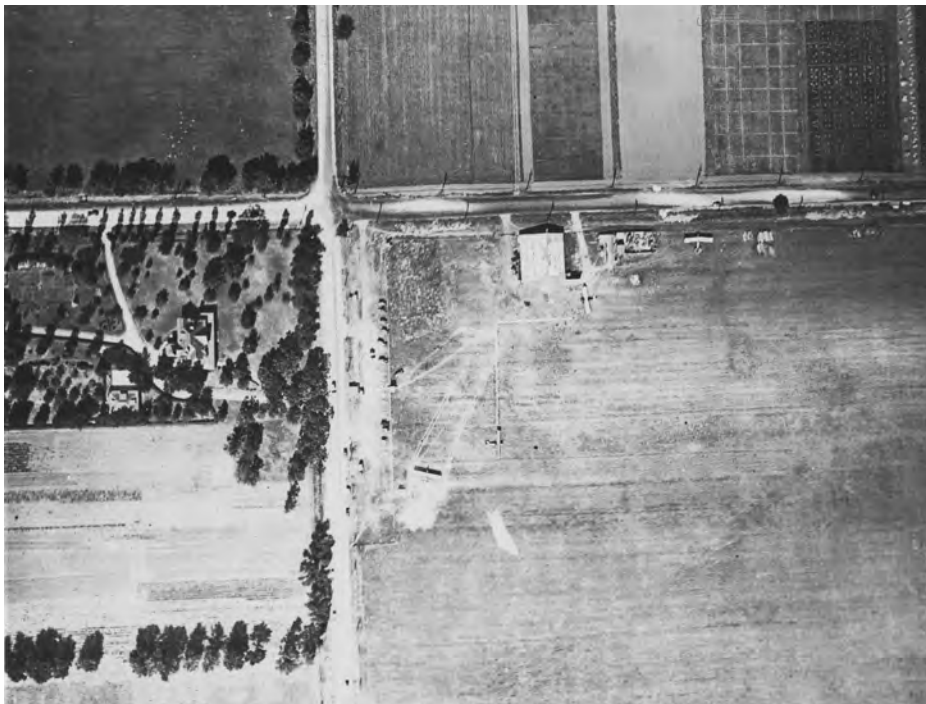
And she was just getting warmed up. "Another difficulty that we have to contend with is that the public wants to dictate as to how the orchestra shall be run and what music they shall play," Mrs. Snyder continued. "Frequently those

who go to the concerts, it may be once or twice a year, and buy 50-cent seats, are the ones who do most of the talking. The men who put up the money have a perfect right to suggest and to object, but I don't think that the general public has."¹³

With no major promotional opportunities in sight and in need of an extended vacation, Mrs. Snyder departed in October 1909 for Europe. Part of her time would be spent in Florence, studying once again with her old teacher Vincenzo Vannini. Though her days of singing in public may have been over, she still needed to be able to demonstrate proper technique for her own students. She also traveled to Berlin to visit Anna Schoen-René, who had recently returned to her native country from Minneapolis and was now devoting herself to the teaching of voice. And there were visits to two virtuoso pianists, as well: Emil Van Sauer in Dresden, Germany, and Paderewski at his Swiss villa.

Mrs. Snyder had planned to return to St. Paul in June 1910, but changes were afoot that sent her rushing home weeks early. The New York Met had a new manager, Giulio Gatti-Casazza, who decided that the company would resume touring in 1910. Past grievances forgotten, St. Paul was on the list of cities being considered for a visit.

Local businessmen designated Hugh T. Halbert, a prominent attorney, to handle negotiations. He initially was described as the manager for the upcoming grand opera season. Once Mrs. Snyder was back in town, however, Halbert quickly faded into the background. The magazine *Musical America* interviewed Nettie when she docked in New York at the beginning of April and asked if there was any chance of a peaceful artistic relationship between Minneapolis and St. Paul. "It certainly would be a fine thing if they could unite for each other's benefit," she responded, "but there is no such prospect. They are the 'Twin Cities' and therefore each one thinks it must do all it can to outdo the other. We have a symphony orchestra of seventy players; Minneapolis has one slightly larger. If St. Paul had one of a thousand players, Minneapolis would be sure to have one of a thousand and ten. Of course, competi-



This aerial view of the intersection of Snelling and Larpenteur (the latter running left to right) Avenues in Rose Township was taken in the summer of 1919. The Crossroads estate, which Nettie and Fred Snyder built, sits on the southwest corner of the intersection, across from Curtiss Northwest Airport. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame.

tion brings good results. However all that may be, we have captured the opera company this year and a splendid subscription list for it, too.”¹⁴

The *St. Paul Daily News* observed that Mrs. Snyder was the only woman in the country involved in opera management. “. . . if the United States shelters another woman impresario, she has kept her light under a bushel so successfully that the public has so far never heard of her,” it said.¹⁵

Adding to the attractiveness of the soon-to-arrive opera troupe were several local connections. The father of Louise Homer, the prominent con-

tralto, had been pastor at House of Hope Presbyterian Church when she was a child. And although the flamboyant diva Olive Fremstad had been raised in Minneapolis, what was mentioned instead in St. Paul was that “she was the most famous woman in the world to claim Minnesota as her home.”

In preparation for the grand event, the *Daily News* provided its male readers, or perhaps their wives, with tips on what a gentleman should wear to the opera; for example, white gloves in the evening, but pearl-colored in the afternoon. “Of course, there is no ‘dress suit’ string attached to any ticket purchased for the grand opera,”

it allowed. “If a man who pays for the stage box chooses to come to his box with a brown suit, black hat and tan shoes, the worst punishment that may be inflicted on him is a frown, or a shoulder-shrug from some of his tiara-crowned neighbors.”¹⁶

In her efforts to get publicity about the upcoming performances, Mrs. Snyder drew on the fact that there had been news stories about Caruso being victimized by extortionists in New York and came up with a quick and quotable angle for the local press. “Instead of taking money away from Caruso,” she said, “the advance sale indicates he will take a substantial amount away from us.”

Music Was the Pulse of “The Crossroads”

When Emmanuel Masqueray accepted the commission to design a fine summer home for Nettie and Fred Snyder, in a sense he also was being asked to create a concert hall.

The theaters and playhouses in downtown St. Paul went quiet during the warm months in the early twentieth century, but not so The Crossroads, as the mansion became known. It rang with the singing of Mrs. Snyder’s students and the melodies of the informal musicales she staged there for as many as 200 guests.

The Crossroads is emblematic of a lingering mystery about the Snyders: where did they get the money to support their lifestyle, which included lavish entertaining and international travel? Fred Snyder had only been in the hotel business for about a decade, while Nettie Snyder was a voice teacher and fledgling impresario.

Yet by 1906 they were able to purchase ten acres of land on the southwest corner of Snelling and Larpenteur Avenues in Rose Township, in what is today Falcon Heights. Further, they had the wherewithal to hire no less than the architect of the St. Paul Cathedral to design a home and grounds. Masqueray was known mostly for his ecclesiastical work, but he also designed commercial

buildings and occasionally took on a residential project.

The \$20,000 home had a limestone exterior on the first story and a “French half-timbered effect” on the second. A broad veranda extended the length of the house, with a porte-cochère at the south end. The interior featured a 60-by-20-foot living/dining room, as well as beam ceilings and stone fireplaces. The surrounding five acres included trees, shrubs and an Italian garden, while the remaining land was used for a truck garden.

In that era, the country homes of people of substance usually had names. Prominent St. Paul attorney Cordenio Severance, for example, was renowned for the entertaining he did at Cedarhurst near Cottage Grove. And the farm home of territorial pioneer William G. Hendrickson, Comodale, was located just south of the Snyder’s property, in the vicinity of today’s State Fairgrounds water tower.

The Snyder’s choice of the name The Crossroads was appropriate, because the property was located, literally, at a country crossroads, surrounded by agricultural fields. Snelling and Larpenteur simply were graded roads and traffic was so light there was no need for so much as a caution sign at the intersec-

tion. The address of the new home was “Larpenteur, 1 west of Snelling.”

The house was ready for occupancy in the fall of 1907. The Snyders would open The Crossroads in April or early May each year, and stay through the fall, unless they were traveling. Their winters were spent at the Frederic Hotel, managed by Fred Snyder, in downtown St. Paul. Mrs. Snyder became as well known for her entertaining and generous hospitality at The Crossroads as she was at the Frederic.

For example, the *St. Paul Daily News* told the tale of Katherine, a young German singer visiting relatives nearby who heard of Mrs. Snyder and hoped she might help her find an engagement in opera or vaudeville. Mrs. Snyder invited the aspiring singer to stay at The Crossroads and the girl accepted, but she insisted on paying her way as a housekeeper. “Often, when all the tasks are finished, she removes her cap and apron and joins Frau Snyder and her guests, and she sings the arias, the lieder, the ballads and even the saucy ‘Drum Song’ to a very appreciative audience in the music room,” the paper noted.

Opera stars such as Olive Fremstad, Marcella Sembrich, Geraldine Farrar and Eleonora de Cisneros were guests

Max Hirsch, the Met's traveling director, provided advance assurances. "We have heard the most gratifying reports from St. Paul about the grand opera season," he said. "We've intrusted [sic] the local management entirely to Mrs. Snyder—that means it cannot fail. We are bringing our best artists to St. Paul . . . the greatest voices in the world today. We will give just as fine productions at your Auditorium this week as we gave last winter in the New York Metropolitan."

On April 23, the Met's train arrived, with 300 performers and crew and eight cars of scenery. Geraldine Farrar told the *St. Paul Dispatch* that she had cancelled

an afternoon performance in Chicago, "because I wanted to be in good voice for St. Paul and I didn't propose to disappoint my good friend, Mrs. Snyder." Standing at her side, the impresario patted Farrar's shoulder and nodded thanks. The fact that the opera season coincided with the opening of the recently completed St. Paul Hotel only added to the excitement.

Farrar starred in *Madame Butterfly*, while Caruso played the vengeful Canio in *Pagliacci* at a Friday matinee. Other operas included *Lohengren*, *Hansel und Gretel*, *Aida*, and *The Bartered Bride*. Not surprisingly, the critical response was enthusiastic. "Mrs. Snyder has

scored a great personal triumph," was the sentiment of one newspaper. The hope was also expressed, as it was every time grand opera came to St. Paul, that the city would be able to enjoy the spectacle on an annual basis from then on. It seemed a real possibility this time, even though the Met was once again suspending touring, because a new company was being formed, one with which Mrs. Snyder had strong ties. Andreas Dippel, co-manager of the Met with Gatti-Casazza, was leaving to form the Chicago Grand Opera Company and Hirsch would be joining him.

By mid-summer 1910, Mrs. Snyder

(Crossroads, *continued*)

as well, sometimes staying weeks at a time. Farrar wrote a letter to Mrs. Snyder from Germany and closed with a wistful, "It must be lovely now at the Crossroads." Actors and actresses visiting St. Paul and Minneapolis were often guests for dinner, including Chauncey Olcott, writer and composer of the perennial favorite, *My Wild Irish Rose*.

The State Fairgrounds expanded northward and Curtiss Northwest Airport opened across Snelling from The Crossroads, but the Snyders stayed on into the 1920s, although their marriage had begun to fall apart. Left owning the home outright, Mrs. Snyder announced in 1924 she was selling it and moving to Italy; instead she rented out the house and sold the five-acre southern half of the tract. In 1928 this

parcel became the Hollywood Court development.

Mrs. Snyder bequeathed the home to her son, Harry Fuller, who sold it without ever having lived there. The Crossroads was only a little more than twenty years old, but its condition rapidly declined. A resident of the Como Park area of St. Paul, who delivered the newspaper there as a boy in the mid-1930s, recalls the interior of the house as ill-lit and dingy, the grounds unkempt. There were rumors that it housed a brothel at one point, and it was being used as a nursing home in 1944.

The following year, the Farmers Union Grain Terminal Association bought the property and tore down the house to clear the way for its new \$600,000 art-deco style headquarters. Today that building is occupied by the TIES organization, a consortium of Minnesota school districts.

Sources: "Ideal Country Home Near St. Paul," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 28 1907, third section, p. 7; "Farmers Union to Erect \$600,000 Office Building," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Dec. 2, 1945, second section, p. 1; and Larry Millett, *Once There Were Castles: Lost Mansions and Estates of the Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 156–158.



In 1924, Mrs. Snyder rented out *The Crossroads*, sold five acres of adjoining property, and moved to Italy. *St. Paul Daily News* photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

was able to announce that the Chicago Company would appear at the Auditorium the following January, featuring John McCormack, the sensational Irish tenor then nearing the peak of his operatic career. That fall, Mrs. Snyder continued her independent booking, presenting performances by top stars such as Marcella Sembrich and Johanna Gadschi, as well as an appearance by the Imperial Russian Ballet featuring Anna Pavlova.

In late October, however, controversy erupted when it became known that the January opera schedule would include Richard Strauss' *Salome*, performed by Mary Garden, the Scottish prima donna. *Salome* was notorious not only for the Dance of the Seven Veils, but also for its shocking final scene in which Salome declares her love to the severed head of John the Baptist.

The Ramsey County Methodist Layman's Association was the first to decry the staging of *Salome*. Mrs. Snyder countered that the opera had been presented by Miss Garden and the company in a number of other cities where it had been regarded as highly artistic. As the debate heated, the impresario denied having said she was a better Christian than the president of the Layman's Association. Among others condemning the opera was the Rev. Harold Pattison, pastor of the First Baptist Church, who declared the very idea of presenting it was "disgusting." When a reporter asked Pattison what he actually knew of the opera, the minister responded that one did not need to commit murder to act as an intelligent juror in a criminal case. Ultimately, Mrs. Snyder relented and a substitution was made, with Garden performing *Thais* instead.

The impresario worked out of a small ticket office in the W. J. Dyer & Brothers music store on Fifth Street, up the hill from the Frederic. During the frantic days that preceded the opera season, she talked to a reporter there while holding "a crescent-moon lettuce sandwich in one hand and a bottle of cold coffee in the other." Once again she complained of the high rent at the Auditorium, threatening to take the production to Minneapolis, but the building management would not budge. And Mrs. Snyder agreed with the oft-voiced criticism that many of the

Mrs. Snyder Promises Brilliant Musical Season for St. Paul

LEON RAINS GOTTFRIED GALSTON GEORGE HENSCHTEL MAX BAUER

LOLIS PERLINGER

MARIE TAPPOLD

MRS. SNYDER

GERALDINE FARRAR

MAGGIE TEYTE

Local Impresario Announces Series of Interesting Recitals at People's Church and Gilbert and Sullivan Revivals at Shubert.

THE proportions of the coming musical season in St. Paul are increasing to such an extent that it promises already to be one of the most brilliant and interesting in the city. It is said to bear many points of resemblance to that of Paderewski. He recently played with Arthur Nikisch at a Berlin Philharmonic concert, and a few days later with Hans Richter at a concert in Vienna. He is under engagement with the Berlin Philharmonic, and will appear in St. Paul next week. He is under engagement with the Berlin Philharmonic, and will appear in St. Paul next week. He is under engagement with the Berlin Philharmonic, and will appear in St. Paul next week.

St. Paul One Day BUFF PAWN COMBINE

Mrs. Snyder's reputation was at its peak in 1912. Among the operatic stars she, center right, brought to St. Paul was Geraldine Farrar, lower left, with whom she shared a genuine friendship. The St. Paul Pioneer Press provided ample coverage of the season that year. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

seats in the Auditorium were too small. With a reporter in tow, she pointed to one, stating, "Put a fleshy woman in that and she almost walks away with the seat when she tries to get out of it."

Despite the furor, the three-day opera season in mid-January 1911 again was deemed a huge success. In addition to *Thais*, performances included *Tales of Hoffman*, *Carmen*, *The Girl of the Golden West*, and *Louise*. At the close, Mrs. Snyder was called to the stage for an ovation and presented with a huge bouquet of roses with a note of appreciation signed by such prominent civic leaders as

Louis W. Hill, A.H. Stem, Lucius Pond Ordway, and Cordenio Severance. Max Hirsch of the Chicago Company told a reporter afterwards that Mrs. Snyder "... is one of the most wonderful women I have ever known and sometimes I think you people of St. Paul don't appreciate her and what she has done for your city and state. Her business ability and tact are marvelous and she has, in addition, what most of us lack—a most winning personality."¹⁷

The Snyders took a winter vacation in Palm Beach, Florida, and opened The Crossroads for the summer season in

May. By July, Mrs. Snyder was able to announce that the Chicago Company would return to St. Paul in January 1912. Prior to that, her fall booking season would include a song recital by the New York Met's Geraldine Farrar and violinist Kubelik. To prepare for the January season, there was a series of lecture/recitals at the Schubert Club to educate people about the operas they were about to see. Assisting was one of Mrs. Snyder's more promising students, Alma Peterson of St. Paul.

The Chicago Company would be performing several operas in English, it was disclosed, including Victor Herbert's *Natoma* with its Native American theme, featuring Mary Garden in the lead. The *St. Paul Daily News* commented that this trend was due to "musical 'progressives' who are promoting American opera and American composers."

Mrs. Snyder was incensed once again when both the Auditorium management and the city building inspector refused to allow the sale of standing room tickets. When she learned that a nearby theater was doing so, she tried without success to get the manager arrested. "But don't think for a minute that I am giving up this fight," she told a reporter. "I'm going after them when I get more time and I'm going to make it hot for somebody." She also was angry that the Auditorium management allowed cuspidors in the foyer and vowed that if they were there when she arrived opening night, she would "throw them out the door." It is not known if she kept her promise.

The impresario continued her practice of meeting the opera company's trains. It was reported that conductor Cleofonte Campanini greeted her with particular warmth, "The moment the maestro saw Mrs. Snyder he threw out his arms and there was a resounding smack, not a stage kiss, but the real article. This was followed by some very choice Italian while the crowd at the depot door cheered."¹⁸

Olive Fremstad offered an assessment of Mrs. Snyder: "She's a wonder-woman to have accomplished as much as she did in bringing the opera west. Women are hampered, you know, handicapped by traditions and prejudices against their sex, but Mrs. Snyder rises above these; she has done what no other woman in the



Mrs. Snyder customarily held an annual recital for her students at *The Crossroads*. In this photo from the gathering in 1912, she is fifth from the right. Her friend, Gertrude Sans Souci, is fourth from the right, and student Alma Peterson, who went on to sign a contract with the Chicago Grand Opera Company two years later, is second from the right. St. Paul Pioneer Press photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

United States could do. It is worth coming to St. Paul to meet her again."¹⁹

As the opera season came to a close, Mrs. Snyder was said to be "on the war-path" over treatment by the Auditorium board and management and declared that she would have no further dealings with them. "I've not only been harassed and hindered in the task of preparing for the opera here, but I've been insulted over and over again," she said. In turn, Albert H. Lindeke, board president, apparently having had enough of this outspoken female, retorted that it was not Mrs. Snyder who brought opera to the city, but the businessmen who put up the guarantee. He also dismissed her claim that the Auditorium rent was too high, "... the rent is very reasonable," he said, "considering that the grand opera company takes \$40,000 out of St. Paul."²⁰

The guarantee was essential, commented Andreas Dippel, and although he and the Chicago Grand Opera Company would "regret exceedingly" if Mrs. Snyder were no longer involved, he would be willing to work with anyone who met his terms. Mary Garden, however, was far less circumspect about the prospect of opera in St. Paul without Mrs. Snyder. "Do they think for a minute that a half dozen business men will give the time to it that this wonderful woman does?" she demanded. "Do they think they can stir up the enthusiasm, decide on a repertoire and make the affair the artistic success that this season has been? I can see them now, picking out '*Lucia di Lammermoor*,'

with its mad scene, '*Traviata*,' with its coughs, and '*Pagliacci*,' with its gasps. Ugh! The fools."²¹ (She either did not know or did not care that *Pagliacci* was a favorite in St. Paul.) More temperate in his words, Charles W. Gordon, a prosperous milliner, who had led the drive to raise the guarantee fund, was highly supportive of the impresario. He declared, "I don't believe anybody would do it as well as Mrs. Snyder."

Leaving the controversy behind, the Snyders departed for a European vacation, stopping in Zurich, where her son, Harry Fuller, was graduating with a scientific degree from the University of Switzerland. The couple also spent several weeks in Paris, visiting with friends and performers, including Emma Eames. They sailed for home from Southampton, England, in April 1912, a week after the departure of the *Titanic*.

The 1912–1913 season was again a busy one for Mrs. Snyder and the *St. Paul Daily News* raved that she had "reached right out and picked the choicest fruit in the world's musical vineyard, and as a result St. Paul will hear ... the rarest music, interpreted by the most gifted musicians." Holding to her words of the previous January, Mrs. Snyder had nothing further to do with the Auditorium, using the People's Church and the Schubert (not to be confused with Schubert) Theater at Wabasha and Exchange Streets for performances. Attractions included Geraldine Farrar, Olive Fremstad, billed as the "Queen of the Wagner Operas,"

John Phillip Sousa and band, Jan Kubelik, and Gottfried Galston, "the greatest pianist since Paderewski."

She also booked a series of Gilbert and Sullivan operas at the Shubert, but no grand opera was slated for St. Paul in 1913. Instead, undoubtedly as a sort of "in your face" gesture to the Auditorium management, Mrs. Snyder brought the Chicago Grand Opera Company to Minneapolis in April of that year. A St. Paul contingent attended, including Louis Hill. Some of its members chose to stay at the Radisson Hotel in Minneapolis rather than endure the "tiresome" trip back and forth. Mrs. Snyder also arranged for the Twin City Rapid Transit Company to run special streetcars from St. Paul to Minneapolis for each performance. But that was the end of it. There was no formal announcement and perhaps her plans were not final, but Mrs. Snyder's days as an impresario were over.

She and her husband left for a six-month European tour in fall 1913, spending several weeks in France and Switzerland, then proceeding to Milan to visit Florence Macbeth, formerly of Mankato, who was preparing for her January debut with the Chicago Grand Opera Company. The couple went on to China, where Harry Fuller was teaching chemistry at a major university and stayed the winter with him and his wife. They returned to St. Paul in late spring 1914 via Manila, Honolulu, and San Francisco.

The fact that Mrs. Snyder delayed her return until after the Chicago Grand Opera Company's April performances in St. Paul provides a strong indication that she was still holding a grudge. In doing so, she missed the homecoming of her protégé, the twenty-three-year-old Macbeth, who was regarded as an emerging opera star. Macbeth and her parents stayed at the Frederic and an estimated 500 supporters from southern Minnesota were said to be in the Auditorium as she opened the season. Under ordinary circumstances it would have been a triumphant occasion for pupil and teacher alike. Adding to the poignancy of Mrs. Snyder's absence was the fact that another of her students, Alma Peterson, signed a contract with the opera company



In 1911, Mary Garden was a flamboyant Scottish soprano. Seen here in a publicity still, she played the lead in Natoma, an American opera said to evoke Native American themes. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

at the conclusion of its run. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reflected afterward that the two men who co-managed the opera season had done good work, even though they lacked the inside knowledge that Mrs. Snyder had acquired during her years on the job.

The St. Paul Symphony succumbed to financial difficulties in 1911, and the Minneapolis Symphony began play-

ing a regular winter concert series at the Auditorium. Mrs. Snyder faithfully supported these events, as she did other musical attractions booked by the promoters who gradually took her place in the years leading up to World War I.

She remained socially active, often hosting events for entertainers in town, both at the Frederic Hotel and The Crossroads. In March 1915, for instance,

the *St. Paul Daily News* reported that she had staged “one of the most delightful events of the Lenten season” when she gave a tea for Florence Macbeth in her studio at the Frederic. Vases and bowls filled with yellow tulips and jonquils decorated the room and a huge bouquet of yellow blossoms served as the centerpiece on the tea table. Guests motored over from Minneapolis and out-of-towners attended, as well.

A few years later, Caruso returned to St. Paul after an absence of almost a decade. Demand for tickets was so heavy that the promoter expanded the configuration of the Auditorium from 3,000 seats to 8,000. Caruso, accompanied by his new wife, a New York socialite, made it clear that he had little time available for social gatherings during his stay. The Carusos had tea, however, with Mrs. Snyder at the Frederic.

Grand opera continued, although seemingly with less impact on the city’s consciousness than a decade earlier. As one such appearance approached, a *St. Paul Daily News* writer sounded almost jaded compared to his predecessors:

Speaking of grand opera singers, they, their fluffy dogs, their tired maids and their anxious secretaries, not to mention their high-priced voices, will soon be in St. Paul. Geraldine Farrar, small, determined, marvelously gowned, is really all that is necessary to give an air of smartness to any occasion. . . .

Louise Homer has always been too much engrossed with babies to expend much energy on dogs and tantrums, so she lacks some of the commoner characteristics of her profession. Alma Peterson, St. Paul’s contribution to the ensemble, hasn’t yet developed them—perhaps her good sense will permit her to escape them entirely.

But, erratic as they are, it’s a dull season that doesn’t bring at least one visit from these much-spoiled songbirds.²²

In early 1917, Mrs. Snyder and a friend left for a four-month trip to Japan



As a child, Florence Macbeth received her first voice lessons from Mrs. Snyder in Mankato. Macbeth went on to a successful international career and the two remained life-long friends. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

and China, where she again visited her son. By the time they returned, the United States had entered World War I. She hosted a “distinctly patriotic program” at The Crossroads that fall, inviting 200 guests. All of the musical numbers were works by composers from nations allied with the United States; no Wagner was heard.

It may not have been apparent at the time, but in 1919 Mrs. Snyder was beginning yet another transition, to her “New York years.” She spent three weeks coaching members of the Chicago Grand Opera Company in their home city, and then continued with them on to New York where the organization staged a season at the Lexington Opera House. She informed the St. Paul papers that she was staying in New York at The Commodore, “newest of New York’s big hotels,” and had hosted a tea there for 100 people, most of them singers from either the Chicago Company or the New York Met. Florence Macbeth attended

and brought her fiancé, “such a good-looking English officer. . .,” Mrs. Snyder wrote back home.

In September, Fred Snyder, the only manager that the Frederic had known in its fifteen years of existence, announced that he was retiring from the hotel business. The papers reported that the Snyders would retain their summer home and spend winters in New York. Mrs. Snyder leased a studio in Manhattan near Central Park and some of her students from the Twin Cities followed. Her husband, however, moved to California. Mrs. Snyder kept the Manhattan studio for the better part of four years, returning to St. Paul and The Crossroads each summer, hosting entertainments that were invariably covered in the society pages, but she disappeared from “the prints” in the spring and early summer of 1922, perhaps while bracing herself for what was to come.

In late July, the news broke that she had accused her husband of infidelity, as well as mental and physical cruelty. She was

said to be seeking a “limited divorce” or legal separation in one account, a divorce in another. Fred Snyder was alleged to have been cavorting, in the form of “wild parties” and “escapades,” in California, as well as at The Crossroads. In the latter case, he was said to have “held high carnival” with an unnamed married woman, serving her “intoxicating liquors” during his wife’s absences.²³

The matter never went to trial, the couple apparently agreeing on a settlement that left Mrs. Snyder well fixed financially and owner of The Crossroads. In 1924, she announced that she was closing her New York studio and selling The Crossroads. Based on the limited records that are available, it appears that she instead sold some of the adjoining property, retaining ownership of the house itself.

She told a reporter that Italy was “the coming country,” now that Mussolini was in charge and she would settle in her beloved Florence. With her usual sense of

the dramatic, Mrs. Snyder purchased the ancient Villa Galileo there, where she ran a voice studio for the better part of the next four years.²⁴ The house, also known as “Villa il Gioiello” (The Jewel), had been the astronomer’s retreat following his trial for heresy in 1633. He died there in 1642.²⁵

She returned to the United States in 1928—now in her late sixties—and visited friends in St. Paul, as well as her son, Harry, who had returned from China to accept a faculty position at Valparaiso University in Indiana. By early 1929, Mrs. Snyder had settled in Hollywood, California, where she once again opened a voice studio. She experienced a health reversal of some sort about this time and a family friend later recalled that she never fully recovered from the surgery it required.

Nettie Snyder never lost the urge to promote the cause of good music, however. In the summer of 1929, Mrs. Snyder was guest of honor at a luncheon and recital held in the south Los Angeles home of a socialite in the African-American community. There she was highly complimentary of the musicianship of Professor William T. Wilkins, proprietor of the Wilkins Piano Academy, as well

as that of several of his students, and promised to attend one of their upcoming performances.²⁶

On October 20, 1929, just short of her seventieth birthday, Mrs. Snyder died in Hollywood. She was buried in the sprawling Hollywood Memorial Park (today the Hollywood Forever Cemetery) on Santa Monica Boulevard adjacent to Paramount Studios. Her will, handwritten on Villa Galileo letterhead, left her entire \$22,000 estate to her son.²⁷ The St. Paul newspapers carried obituaries, as did those in Albert Lea and Mankato. “Mankato friends will remember her as an inspirational friend and teacher,” said the *Mankato Free Press*.

Both parts of that comment are worth emphasizing. For Mrs. Snyder, friendships were for life and she put a tremendous amount of energy into maintaining them. As a teacher, she helped scores of girls and young women develop as singers. At least two of them, Florence Macbeth and Alma Peterson, had successful professional careers. As a businesswoman in an era when there were not many, she also was a role model and mentor. At least one of the young women

who worked in her office became a music manager herself.

The characteristic that stands out above all others, however, was her deep desire to develop an appreciation in others for the music she so loved. A comment she made when booking a second-tier opera company is instructive: “Although the company carries many noted stars,” she declared, “it will appear in St. Paul at popular prices. . . . This will give everybody a chance to hear the classic operas, and that has been my ambition all the time, to give all the people, not a few people, an opportunity to hear grand opera.”²⁸

Bravo, Nettie Snyder, bravo.

In a former life, Roger Bergerson was a reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press and is still writing but for other publications. His most recent article in Ramsey County History appeared in the Summer 2010 issue. A long-time resident of St. Paul, he gives special thanks to Donna Lange, researcher extraordinaire with the Sauk County (Wis.) Historical Society, and Robert Tallant Laudon, professor emeritus of Musicology, University of Minnesota, for their help with this article.

Endnotes

1. “Music and Musicians,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, April 27, 1907, p. 1. For a history of opera in St. Paul at a later time, see Steve Trimble, “Curtain Up in 1933: The Legacy of the St. Paul Opera Association,” *Ramsey County History*, 39, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 4–18.
2. “Manager Scott’s Benefit,” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, February 11, 1887, p. 2.
3. Robert Tallant Laudon, “Gertrude Sans Souci (1873–1913) and her Milieu: Building a Musical Career,” University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, 2003. <http://purl.umn.edu/44896>, p. 23.
4. “Music and Musicians,” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, January 11, 1891, p. 4.
5. Laudon, p. 34.
6. “Change at the Saulpaugh,” *Mankato Daily Review*, September 29, 1898, p. 3.
7. Sharla Scannell Whalen, *The Betsy-Tacy Companion: A Biography of Maud Hart Lovelace* (Whitehall, Pa.: Portalington Press, 1995).
8. Laudon, pp. 10–11.
9. Janis White Dees, “Anna Schoen-René: Minnesota Musical Pioneer,” *Minnesota History*, 48, no. 8 (Winter 1983): 332–38.
10. “Music and Musicians,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, Dec. 29, 1906, fourth section, p. 2.
11. Larry Millett, *Lost Twin Cities* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1992), 284–85.
12. “Grand Opera Arrives in St. Paul,” *St. Paul Daily News*, April 23, 1907, p. 2.
13. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 28, 1909, Books, Drama, Music section, p. 1.
14. “News of the World of Music,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 10, 1910, fifth section, p. 3.
15. “Woman Manages Engagement,” *St. Paul Daily News*, April 10, 1910, p. 10.
16. “Expert Tells What to Wear at Opera,” *St. Paul Daily News*, April 10, 1910, p. 10.
17. “Permanent Opera Season for City,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 16, 1911, p. 5.
18. “Mrs. Snyder Kissed by Maestro Campanini,” *St. Paul Daily News*, January 29, 1912, p. 8.
19. “Premier [sic] of Opera Season is Ready,” *St. Paul Daily News*, January 29, 1912, p. 8.
20. “Opera Without Mrs. Snyder Sure,” *St. Paul Daily News*, January 31, 1912, p. 1.
21. “Mary Garden Puts on Real Dagger Act When Excited,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, February 1, 1912, p. 2.
22. “The Keyboard,” *St. Paul Daily News*, September 17, 1916, p. 8.
23. “Mrs. Fred Snyder, Music Leader, Sues For Divorce: Accuses Prominent Woman,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 27, 1922, p. 1.
24. “Mrs. Snyder Here Selling Out Home, The Crossroads,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 13, 1924, p. 1.
25. Harold Donaldson Eberlein, *Villas of Florence and Tuscany* (Philadelphia and London, J. B. Lippincott Co.; New York, The Architectural Record Co., 1922), 99–112.
26. “Prof. Wm. T. Wilkins Honored by Noted Musician,” *California Eagle*, June 21, 1929.
27. Ramsey County Probate Records.
28. “English Grand Opera Season Now Assured,” *St. Paul Daily News*, November 26, 1911, p. 1.

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. Postage
PAID
Twin Cities, MN
Permit #3989

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



Between 1954 and 1962, the William Crooks, the first steam locomotive to operate in Minnesota, was on display at the St. Paul Union Depot. This postcard from that time period shows the well-preserved engine close up. For more on the William Crooks, see page 27. Postcard from the collection of Brian McMahon.