

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

CELEBRATING
**RAMSEY COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S**

65th Anniversary

Fall 2014

Volume 49, Number 3

An Adventure in Historical Research:

In Search of Ethel Stewart

Steven C. Trimble, page 3



The Gibbs farmhouse about 1961 at the Gibbs Museum of Pioneer and Dakota Life in Falcon Heights, Minn. The original portion of this building that was the home of Jane and Heman Gibbs for more than fifty years dates from 1854. Remarkably well preserved, the farmhouse is on the National Register of Historic Places and plays a central role in telling the story of pioneer life in Ramsey County and Jane's relationship with the Dakota Indians of the area. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

President

Chad Roberts

Founding Editor (1964–2006)

Virginia Brainard Kunz

Editor

John M. Lindley

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

William Frels

Chair

Cheryl Dickson

First Vice Chair

Elizabeth M. Kiernat

Second Vice Chair

Julie Brady

Secretary

Carolyn J. Brusseau

Treasurer

Thomas H. Boyd, Anne Cowie, Jo Anne Driscoll,

Thomas Fabel, John Guthmann,

Richard B. Heydinger, Jr., John Holman,

Kenneth H. Johnson, David Kristal,

Carl Kuhrmeyer, Father Kevin M. McDonough,

Nancy W. McKillips, Susan McNeely,

James Miller, Robert Muschewske,

Jeffrey Slack, Ralph Thrane, Susan Vento,

Jerry Woefel.

EDITORIAL BOARD

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

Thomas H. Boyd, John Diers, William Frels,

Douglas Heidenreich, James Miller,

John Milton, Laurie M. Murphy,

Paul D. Nelson, Richard H. Nicholson,

Jay Pfaender, David Riehle, Chad Roberts,

Steve Trimble, Mary Lethert Wingerd.

HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

William Fallon, William Finney, George

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

James Reagan.

RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Jim McDonough, chair

Commissioner Toni Carter

Commissioner Blake Huffman

Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire

Commissioner Rafael Ortega

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 © 2014, 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: info@rchs.com; web site address: www.rchs.com

RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 49, Number 3

Fall 2014

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.

C O N T E N T S

- 3 *An Adventure in Historical Research:
In Search of Ethel Stewart*
Steven C. Trimble
- 8 *Growing Up in St. Paul*
The Peripatetic RCHS in the Mid-1970s
Anne Cowie
- 12 *Looking for Manuscripts:
Virginia Brainard Kunz and Ramsey County History*
John M. Lindley
- 17 *Safer and More Accessible:
The RCHS Archives and Collections Since 1994*
Mollie Spillman
- 22 *Expanding Our Understanding of the Past:
The Sod House and Dakota Kin at the Gibbs Museum*
Priscilla Farnham

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

Nobody knows your own history the way you do. At RCHS, we are always advocating for families, businesses, and other groups to collect and write their own histories. This issue, we are taking our own advice! We have put pen to paper (well, digitally) and have brought together different perspectives from our history as an organization as part of celebrating the Society's 65th Anniversary. Steve Trimble writes about our founder, Ethel Stewart. John Lindley shares his views of Virginia Kunz, executive director and editor of this magazine for more than 40 years. Priscilla Farnham outlines the transformative change in interpretation at the Gibbs Museum that she initiated as executive director to include the 1995 archeological dig and the well-documented interaction between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people. Mollie Spillman, our curator/archivist, outlines her story of preserving and sharing our heritage of artifacts. And I'm in there too, writing about my first job at RCHS, one of the first tenants in Landmark Center. So get inspired, and write your own histories! Your family, friends, and maybe even readers of this magazine (should you submit an article), will thank you.

*Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board*

Growing Up in St. Paul

The Peripatetic RCHS in the Mid-1970s

Anne Cowie

When I graduated from college in 1972, I entered a masters' program in American history at the University of Washington. I didn't know exactly what I wanted for a career, but I always loved museums. In January 1974, I returned to Minnesota with my newly minted graduate degree, looking for a Real Job in Museum Work. I was lucky. Ramsey County had just acquired the Old Federal Courts Building and post office bordering Rice Park in downtown St. Paul from the federal government. Later renamed Landmark Center, it would house a number of cultural organizations. Virginia Brainard Kunz, who was then the Executive Director of the Ramsey County Historical Society, had negotiated for RCHS to act as the official representative of Ramsey County in the building. In so doing, she presciently saw the chance to extend the society's reach beyond the Gibbs Farm, where it had offices starting in 1954, to downtown St. Paul. And most important to me, she had obtained a grant to develop and house a temporary exhibit on the early history of St. Paul in the building's north lobby.

I knew Virginia from a few years earlier, when my father, Henry Cowie Jr., was on the RCHS board as its vice president, and she had graciously allowed me, then a high school student, to write an article for the society's magazine (must have been a slow history news day!).¹ When I found that Virginia was looking for someone to research and write the new exhibit, I jumped at the chance to do "real history" for the princely sum of \$4.25 per hour, the equivalent of about \$20 per hour today, and to work in the Old Federal Courts Building.

Landmark Center Opens

I loved going down to that building every day. Although renovations were scheduled, they had not yet begun. The post office was still bustling on the first floor, covered by a frosted glass ceiling; the grand cortile was not yet an open space. I volunteered to conduct building tours and was allowed to explore the depths of the subbasement, with its giant pillars and rock walls, as well as the pigeon-inhabited top floor in the north tower.



Anne Cowie, left, and RCHS colleague, Peggy Korsmo Kennon, evaluate photos for possible use in a project they were working on in 1976. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

Sometimes Betty Musser, who had a large part in saving the building, moved regally through the halls; she greeted me pleasantly, especially when I was properly attired in a skirt. (Over my four years at college, dining hall attire for women had progressed from skirts at all meals,

to skirts at dinner, to skirts at Sunday dinner, to frayed blue jeans with India print tops at any meal.)

Our downtown office at RCHS started as a few desks, file cabinets, and typewriters (remember this was in the era before personal computers and word processing) tucked into the northwest lobby corner. We had large windows, and the rear of the office opened into a two-story safe with a spiral staircase. Unfortunately, despite its glamorous appearance, the safe was used for mundane purposes ("Did you find that old stationery? It must be in the safe.") Every morning, I climbed the stairs to the white-tiled bathroom on the second floor, filling the percolator with water to make Virginia's coffee, which fueled her for a day of cajoling county officials, soothing board members, and singing our praises to anyone who would listen.

Virginia was a feminist before anyone dreamed up the word. College-educated in Iowa, she had been hired as the first woman reporter on the *Minneapolis Tribune* when the male reporters were drafted in World War II. She left that job after the war, had two children, and worked in publishing until she found to opportunity to join RCHS as Executive Secretary. Executive Secretary soon appropriately morphed into Executive Director, and she was off and running.

Virginia knew how to work in a newsroom and how to interview a source. She could bang away on an old typewriter through all kinds of interruptions and get our award-winning magazine to the printer on time. She could argue persuasively for funding to paint the buildings at Gibbs Farm or sponsor a magazine article. At that time, although RCHS received some grant funds and individual contributions, the majority of its funding, about \$100,000 per year,

came directly from Ramsey County, and Virginia skillfully lobbied the County Board of Commissioners every year for that contribution.

Virginia had great relationships with all of our highly qualified board presidents (when I was there, Bob Baker, Bob Mirick, and Dick Murphy). She was constantly on the phone, making sure that they were well versed in whatever new project she wished to undertake. She had a ready command of an overview of Ramsey County history, which she described with great enthusiasm (I was to fill in the details, for the exhibit). Perhaps most significantly, she made sure that RCHS was included in any history-related endeavors in the city and county. For instance, she was a key member of the committee, along with representatives from other agencies, which preserved the Irvine Park area from demolition and assured its historically sensitive redevelopment.

I was thrilled with the idea of “urban homesteading” and amazed that people could, and did, purchase great old homes for \$1 and restore them to a new version of their former glory. I was simply fascinated by old houses. Once, I had a driving tour of historic houses from the passenger seat of a nice-looking convertible owned by a staff member from another agency. Another day, I set out to explore on my own, ringing the doorbell of an ancient house on St. Paul’s East Side. A man whose age approximated his home’s answered the door. To my surprise, he invited me in, where he showed off original brown patterned wallpaper and a still-functioning crystal radio set!

Most of my days were a bit more mundane; I spent a lot of time researching in the Minnesota Historical Society library and typing up my exhibit copy, rather badly in the days before computers. But when it was done, it was exciting to see the final exhibit panels outside our office, and to watch people actually read our work. That fall, our exhibit was featured on building tours as part of a “St. Paul on Parade” program for the Downtown Council. St. Paul was definitely embracing the new uses for its old building.²

Our second exhibit followed in a few months, this one on St. Paul in the 1850s.

This time, I was allowed free rein to develop my own ideas. I still did the writing myself but could hire a photographer, designer, and carpenter, albeit on a shoestring budget. I had a lot of fun.

At the time, I was entranced by Benjamin Franklin Upton’s famous 1857 panoramic photos of downtown St. Paul,



RCHS Executive Director Virginia Brainard Kunz at her electric typewriter in 1976. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

so we built a circular exhibit to allow a person to step inside and experience the full 360-degree view. I devised a panel using an 1850s map with a plastic overlay that showed the current grid of downtown streets on top, so that people could compare then and now. I put up another map of the Irvine Park area, which displayed wonderful 1850s sketches of its homes side by side with photographs of the same houses in 1974, awaiting restoration. And I dug up newspaper articles from that era on microfilm; we took photos of the articles, which detailed activities such as ice-cutting, sleigh races, and baptisms in the Mississippi below St. Paul. These articles not only went on an exhibit panel, they also formed the basis for a readers’ theater performance by Macalester students at the RCHS annual meeting to celebrate our 25th anniversary in 1974.

That anniversary celebration started with the 1850s exhibit opening, followed by dinner in the newly opened cortile area where the post office had formerly conducted its business. Centerpieces on each table included hand-crafted items

from the Gibbs Farm, such as beeswax candles and bread dough baskets filed with apples and pine cones. Other events took place in the new downtown location as well. RCHS extended its tradition of crafts classes by holding a class on making Victorian Christmas ornaments. And for the first time, the RCHS book collection was moved from the Gibbs Farm to the new offices. It then had only about 150 books—a small number compared to those in today’s Research Center—and no designated staff assistance. Helen Larson joined us as administrative assistant downtown, and Ila Drost continued as our part-time bookkeeper. Lansing Shepard helped with communications.

Finding a Place for the Board to Meet

As a young member of the RCHS staff, I didn’t attend meetings of the RCHS Board of Directors. A random search of old Board minutes in the RCHS archives indicates that in the late 1950s, the board met at 2151 Commonwealth Avenue in St. Anthony Park, which at the time was the residence of Ethel Stewart. Following her death, the Board typically met in the home of whoever was the president of the Society and from time to time at the Gibbs farmhouse, which really wasn’t suited for meetings given the size of the rooms in the house. In 1975 the Board held some of its meetings at Macalester College. Thus the move to Landmark Center gave the Society more stability, as well as a downtown presence, because the Board could reserve a courtroom in the building and meet close by its offices.

RCHS proudly joined with other organizations to promote the Old Federal Courts Building in its reincarnation as the Landmark Center. We supplied costumes for a United Way luncheon held in the cortile. And we presented a framed copy of an 1874 lithograph of St. Paul to members of the National Trust for Historic Preservation when they toured the building and then boarded the Delta Queen for a downriver trip. The country as a whole was waking up to the idea of urban historic preservation, and RCHS was definitely in the mix.

After about eighteen months, however, when building renovations were fully underway, we had to move our offices to a temporary space at the student center at Macalester College. This was a less-than-ideal location, as it was far from both downtown St. Paul and our site at the Gibbs Farm. But Virginia kept her finger on the pulse nonetheless. She was also exceptionally kind to me when my father died suddenly of a heart attack at age 49.

At Gibbs Farm

Before long, we made another temporary move, this time to the basement of the Stoen Schoolhouse at the Gibbs Farm. It was a bit cramped and dank. I typed away in the back of the room, accompanied by old scrapbooks, coming up for air over lunch at an outside picnic table in nice weather. In 1966 the Society had purchased the one-room schoolhouse, which dated from about 1888, and moved it from Chippewa County to the museum. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Heman Gibbs had built a one-room schoolhouse, which at the time was still standing, but it was located on the south side of Larpenteur Avenue on land that was owned by the University of Minnesota. Thus the Stoen Schoolhouse was a very close substitute for the school that the Gibbs children and others in the area had actually used in the late 1800s.

On the positive side of being at Gibbs, I was exposed firsthand to new areas of programming. It was not unusual to have several crises unfold at once: a school tour was late; the goose was hissing at the children again! But Gibbs staff members fortunately had more practical skills than I. Robert M. “Skip” Drake, the site manager, knew about everything from feeding horses to farmstead history; I was impressed.

In 1973 he had succeeded the former manager, Ed Letterman, who had written an illustrated, hand-lettered guide to historic farm implements and processes, *Farming in Early Minnesota*, which was one of our first book-length publications.³ Initially RCHS had employed Ed Letterman and his wife as the “Hosts in Residence” at the Gibbs House. At the



In the mid-1970s RCHS moved the one-room Stoen Schoolhouse from Chippewa County to the Gibbs Museum. Although the schoolhouse took up all the available space on this trailer, the wooden structure was not that difficult to transport roughly 140 miles to its current location in Falcon Heights. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

time, the Lettermans lived in a small apartment (since removed) in the basement of the farmhouse. Then in 1968 the couple was identified as the “Curators” at the House and in 1969 the Society began referring to the site as the Gibbs Farm Museum.

Years before my arrival at Gibbs, the Society had hired architect Edwin Lundie to design a new barn that could house agricultural implements that were part of the RCHS collections. Many of these farm tools can still be seen in the drawings in Ed Letterman’s book. This new building, which was known to all as the Red Barn, was constructed in 1958. It stood parallel to the much older White Barn (circa 1910), which the University owned at the time but allowed RCHS to use. Many years later, in 1997, the Red Barn was relocated along the west property line of the museum because the area between the White Barn and Red Barn would fill with mud every time it rained and become unusable. Besides addressing the drainage problem, relocating the Red Barn helped form a natural courtyard between the farmhouse on the

south, the White Barn on the north, and the Red Barn on the west that facilitated a wide range of outdoor programming at Gibbs. During my time on the RCHS staff, Virginia submitted all the paperwork needed to have the Gibbs farmhouse listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

When I was working out of the schoolhouse basement, Peggy Korsmo Kennon expertly managed tours and craft demonstrations. Judy Osborn worked carefully to administer quilting and schoolhouse classes. It was a supportive and competent group, and I think we all appreciated the unique nature of our employment. Fortunately my time in the schoolhouse basement came to an end in 1976 and the RCHS offices were once more located in Landmark Center.

Back to Landmark

By now attuned to the grant-writing concept, that year I applied for and received a Minnesota Humanities Commission grant for an interdisciplinary conference on the Mississippi River in St. Paul. Co-sponsored by the Science Museum of Minnesota, it



The restoration of the Old Federal Courts Building on Rice Park in downtown St. Paul was a massive project. In this photo from 1975, the hard work of making the building into Landmark Center began with Elizabeth Musser, right, the chief fundraiser for the nonprofit that would operate the building, striking the first ceremonial blow on what was then the loading dock of the former post office, which faced Washington Street. Ready to follow her example are, left to right, Carl Drake and Ron Hubbs, both of the St. Paul Companies (now Travelers) and Frank Marzitelli of the St. Paul Port Authority. Photo by Joan Larson King. Photo courtesy of Minnesota Landmarks.

featured local and national speakers about the river from the perspectives of biology, history, anthropology, and literature. Dr. Calvin Fremling, a biologist from Winona State University, and Dr. Roderick Nash, a historian from the University of California Santa Barbara, gave particularly compelling presentations.⁴

In 1976 I also took advantage of funding that was available for programs related to the Bicentennial of the United States to develop a videotape of the river's history. Having studied only the Mississippi's early days, I was naively amazed at photos showing how polluted the river was in the 1920s, but I was gratified to document the efforts to clean it up since then. (My only downfall was being unable to figure out the then-new VHS technology to show the finished tape to impress a date. Fortunately, this was not a public performance.)

By this point, I had realized that grant money would not sustain me forever and that RCHS could not afford a full-time researcher. So I moved on. But I could not stay away for too long; about ten years later, when the administrative offices were permanently ensconced on the third floor of the renovated Landmark Center, I came back as a board member of RCHS. I am still entranced by RCHS's mission and dedication. Like Virginia Kunz, we are all pushing for the next great way to make history happen.

Anne Cowie not only serves on the RCHS Board of Directors, she is also the chair of the Society's Editorial Board. Since becoming chair in 2006, she has written a Message for readers in each issue of Ramsey County History.

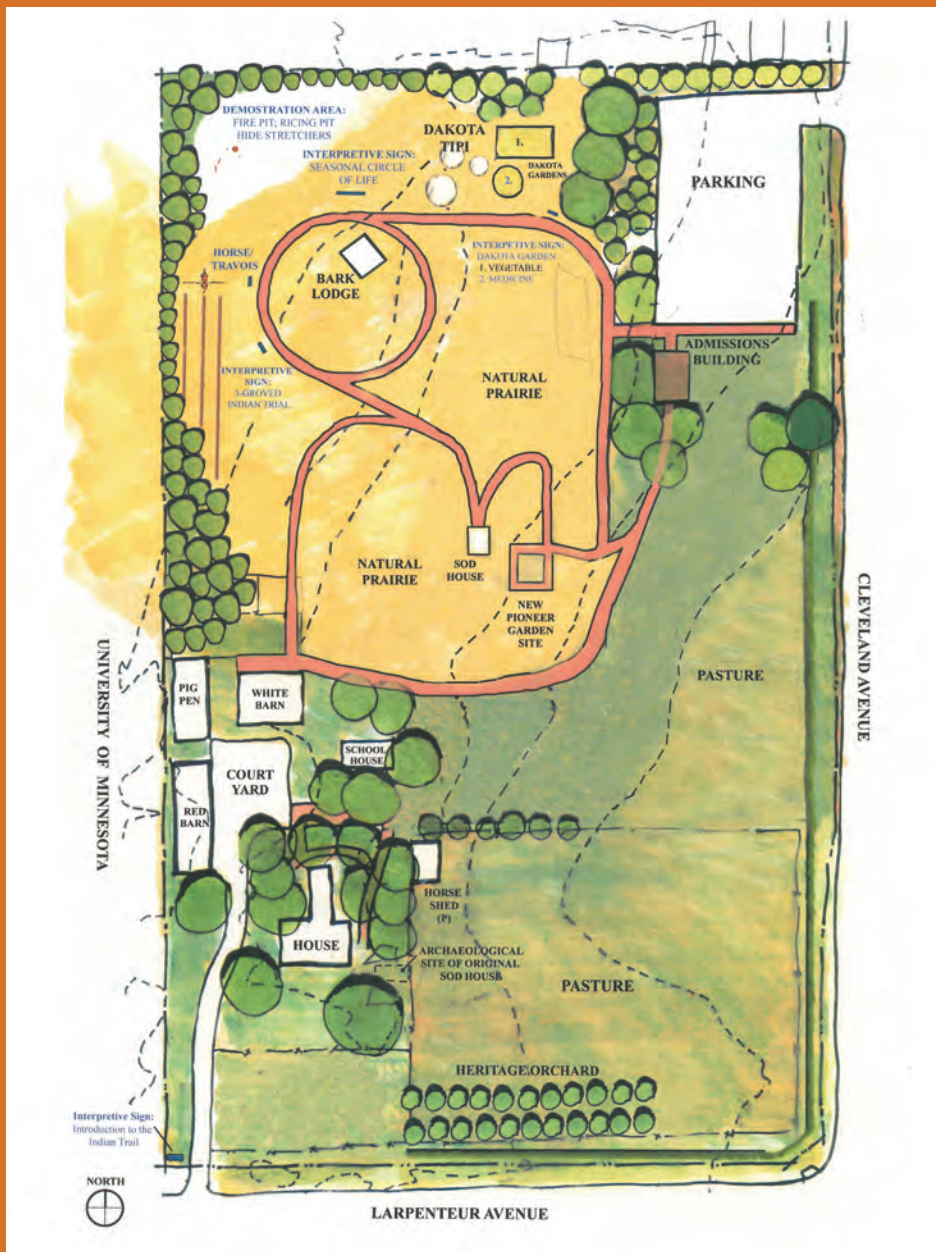
Notes

1. Anne Cowie, "Marshall Sherman and the Civil War: St. Paul's First Medal of Honor Winner," *Ramsey County History*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Fall 1967): 3–7.
2. Anne Cowie, "Explorers, Traders, Farmers: The Early History of St. Paul," *Ramsey County History*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Spring 1974): 18–22.
3. Edward J. Letterman, *Farming in Early Minnesota* (St. Paul: Ramsey County Historical Society, 1966). This book was an expanded version of a booklet Letterman had compiled and written titled "Farming in Early Minnesota as Shown by the Exhibits in the Agricultural Museum, 2097 W. Larpenteur Avenue, St. Paul 13, Minn.," in 1961. The Larpenteur address is that of the Gibbs Farm Museum.
4. Calvin R. Fremling (1929–2010) was one of the foremost authorities on the endangered environment of the Upper Mississippi River. Born in Brainerd, Minn., he graduated from St. Cloud State Teachers College in 1951. He served in the 101st Airborne Division during the Korean War and subsequently received his doctorate in zoology from Iowa State University in 1959. He was a professor at Winona State University from 1959 until his retirement in 1991. Although he authored or co-authored 47 publications on aquatic ecology, he is best known for his book *Immortal River: The Upper Mississippi in Ancient and Modern Times* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004). Roderick F. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967; revised ed., 1973). Nash's book is one of the first scholarly studies in the field of environmental history.

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

U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul, MN
Permit #3989

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



In the late 1990s, landscape architect John Koepke prepared this conceptual drawing of the Gibbs Museum. The drawing shows how a replica sod house could be positioned at the center of the prairie to function as the key element in the movement in both space and time from a Dakota interpretation in the northern portion of the museum to a pioneer interpretation in the southern part where the Gibbs farmhouse and barn already stood. Drawing courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society archives. For more on the Gibbs Museum, see page 22.