

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.

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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.

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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*

Looking for Manuscripts:

Virginia Brainard Kunz and *Ramsey County History*

John M. Lindley

Shortly before Virginia Brainard Kunz was to retire as executive director of the Ramsey County Historical Society at the end of 1989, a Minneapolis newspaper reporter wrote a profile of her work for the Society that carried the headline “Virginia Kunz Will Become Historical Society Footnote.”¹ Although the editor at the newspaper who crafted that headline intended either to have some mild humor at Virginia’s expense or to demonstrate a knack for cleverness, Virginia Brainard Kunz was never a footnote to anything she set her mind to do. If the headline writer had really understood what the reporter was trying to convey about Virginia, the big type would have more accurately included the word “Pioneer” at the Historical Society because that was Virginia’s role.

I first met Virginia in the spring of 1988. At the time I was working for a prominent St. Paul publishing company. My boss called me into his office and informed me that he was a board member of the Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) and since I was working for a printing company and also had a degree in history, I was to meet Virginia and another board member, Richard T. Murphy, for lunch the next day. The purpose of this lunch, he explained, was to talk to me because they wanted someone with a background such as mine to head up the Ramsey County Historical Society’s Editorial Board, which was responsible for overseeing the publication of the Society’s history magazine.

I was also informed that this was a volunteer position and that the time that I spent on RCHS business would partly come from my time as an employee and partly from my personal time. Of course, I knew right away that this volunteer job would mostly be done on my time and not on the company’s, but he was not the type of boss to whom I or any of my colleagues ever said, “No, I don’t think I’ll do that.”

Once I got over my initial nervousness at lunch the following day, I found Virginia and Dick to be delightful people who were totally committed to the business of publishing good writing about local history.

I also discovered that they had a passion for communicating the history of St. Paul and Ramsey County in more than just a quarterly history magazine. They wanted the general public to have a better understanding of how past events influenced what was happening in the community today. The magazine, while important, was only one of several programs RCHS had to tell the story of Ramsey County’s past.

Dick explained to me that Virginia had

begun editing the Society’s history magazine, *Ramsey County History*, in 1964 and that it was currently published twice a year. After Virginia officially retired, the latest RCHS strategic plan called for her to continue as the magazine’s editor and to increase its publication to a quarterly. Although most of the conversation focused on their vision for the magazine and its expanded publication schedule, I later learned that they apparently found I was a good fit for the job they wanted done on the Editorial Board and I agreed to take on this new assignment. A few days later, I called the Editorial Board’s first meeting so that I could introduce myself and begin to define its role relative to Virginia, who was then both the Society’s executive director and its editor.

Working at the Newspaper

Born in 1921 in Fairmont, Minnesota, Virginia was the daughter of Dudley



In this photo from about 1945, Virginia Brainard, right, and her colleagues Kenneth Carley, John Cotton, and Charles McFadden sort through photos at the Picture Desk at the Minneapolis Star-Journal. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Shattuck Brainard (1884–1960), an educator and author of a half dozen or more books in history, and Merl Anderson Brainard (1886–1960). She received an early introduction to history at St. Cloud State Teachers College in 1939–1940, where her father was a professor. Then Virginia transferred to Iowa State University, where she graduated in 1943 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter the *Minneapolis Tribune* hired Virginia. With many of its male employees gone for service with the U.S. military, she was one of the first women who worked at the newspaper as a journalist. Her initial duties involved cropping and sizing photos for news stories, writing short articles, and writing headlines. Later on, she wrote longer features and articles.

In 1954, for example, she took first place in the daily newspaper division for an informational story and a first place for a juvenile promotion at the Minnesota Federation of Press Women's annual meeting.² In all, Virginia won five first place awards from the National Federation of Press Women and in 1950 and again in 1951 she won a Page One Award from the Twin Cities Newspaper Guild. She spent fourteen years working for the newspaper, 1944–1951 and 1953–1957.³

Between 1958 and 1962, Virginia worked as the state public information director for the Minnesota Association for Retarded Children. Her newspaper skills served her well when in 1962 the Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) hired her as its executive secretary. Two years later, Virginia founded *Ramsey County History*. In its early years, the Society's magazine came out twice a year. In 1973 RCHS made Virginia its executive director, a position she held, along with her job as editor, until her retirement sixteen years later.

Don Boxmeyer, a staff writer for many, many years at the *Pioneer Press*, interviewed Virginia about five years after she retired and asked her about what it was like working at the Minneapolis newspaper. Virginia told him, "World War II opened doors to women that had historically been closed. We became the pioneers, and, ever since then, I've tried to



In 1982 Richard T. Faricy, left, the president of the RCHS Board presented Virginia Brainard Kunz with an engraved plaque commemorating her twenty years of service to the Society. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

encourage women to blend their careers with their personal lives."⁴

When the federal government decided in the late 1960s to build a new Federal Building on Robert Street and Kellogg Boulevard, the question of what to do with the Old Federal Courts Building, post office, and customs house adjacent to Rice Park erupted. Given the building's central location downtown and its deteriorating physical plant, there were calls for the demolition of the aging structure. A good number of ideas were floated as to what to do with the space that would be freed up once the courthouse was demolished.

A group of concerned citizens and government officials that was led by Frank Marzitelli, who was then the executive vice president of the St. Paul Port Authority and a founder of the St. Paul/Ramsey County Arts and Science Council and Georgia Ray DeCoster, a member of the St. Paul City Planning Commission and chair of the commission's Historic Preservation Committee, made sure, however, that the building was not torn down. Virginia was one of the advocates for saving the building. She wanted RCHS to have a physical presence in downtown St. Paul in addition to its museum at the Gibbs Farm and was confident that once the Society had its offices in the restored building, RCHS programs would have greater visibility and the Society would be able to grow its membership.

With the backing of Mayor Tom Byrne, who organized a committee to

preserve the Old Federal Courts Building that was led by Marzitelli and DeCoster, public support for repurposing the building grew and the mayor's committee was subsequently incorporated as a public nonprofit corporation called Minnesota Landmarks. In 1972 the federal government, satisfied that the proposed new usages for the courthouse met its regulations for surplus-property disposal, transferred title to the building to the City of St. Paul. Later, in 1975 the city transferred the title to Ramsey County, which made Minnesota Landmarks its agent for operating the building.

Guided by philanthropists, such as Elizabeth W. Musser, who wanted the Courthouse restored and turned into a center for the arts, the private sector provided the money (initially \$13.5 million) needed to restore the building, which reopened in 1974 as the Landmark Center. After Ramsey County took ownership of the Landmark Center, it designated the Ramsey County Historical Society as its official representative in the building. This meant that RCHS had use of a very limited amount of space in the building rent-free.

Leading RCHS

Although this agreement between Ramsey County and the historical society was good for RCHS, it initially caused some friction with other organizations in the building. Some arts and education tenants felt RCHS was getting preferential treatment; others argued that they should receive similar lease terms for their space. Minnesota Landmarks also questioned the county's arrangement with RCHS from time to time. As the executive director of RCHS, Virginia Kunz vigorously defended the terms of the lease that RCHS had with Landmark. She was up to the task and over time this tempest, which was completely tangential to the mission of RCHS, gradually disappeared.

Another nagging problem for RCHS in those early years was confusion between the Minnesota Historical Society and the Ramsey County Historical Society. Because the RCHS offices were located in downtown St. Paul only a short distance away from the Minnesota Historical Society's building, many people who came to Landmark for RCHS programs

or exhibits thought they were operated by the state society. Virginia and her hard-working staff repeatedly had to explain that the historical society located in Landmark was RCHS. By Minnesota law, every county had to have a historical society. Thus RCHS, as the historical society for Ramsey County, had its own offices, library, programs, and exhibits and it was not a part of the Minnesota Historical Society. Again, time has helped to lessen this confusion.

Having learned that awards in journalism can help promote a publication, in August 1967 RCHS received a Certificate of Commendation from the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) for its history magazine, *Ramsey County History*. At the Society's annual meeting that fall, Russell W. Fridley, who was then the director of the Minnesota Historical Society and on the board of the AASLH, presented the award to Margaret W. Wall, the RCHS president. In his remarks at the time of the presentation, Fridley pointed out that the AASLH that year had given out only eight awards to county historical societies and the RCHS award was the only one given to a county historical society magazine.⁵

Publishing *Ramsey County History* involved more than Virginia. From the time of the magazine's inception, the Society's board of directors established an Editorial Board to support and assist Virginia in seeing that the magazine came out on a regular basis. If you look through the back issues, you can see the names of the Ramsey County Commissioners over the years and all the Society's officers and the members of its board of directors. Members of the Society's board may not have had a large role in determining the editorial content of any given issue of the magazine, but they had the responsibility to ensure that RCHS had the funding to pay for publishing these magazines. The back issues of *Ramsey County History* also yield a little-known quirk. Between 1973 and 1975, the Society called itself the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society. That name change didn't go over well with the Ramsey County Commissioners, however, and it was quickly consigned to oblivion.

In 1990 *Ramsey County History* offi-



Virginia Brainard Kunz in 1989 at the time of her retirement as executive director of the Ramsey County Historical Society. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

cially became a quarterly history magazine. Virginia, now retired, continued as its editor. The Spring issue that year featured a long article written by Professor Thomas C. Buckley of the University of Minnesota about James J. Hill's yacht, *Wacouta*. This issue included other articles, such as a piece on the Great Northern Railway strike of 1894 that was written by Tamara C. Truer, who was at the time the manager of the Society's Gibbs Museum in Falcon Heights. The inaugural issue also included features that have been used often, but not in every magazine, since then: Letters to the Editor, Book Reviews, A Matter of Time, and What's Historic About this Site?

The Editorial Board

As I worked with Virginia and the other members of the Editorial Board over the next several years, we learned that putting together a quarterly history magazine that depended upon voluntary manuscript submissions from authors was hard work. The Editorial Board assisted Virginia in a variety of ways, especially regarding magazine policies and passing along information about potential authors or topics for articles. It was also a forum for discussing the content of upcoming issues of the magazine and suggesting new books that might be worth reviewing in a future issue. As with the authors of

articles, finding people who were willing to read a new book and write a review of it was not easy, but Virginia could be very persuasive, as I soon learned, when she wanted a book reviewed.

Board members often proposed excellent topics for possible articles. We eagerly debated the pros and cons of these suggestions. Inevitably the conversation turned on the question: who would be willing to write an article on that great idea? Many times no one had an answer to that question. We all knew the success of a quarterly magazine hinged on getting good manuscripts. As William S. Fallon, then the president of the Society's Board of Directors wrote in that Spring 1990 issue, "We also would like to remind you that we always are looking for manuscripts, for writers and particularly for reminiscences, those colorful and personal accounts of St. Paul and Ramsey County." As many of you may recognize, Virginia was able to take those personal reminiscences and print them as a feature she called Growing Up in St. Paul. These Growing Up accounts are now a staple of our magazine. Today, just as was the case when Virginia was the editor, we can always use more submissions of these recollections because they are so fresh and original.

Virginia had no budget with which to pay writers for their time and effort. Thus she was dependent on authors who would send her their manuscripts in a timely fashion. More often than Virginia was willing to admit, she didn't get a manuscript in time to include it in a specific issue that she was readying for publication. Consequently she would have a gap of two or three or four pages to fill before the issue in question could go to press. Sometimes she had a manuscript in her files that she could move ahead in her schedule and print sooner rather than later. In other instances, however, Virginia's solution was to reach into her editorial bag of features and to write a book review or A Matter of Time, or a What's Historic About This Site? to fill out the contents of the issue. Most of these pieces carried no byline; thus we don't have an exact record of all the articles and features Virginia wrote for *Ramsey County History*. Every time one of these last-minute features appeared, I

found it hard to determine how she had managed to pull together so much interesting material in such a short time.

Early on in my involvement with *Ramsey County History*, I commented to Virginia at one of the Editorial Board meetings that I had found a couple of typos in the most recently published issue. Her response was quick and to the point: "Why don't you help me by proof-reading the issue before it's printed?" Little did I realize when I agreed to do that how much time I'd spend going over proofs to ensure what was printed met the high standard of quality that both of us wanted the magazine to have.

When discussions of potential topics for articles would come up in our meetings, someone would usually ask "Have we ever published something on topic X or subject Y or person Z?" Inevitably Virginia would respond, "Oh, we did something on that" and then she would name the year and the author. Her knowledge of what was in the many back issues was truly amazing. Of course, Virginia had an advantage over all of us on the Editorial Board; she had put those issues together and thus knew them well. The rest of us had become involved with the planning of the magazine after 1989; thus we only knew bits and pieces of earlier issues.

These questions about what had been written about and by whom and when it had been published in a back issue spurred Steve Trimble, Paul Nelson, and others on the Editorial Board to take on a massive volunteer project to write brief synopses of the contents of every major article in every back issue of *Ramsey County History*. It took years to complete this project. Today these brief explanations of what each article covers may be found in a link on the RCHS website under the heading "Magazine Index." Something of a misnomer, this listing is not a true subject index; instead it is essentially a contents listing of each issue with a brief synopsis for each article. Nevertheless, it serves to help readers find back issues that touch on a topic in which they are interested in learning more.

During her tenure as executive director between 1964 and 1989, Virginia not only managed the Society's move from offices at the Gibbs Farm Museum (now

the Gibbs Museum of Pioneer and Dakota Life) in Falcon Heights to larger quarters in the Landmark Center, she was also instrumental in the creation of the Irvine Park Historic District, which was the first of its kind in St. Paul. A skilled executive, Virginia also oversaw the growth of the Society from operating two afternoons a week at Gibbs Museum on an annual budget of \$10,000 to a nonprofit that had more than 1,200 members and a budget that exceeded \$500,000 at the time of her retirement.

Virginia's Books

In addition to all the responsibilities she had as executive director of the Society, Virginia found time to write fifteen books, three of which were histories of St. Paul. Her two best-known books are *St. Paul: Saga of an American City* (1980) and *St. Paul: The First 150 Years* (1991), but she also authored a number of corporate and institutional histories. RCHS published Virginia's last book, *'Bought 2 Horses & a Wagon': The Story of the Murphy Companies, 1904-2004*, which came out at the time of the firm's centennial. In this history Virginia told the colorful and compelling story of a local business, the Murphy Companies, which had been founded by Edward L. Murphy Sr., who at the time was living on Rice Street in the North End neighborhood. The construction of the Minnesota Capitol between 1898 and 1906 gave that first Murphy business, Murphy Transfer Company, a strong boost because this massive public works project required many teams of horses to haul stone and other materials to the construction site.

Veteran journalist and widely acknowledged expert in the architectural history of the Twin Cities, Larry Millett interviewed Virginia just before she retired for a profile in the *Pioneer Press*. She told Millett, "We've seen an enormous interest in neighborhood and community history in particular. There's also been a tremendous interest in family history."⁶ That statement is as true today as it was in 1989.

Following her retirement, Virginia edited *Ramsey County History* from her home and kept in frequent touch with authors, Society members, RCHS staff, and her many contacts in journalism and local

history. She also wrote many articles for *Ramsey County History*, including extended biographical profiles of local business leaders Richard C. Lilly, Lucius P. Ordway, and I. A. O'Shaughnessy. Virginia also took on freelance assignments of research and writing projects for a wide range of local clients. Freed from her responsibilities of managing RCHS as its executive director, she now had the time to take on these larger projects. Some of them resulted in published books or articles; others served the internal needs of the client and were not published.

As editor, Virginia strived to make sure that contributors to *Ramsey County History* got their facts correct. She also wanted to publish history that told a good story, especially when it could focus on the people in that story. This attitude reflected her training as a journalist. The importance of this emphasis on people and their story came through in the positive feedback about the magazine that the Society received from readers over the years. Twice during her time as editor, *Ramsey County History* earned an award for excellence from the American Association for State and Local History (1967 and 1993).

Virginia evaluated potential articles on the merit of their content and value as historical research. Thus she fostered an open approach to new or different topics in local history. Many of the authors who worked with Virginia would tell her of other historians she might like to contact on behalf of the magazine or they would volunteer an idea for a future article that would appeal to the magazine's readers. In the words of Mary Lethert Wingerd, one of today's foremost historians of Minnesota, Virginia "was a master at making our history accessible to the public." Virginia was actively working on the latest issue of the magazine when she fell ill just over a week before her death on January 7, 2006. Preceded in death by her husband Richard Carl Kunz (they married in 1950; he died in 1978), Virginia is survived by a daughter and a son and four grandchildren.⁷

Her Legacy

The RCHS Board of Directors subsequently established a memorial fund to honor Virginia Kunz's legacy of editing



In 1993 the American Association for State and Local History awarded a Certificate of Commendation to the Ramsey County Historical Society for its quarterly history magazine, *Ramsey County History*. Seen here from left to right are some of the members of the Society's Editorial Board who helped guide the publication process: Priscilla Farnham, executive director of RCHS; Thomas C. Buckley; Virginia Brainard Kunz, editor; John M. Lindley, chair of the Editorial Board, holding the certificate; Thomas H. Boyd; Arthur C. McWatt; Thomas J. Kelley. Not pictured members of the Board included Charlton H. Dietz, Laurie M. Murphy, and Thomas B. Mega. Photo by Richard Strom. Photo courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

Ramsey County History for more than forty years. Memorial tributes at the time of her death universally acknowledged Virginia's deft editorial hand, her nearly encyclopedic knowledge of St. Paul history, and her talent as a writer. The Board also established the Virginia Brainard Kunz Award which is given to the author of the best article published in *Ramsey County History* in a two-year span. The first award was made at the Society's annual meeting in the fall of 2006 for the publication years 2004 and 2005. Since then, the Kunz Award has been made four more times with the latest award being made in 2014 for articles published in 2012 and 2013. Each recipient of the Kunz Award receives a certificate and a cash prize.

Virginia Kunz's career encompassed more than just what she did for the Ramsey County Historical Society between 1964 and 2006. In 1969, for example, Virginia joined with two other women who ran county historical societies in Minnesota to organize the Southern Minnesota Historical Assembly (the successor organization to the First District Historical Assembly). The mission of this group was to "aid

the cause of state history by collecting, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge of local history," especially in the counties in southern Minnesota. The Minnesota Historical Society actively supported this affiliation of county historical societies at the time, but the organization slowly declined and disbanded in the early 1990s.

Another way to measure Virginia's wider accomplishments as an author and historian is to enter her name in the online library catalog at the Minnesota Historical Society. Type in Virginia's name and the computer will then list 35 books, articles, collections of papers, and other publications that she either wrote or edited. Her first book, now sadly out of print, was *Muskets to Missiles: A Military History of Minnesota*. She wrote this history for the Minnesota National Guard in 1958. Then in 1966 she published a pair of books, *The French in America* and *The Germans in America*. Her first book published for RCHS was *Discover St. Paul: A Short History of Seven St. Paul Neighborhoods* (1979). The computer then lists the many articles she wrote in the magazine that carried her byline along with her other

books and articles. In all, this list reflects a lifetime of writing history.

As the founding editor of *Ramsey County History*, Virginia Kunz left a legacy of books, articles, and other writings that is more than a historical footnote. She made sure that during her time at RCHS as many of the stories of the past in Ramsey County as possible are documented and made part of the public record by getting them published. She knew that once these stories were in print, anyone who wanted to learn more about the richness of the county's historical record could find it. Tough, demanding, and a skilled writer, Virginia Kunz set the bar for good local history very high. For that, we can all be grateful.

John M. Lindley holds a doctorate in history from Duke University and is the successor to Virginia Kunz as the editor of Ramsey County History.

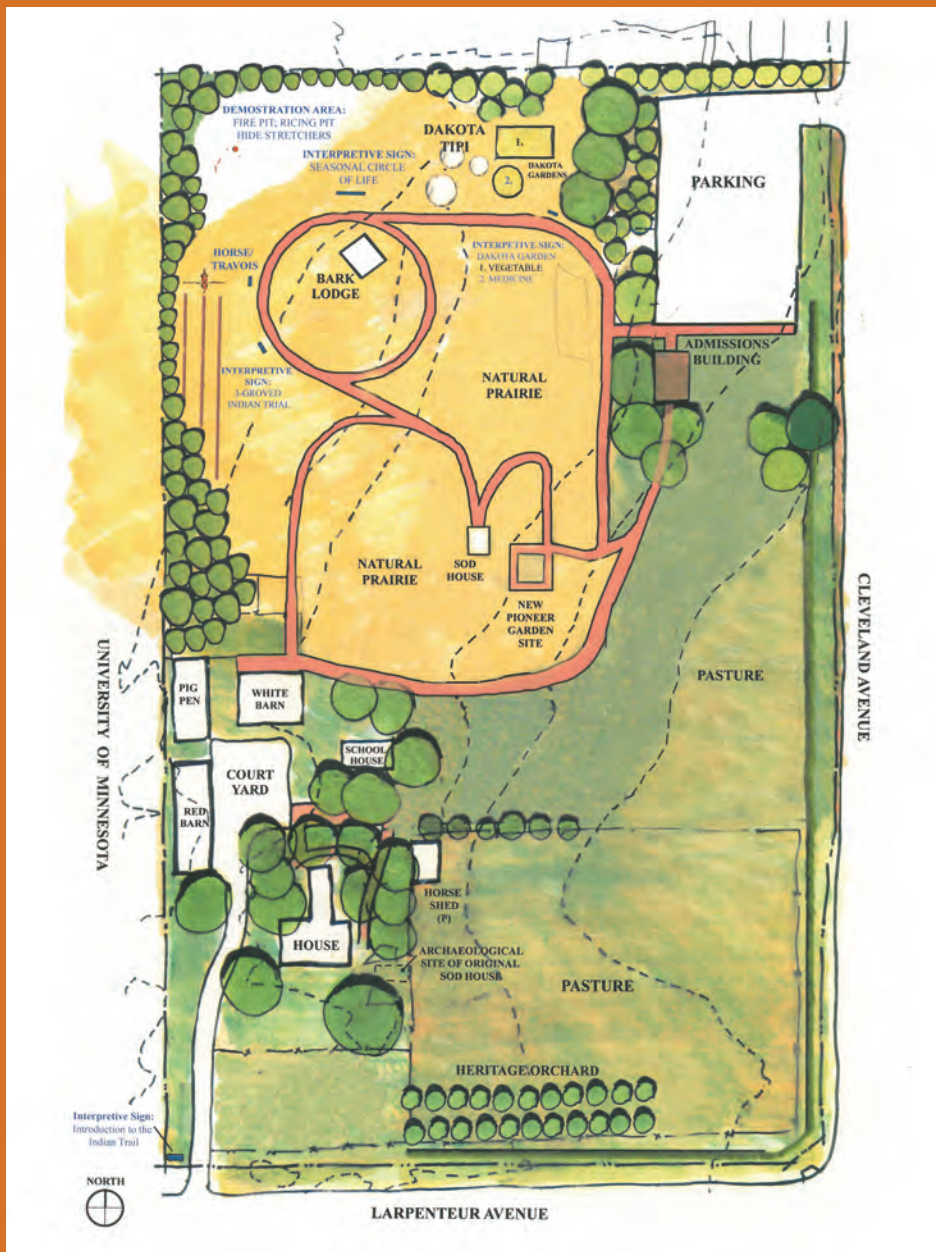
Notes

1. David Chanen, "Virginia Kunz Will Become Historical Society Footnote," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, November 9, 1989, page 1Y.
2. "3 State Awards to Miss Murray," *Winona Republican-Herald*, February 22, 1954, p. 9.
3. "KUNZ, Virginia Brainard" in Barbara Harte and Carolyn Riley, eds., *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 21-22 (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1969).
4. Don Boxmeyer, "Women's History Month Profile [Virginia Brainard Kunz]," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 28, 1994, p. 1C.
5. "Ramsey County History Wins Award," *Ramsey County History*, 4, no. 2 (Fall 1967): 17.
6. Larry Millett, "Historical Society Editor to Retire," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 9, 1989, p. 1C.
7. Robert J.R. Johnson, "For County, She Wrote the Book," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 26, 1989, p. 8A; Virginia Brainard Kunz, "Lucien Galtier Saved St. Paul from a Fate as 'Pig's Eye,'" *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 31, 1991, p. 9A; Don Boxmeyer, "It's Not a Melting Pot, It's What We Call Home," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 3, 1992, p. 1F; "Virginia Brainard Kunz [obituary]," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 12, 2006, p. B6; Matt Peikan, "Historian Told Tales of Everyday Life," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 10, 2006.

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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.