

RAMSEY COUNTY

History

A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

“Abide with Me”
Grace Craig Stork, 1916

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Fall 2016

Volume 51, Number 3

A Workplace Accident

John Anderson’s Fall from the High Bridge

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Towering above the Mississippi River flood plain, St. Paul’s Smith Avenue High Bridge, seen here in a 1905 postcard, connected the city’s oldest residential neighborhood, West Seventh Street, with its newest at the time, Cherokee Heights, or the Upper West Side. John Anderson, a painter working on the bridge in 1902, fell and survived the accident. His story tells us much about the dangers in the workplace then and now. Photo by the Detroit Photographic Company, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON JANUARY 25, 2016:

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future

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A Message from the Editorial Board

In this issue, we are reminded how workplace conditions in Ramsey County reflect social and political realities. Brian McMahon gives us a look at St. Paul's Ford Assembly Plant during World War II, when the facility was retooled for the war effort. Many workers, including women, were hired to manufacture parts for Pratt & Whitney airplane engines and the M-8 armored car. John Sielaff details the story of John Anderson, a painter who suffered severe injuries in a fall when he was painting the High Bridge in 1902. In the days before Workers' Compensation was enacted in Minnesota, Anderson's legal claim against his employer took a convoluted journey through the court system. Rebecca Ebnnet-Mavencamp shares a social history of the Stork family, who lived on Cleveland Avenue. Although Clinton Stork worked at the H.B. Fuller Company, this story concentrates on family, especially the debilitating illness of Grace Stork, examined through compassionate diary entries of her daughter.

As a final note, don't forget we have podcasts available too. Paul Nelson has a wonderful interview with former Mayor George Latimer, and his latest podcast takes a look at one of our earliest and most interesting settlers, Harriet Bishop. Check them out at www.rchs.com.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

Streetcars: A Way of Life

DeAnne Marie Cherry

Traveling by streetcar in St. Paul was a way of life for my family many years ago. As I searched for information concerning my family history, I became aware of the significance of the streetcar in their daily lives. The following is a sample of our family streetcar stories.

Streetcars were not always electric. My great-grandfather, Andrew Sobkowiak, was a carpenter by trade and he traveled on the streetcar to his various jobs. In the beginning, Andrew rode on a horse-driven streetcar that he probably caught on Rice Street. The speed of this type of transportation was about five miles per hour. The driver stood on an open platform guiding the horses on their route. In those days, the horses needed much attention with food, shelter, and the skills of a blacksmith. The streets were littered with horse manure, a cleanup problem for the city.

In 1890 the first electric streetcar started running on Grand Avenue in St. Paul. Soon there were other lines in the city. Andrew took an electric streetcar to the University of Minnesota campus where he worked in some of the campus buildings and to a different job he had at the St. Paul Hotel on Rice Park. He paid a nickel in cash to ride. This was before the Token Fare was established.

My grandmother Catherine Maslowski, who was called Kate, was ahead of her time. She was a more liberated woman than most when it came to work outside the home. In 1905 Kate and her sister Jennie started their first jobs and they rode the Payne Avenue streetcar to work in St. Paul. They were listed in the *1905 St. Paul City Directory* as “strippers.” Now the title of their occupation may throw the reader. You might think, Wow! Grandma Kate was a stripper. However, she was not a lady of the night. Both



Frank and Catherine Sobkowiak, July 6, 1915. All photos are courtesy of DeAnne Marie Cherry.

Kate and Jennie were working at Kuhles & Stock, a tobacco company in St. Paul. They were tobacco strippers. One might wonder if they ever smoked a cigar outside the building. We will never know.

On Wednesday, July 6, 1915, my grandparents Frank Sobkowiak and Catherine Maslowski were married in St. Casimir Catholic Church located at Forest and Jessamine Streets in St. Paul's North End. Unlike most wedding parties of today, Frank and Kate did not have a limo or a decorated car to ride in. As Frank got dressed for his wedding, he

listened to the rain outside his bedroom window. Frank and his best man found it necessary to hurry, in the rain, to catch the streetcar in South St. Paul taking them to downtown St. Paul. While they waited to transfer to the Forest-Phalen streetcar that would take them to the church, they sought shelter from the rain in the doorway of a nearby building. At their destination, they got off the streetcar and hurried into the church. With the church filled with family and friends, the mood was festive in spite of the weather.

In 1919 Frank began working for the Armour Meat Packing Plant in South St. Paul. Each day he caught the 5:40 a.m. streetcar at Geranium and Forest Streets, and then transferred at Robert and 7th in downtown St. Paul to another streetcar. Once he arrived in South St. Paul, Frank had to walk about a mile to the plant. In the 1940s Frank was still riding the streetcar to and from work. I remember that the sound of the afternoon streetcar was the signal for the neighborhood kids to go home. My Grandma Kate had always allowed all the kids to play in her yard at 915 Geranium Street. When her husband came home from work, however, the kids were gone and my brother, Dennis, and I had to be quiet so that grandpa could take a nap.

In 1923 Frank took his daughter, my mother Melvina Sobkowiak, on the streetcar to see the St. Paul Saints play ballgames. They rode the streetcar to the Lexington Ball Park on University Avenue. On one occasion, they went to a doubleheader between the St. Paul Saints and the Minneapolis Millers. They watched the first game at the Lexington Ball Park and then they took a streetcar to Nicollet Park in Minneapolis. In 1923 the Saints won 111 ballgames. Baseball

would become a life-long interest for my mother, from the old St. Paul Saints to the present-day Minnesota Twins. She knew the statistics for many of the players in both the American and National Leagues. Mother often discussed baseball with her grandsons. When she died in 1999, Mother was buried with a Homer Hanky, a celebrated souvenir from when the Twins won the World Series. My son Paul spoke at my mother's funeral and said, "If there is baseball in heaven, grandma will know all the angels' names and their baseball statistics."

Over the years my Grandma Kate managed to travel all over the Twin Cities on the streetcar. On one shopping trip in the 1930s, she went to Bannons Department Store on Seventh Street in downtown St. Paul. As Kate went into the store's elevator, much to her surprise, Topsy the family dog, followed her in. A lady in the elevator remarked, "What a cute dog!" Kate, however, was so embarrassed that she pretended not to know Topsy. She simply got off the elevator on the next floor. Then Kate got on another elevator going back down and, in the end, she went home on the streetcar. Grandma Kate was sorry that she could not take Topsy on the streetcar and she was worried about him. Then she looked out the window and saw that Topsy was running as fast as his little legs could carry him following the car. Lucky for him, the streetcar stopped often. When Kate got off the streetcar, she waited for her dog. Topsy, an extremely tired dog, came running toward her in the distance. After that experience, Grandma Kate always made sure that Topsy was in the house before she left.

In January 1937, my mother, Melvina, and her friend, Leona Schulte, rode the streetcar to downtown St. Paul. They marched in the St. Paul Winter Carnival Parade with the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing (today known as 3M) Company's contingent. Melvina said, "It was a very cold January evening, but



Edward Sobkowiak 1940, in front of 915 Geranium Street, the family home, wearing the uniform of a U.S. Marine recruit.

that they still had fun in downtown St. Paul. The city was so alive with music and commotion that it was a great experience." You might wonder if they stopped to get warm in one of the bars in downtown St. Paul and had a nickel beer. They did indeed make such a stop.

In 1940 my Uncle Edward, son of Frank and Kate, joined the Eighteenth Marine Regiment, United States Marine Reserves. This unit from St. Paul was the first reserve unit in the state to be called up for service in the armed forces. On Friday, November 8, 1940, Frank and Kate took the streetcar downtown to see their son. They watched him march through downtown St. Paul to the train depot. Kate remembered that motorcycle police and members from the St. Paul Motorcycle Club led the Marines along the way. There was also a Winter Carnival band that marched with the young men. The *St. Paul Dispatch* reported the following, "Walking in single file, the men

went to the concourse, stowed away their guns and other equipment on the train and then piled out of the coaches to say farewell to the men, women, and children clustered in front of every coach." It was a very tearful goodbye for Edward's family. Kate tried to smile, but in the end, she could not stop the tears from falling. Her only son was going off to war. At age twenty-two, Edward left his hometown on a train bound for Camp Elliott in San Diego, California. His unit subsequently fought in some of the fiercest battles in the Pacific Theater, particularly Tarawa, Tinian, and Saipan.

It was raining on the morning of November 11, 1940, when my grandpa Frank and my dad Gene boarded the streetcar for downtown St. Paul. Ironically, they were going to Foreman and Clark, the men's clothing store, on Wabasha Street to buy Gene a winter coat. By the end of that afternoon, he would certainly need a warm coat because the rain turned to sleet and then to heavy snow. This, of course,

was the Armistice Day Blizzard that hit Minnesota unexpectedly. The storm stranded many people with cars in ditches and some of the streetcars got stuck in the snow. On that afternoon, my mother put rugs by the kitchen door to keep the snow from blowing into our home at 871 York Avenue, on St. Paul's East Side. To keep me off the cold floor, my mother put me in my highchair. She gave me toys to play with. Remember in those days we did not have a TV back to keep kids entertained. All this happened a couple of months before my second birthday; thus I only remember the story about the storm.

I do know that my mother was very worried at the time about my dad and my grandpa. My family did not have a phone in the house, so dad could not call her. In the end, dad and grandpa managed to ride a streetcar home around eight in the evening. Years later, mother told me that she was thankful that her brother went off to war a few days before this terrible



Melvina and Leona in their marching uniforms in 1937 alongside a streetcar at Lake Phalen.

storm. Had my uncle been in town, he would have been deer hunting and might have died in the woods from exposure, as some hunters did.

In December 1945, my family all rode the streetcar downtown to the St. Paul Union Depot to meet my Uncle Edward, who was returning from five years of service in the Marines during World War II. In the vast waiting room of the Union Depot there was an enormous amount of hugging, kissing, and crying as families welcomed back their family member from the service overseas. Grandma Kate thanked God that her son was one of the lucky ones to survive a major invasion and come home alive. Her nephew, who grew up next door, never came home.

When I personally think of the streetcar, it brings back happy memories of my grandma. I remember riding on the streetcar with her and my brother, Dennis, in the late 1940s. It was fun to put the tokens in the meter box. Part of the fun included pulling the cord that signaled that we wanted to get off at the next stop. Although I don't remember, I would imagine that both Dennis and I wanted to pull that cord. I remember that some of the men stood in the back of the car and smoked cigarettes. However, I don't remember ever seeing a woman smoking back there. One of the places that we went to was Woolworth's, a dime store, in downtown St. Paul. The store had a lot of toys and candy that would entice any

young child. On Sundays, in the summer, we rode the streetcar to Calvary Cemetery on Front Street to visit my great grandparents' graves. Grandma would weed and then plant flowers on the graves. The trip always ended with ice cream bought at a drugstore near the cemetery. We also rode on the streetcar to Como Park where we saw the animals and visited the flower gardens. The best part of Como Park was when grandma let us ride on the water bikes. What fun we had peddling through the water on those warm afternoons.

Also in the late 1940s I traveled by streetcar to a St. Paul Saints ball game. I vaguely remember ball player names, such as Eric Tipton (1946–1951), Ferrell Anderson, and Roy Campanella (1948). What was most enjoyable for me as a child was the treats that I got to eat at the game. I didn't really pay attention to what was happening on the field. That is now changed as I am a Minnesota Twins fan who attends a few games each season and watches many of them on TV.

Even though the streetcar was long gone, I had a chance to ride on one again in 1974. We celebrated my son Mark's seventh birthday with a party at Lake Calhoun. Here we had a chance to ride on the Como-Harriet Line by the lake. I probably had more fun than my children. The ride brought back pleasant memories of my grandmother and of a slower and gentler pace of life.

The years have gone by so fast. I was

once that young child riding the streetcar with my Grandma Kate, and now I am Grandma DeAnne riding the streetcar with my grandchildren, Skylar and Rayne Van Guilder. They really had fun riding on the Como-Harriet Streetcar a couple summers ago. Later, with much excitement, my nine-year-old grandson, Skylar, told his mom that he got to ride on a one-hundred-year-old streetcar with grandma. It was a great time and certainly a memory maker for future thoughts.

DeAnne Marie Cherry is a retired college administrator whose passion is researching family history including the life her family has lived in the city of St. Paul since the 1880s.



DeAnne Cherry with Rayne, left, and Skylar Van Guilder, next to a restored streetcar on the Como-Harriet Line.