

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Spring 2015

Volume 50, Number 1

Growing Up in St. Paul

*Payne Avenue:
Memories of Mora,
Bocce Ball, Shining Shoes,
Gardens, and Swede Hollow*

Richard A. Sherwood

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*When Adapting to Change Was Not Enough
Brings Is Gone: The Life and Death
of a St. Paul Family Business*

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With the St. Paul Cathedral in the background in this undated photo, a Brings and Company wagon driven by two teamsters is on its way. Imagine lifting over 100 bales of hay onto this wagon, each of which weighed between 60 and 80 pounds, then driving one of many teams of horses that Brings owned over the years to deliver the hay! Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.

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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

Wander around St. Paul with this magazine and your imagination, and you will learn all kinds of stories. The stone building now located at 178 Goodrich Avenue was once the home of Joseph Brings, patriarch of the Brings family and founder of the Brings Company, the legendary feed business. Marcia Kremer outlines its origins and flexibility in providing first hay for carriage horses, then feed for the circus and the zoo, and finally landscaping products. The Soldiers and Sailors Memorial at the eastern end of Summit Avenue is crowned with a sculpture of Josias King, whom Patrick Hill restores to his rightful status as the first Minnesota volunteer in Lincoln’s Union army. Hill’s article carefully dissects the surrounding events and discredits a competing claim. And the current Swede Hollow Park provided a natural playground for Richard Sherwood and his friends growing up on the East Side of St. Paul in the 1940s. The Second World War was a backdrop, but the boys were able to build forts, explore the woods, and even follow Phalen Creek to fish in the Mississippi River. Write your own Ramsey County story and share it with others too!

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

When Adapting to Change Was Not Enough

Brings Is Gone: The Life and Death of a St. Paul Family Business

Marcia Kremer

On December 23, 1969, Brings and Company, a feed and seed store in business since 1884 located at 310–318 West Seventh Street (at Ramsey Street), received a notice from the Housing and Redevelopment Authority of the City of Saint Paul. The notice informed the business owners that their location had been officially designated an urban renewal area to be redeveloped and rehabilitated with financial assistance from the U.S. government. Then less than three weeks later, on January 12, 1970, the West Seventh Street Association for Neighborhood Development informed Brings and Company “that as a result of planning activities conducted during the past year, the above listed property (310–314 West 7th, Saint Paul, Minnesota), is proposed for acquisition. The proposed acquisition of your property is a part of activities designed to make the West Seventh neighborhood a better place in which to reside.”¹ By March 18, 1971, “the transaction whereby Housing and Redevelopment Authority of the City of Saint Paul acquired the Brings and Company property at 310–318 West Seventh Street, Saint Paul was completed . . .”² and the headline “BRINGS IS GONE” that accompanied Gareth Hiebert’s “Sunday Magazine” feature story in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* on February 28, 1971 said it all.³

With the dissolution of Brings and Company, the legacy of a pioneer St. Paul family had been lost. Over the course of nearly 113 years and four generations, the Brings family had played a significant role in the development of the Fort Road/West Seventh Street area.

Arriving with his craft and entrepreneurial skills in St. Paul, Joseph Brings, a young German immigrant, would be the first of the Brings clan to make his mark in this area. His son, grandsons, and great-granddaughter’s husband would follow in his footsteps. The story of the Brings family and their contributions to the development of the West Seventh Street area is a wonderful saga of a family recognizing the needs of the community, cultivating their neighbors’ respect and trust, and adapting over time to survive in the highly competitive business world. From 1857–1970, the Brings family and their business was a presence in the West Seventh Street area. This is their story.

Leaving Germany

On September 24, 1848, Joseph Brings, a twenty-eight-year-old cooper, and Lucia (who was known in the family as Lucy) Surth, a twenty-three-year-old seamstress, both from the Village of Glesch on the Rhine near Cologne, Germany, were united in marriage at the church of St. Kunibert in Cologne.⁴ For the next nine years, they would live and work in Cologne and start their family.

In 1857, like thousands of Rhinelanders, Joseph Brings set off with his family to find a home and begin a new life as German immigrants on the other side of the Atlantic. Perhaps he was driven by curiosity and a thirst for adventure, but more likely he was seeking a better life for his family and economic advancement. On March 14, 1857, Joseph, Lucia, and their three young daughters, seven-year-old Mary, five-year-old Margaret, and nine-month-old Elizabeth, arrived

at the Port of New York aboard the ship *Belgique*.⁵ Joseph and his young family settled in St. Paul, shortly thereafter.⁶

Like many of the other German immigrants, Joseph lived in what is now known as the West Seventh Street/Fort Road area, a traditional immigrant neighborhood for several early waves of newcomers to the area. The earliest immigrants were mostly Germans, who built several breweries and St. Paul became a hotbed for brewing activity. It was a perfect place for the Germans to make their lager beer, a beer that had a cool, light foaming quality that many people preferred to the common English ales and porter beers.⁷ With all the beer being produced locally, Joseph was able to support his family working as a cooper (barrel maker). St. Paul seemed a good fit for him.

Joseph soon recognized the need to diversify his business ventures. According to the *St. Paul City Directory*, in 1857 he was a cooper on Oak between Pine and Ramsey Streets. By 1859 he had added a saloon at that address, and in 1861 his business was listed as hay, feed, saloon, and cooper on Smith Avenue between Sherman and Ramsey Streets. The first record of the Joseph Brings family in the U.S. census appeared in 1860. It indicates they were living in St. Paul’s Fourth Ward and Joseph’s occupation was listed as a cooper. This census record includes a daughter, Gertrude, age two, the first Brings child born in Minnesota.

In 1863, Joseph and Lucy Brings purchased a home and lot for \$1,300 (\$700 mortgaged) from its original owner and builder, John Charles Schilliger, at what was to become 314 North Smith Avenue. Joseph operated his cooperage from the house for the next few years.⁸

By 1865, the Brings family had grown to include three more children, Joseph, Louise, and Frank.⁹ By 1867,



These two photos compare the Brings family home at 314 N. Smith Avenue in 1900, left, to the restored home which was moved in 1989 to its new location at 178 Goodrich Avenue. The house has been a private, remodeled residence since 1990. Left photo by Carl Otto Erickson; courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society; right photo by Marcia Kremer. Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.

The Joseph Brings House

Joseph and Lucia Brings purchased a home and lot in St. Paul on what was to become 314 N. Smith Avenue from John Charles Schillinger for \$1,300 on May 1, 1863. They lived in the house until 1873. He ran his cooperage from the home until 1870 (Joseph Brings' 1899 obituary identifies his homestead as "the old stone house opposite the car shed on Smith Avenue . . . [which] still stands, one of the old landmarks").

Schillinger, a stone mason who had emigrated to the United States from Switzerland, built the house using locally quarried limestone in 1859. Corner quoining accents the smoothly finished front facade and the roughly finished side and back facades. About 1,000 square feet in size, the two-story house had a full basement, a living room and kitchen on the first floor, and two bedrooms on the second floor.

The Joseph Brings House is a good example of a two-story stone residence from the Civil War or Pioneer era. According to the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission Site Nomination Form, the architectural character of the house is significant, because it is a rare representation of the transitional phase in Minnesota architecture between the Federal and Greek Revival styles and also hints at the Italianate style soon to follow. Common characteristics of this traditional style are simplicity, sparse exterior detail, and a formalized symmetrical appearance. This style was practical for the early settlers because it fit their lifestyle, limitations of material shortages, and rapid construction necessary during the Pioneer era. There are a few simple elements of decoration unusual to limestone houses constructed in this era. Underscoring the low hipped roof is a row of underlined wide spread modillions. The windows are six over six, double hung with smooth limestone lintels and sills. The three-bay arrangement is symmetrically positioned on the flat, proportioned facade. The entrance is

beneath the upper right window. Surrounding the door are flanking sidelights and a rectangular transom. Additions to the original design include shutters and a three-bayed front porch, with an upper row of spindles, modillions, and simply capped columns which were added sometime before 1900. The Brings House is a remnant of the residential architecture built by the working community which settled the West Seventh area (report prepared by Theresa Schwarz, HPC intern, 9 August 1989).

In 1981 the Saint Paul City Council designated the house as a Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Site. In 1989, the house, which was then owned by United Hospital, was moved upon approval of the Heritage Preservation Commission at a cost of about \$20,000 to make room for new construction at United and Children's Hospitals and was designated a Saint Paul Historic Presentation Site for a second time after the move. Its present location is 178 Goodrich Avenue.

The new site is a residential lot in the West Seventh Street neighborhood which relates well to the historic context of the house. The house was restored and included the construction of a new chimney, two new porches, and an addition. The building's limestone was cleaned and repointed, and the limestone sills were repaired in conformance with the preservation program. The original fenestration pattern was preserved and windows and doors matching the originals were installed. The building was reroofed with cedar shingles, which are consistent with the original design, and soffit and fascia were repaired or replaced to match the original roof profile. The addition was detailed to be compatible with the existing building and is not visible from the street. The front and rear porches were reconstructed to match historic photographs. Since 1990 the home has been a private residence (St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission Site Nomination Form).

according to the *St. Paul City Directory*, Joseph was operating his cooperage on Ramsey between Seventh and Oak and was living on Oak between Ramsey and Sherman. Then on September 23, 1868 Joseph Brings purchased Lot 5, Block 1 in Leech's Addition to St. Paul for \$1,200 (\$600 mortgaged) from Jacob and Catherine Dony.¹⁰ He agreed to pay off the mortgage with interest at a rate of 10% per annum within four years. The mortgage was paid off on February 23, 1870.¹¹ There was a small frame structure on the property.

Joseph took out a mortgage again on the property in 1870 for \$1,300 from George Dorman and the promissory note required him to keep the building on the premises insured and in good condition. He agreed to pay off the mortgage within two years at an interest rate of 12% per annum paid quarterly. He paid off the mortgage on November 23, 1871.¹² From 1868–1870 Joseph's cooperage was listed at Fort Road and his residence as 79 Oak. Joseph was operating his cooperage from the frame building on the property he purchased. The 1870 U.S. census indicates that another Brings child, Lena, had been born in 1868. She would complete the family of six girls and two boys, who were then living in the limestone house on Smith Avenue.

Joseph Opens a Store

In 1870, Joseph opened a store at 212 Fort Road on the lot he bought in 1868 (probably in the frame building that was already there). The 1871 *St. Paul City Directory* listed his business as a cooperage and saloon, groceries and provisions at the corner of Fort and Ramsey. Since Fort Road had become the main artery for people traveling west from Lowertown (downtown St. Paul), locating his store here proved to be a fruitful venture. By 1873, Joseph's occupation was listed as a cooper and grocer. In 1873, the family moved from the limestone house and began living at 209 Fort Road, the same location as the business, which would later become identified as 312–318 West Seventh and known as Brings Flour and Feed. For the next 100 years, the Brings family would operate their businesses from this location.

Joseph ran his cooperage and grocery business until his retirement in 1883. During that time, he would see his four eldest daughters marry men from the area. Mary Brings married Conrad Heymel in 1870; Margaret wedded Thomas M. Skok in 1873; Elizabeth and John Brabeck were married in 1876; and Gertrude married Henry Kopp in 1879. Sons Joseph and Frank and daughters Louise (who later married Adelard Michaud) and Magdalena (Lena) (who later married Ferdinand Barta, a prominent attorney) continued to live at home. Although Joseph died in 1899, he would see the fruits of his labors blossom in the next fifteen years as he continued to live at the back of the store with wife, Lucia.

In 1884 young Frank J. Brings, Joseph's son, who was just nineteen,

would begin to make his mark in the history of West Seventh Street/Fort Road. That year Frank took over the family business and began building it into one of the most successful and long-running enterprises on today's West Seventh and Ramsey Streets. What had initially been his immigrant father's cooperage, grocery, and feed store would be transformed and grow into Brings and Company Feed and Seed and continue on that site for the next eighty-seven years.

By the mid-1880s, West Seventh Street (formerly called Fort Road) was the most heavily traveled route for anyone moving west of St. Paul by land. In those days, horses were the main mode of transportation; thus everything ran on hay. Delivery wagons from breweries and department stores, express wagons, fleets from dray companies, police



This is the only known photo of Joseph Brings, left, along with and two other unidentified people outside the Brings Store at 209 Fort Road, today better known as West Seventh Street in St. Paul. The photo dates from the early 1870s. Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.

and fire wagons, and teams from liveryies throughout the Twin Cities patronized Brings. Wealthy families from Summit Hill and Irvine Park rolled up in fancy buggies. As Gareth Hebert wrote, "The old adage that money ain't hay didn't apply to Brings and Company feed and seed emporium." Over a million dollars flowed through the gilt-scrolled cash register in one year during the 1890s.¹³ Brings truly had the carriage trade and watched the business roll in.

Frank J. Brings sold feed to James J. Hill, famous builder of railroad empires. On winter Saturdays, when snow was banked along the ice-rutted streets, Hill and his neighbor, Frederick K. Weyerhauser of lumbering fame, would stop so that Hill could pay his feed bill and both men could warm their hands over the old coal stove. Tan Langford, who was America's first cowboy, U.S. marshal, and one of the fathers of Yellowstone National Park, brought his team up to the store from Irvine Park

when he was in town. Pierce Butler, who later became a distinguished associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, also struck up a friendship with Brings that lasted for many years.¹⁴

During the 1890s Frank Brings' personal life changed as well. On October 8, 1890, he married Josephine M. Crebbs, granddaughter of Augustine Larpenteur and Samuel Morris. Augustine's sibling, Eugene Nicholas Larpenteur, and her nephew, Auguste Louis Larpenteur, were members of the pioneering Larpenteur family that had settled in St. Paul in the late 1840s. Josephine and her sister, Helene, both of whom had been born in Baltimore, Maryland, came to St. Paul with their mother, Margaret Emilie Morris Crebbs, shortly after their father's death in 1869 because they would have support from the large extended Larpenteur family here.

Frank and Josephine were blessed with three children, Hubert Leslie in 1891; Francis Schade in 1894; and Helene Morris in 1896. The end of the decade



Young Frank Brings, Joseph's son, seen here in about 1890, took over the family business in 1883 after Joseph retired and built it into a successful cooperage, grocery, and feed store on his reputation for honesty and integrity. The store would flourish for the next 87 years. Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.



A Brings family gathering, possibly in 1899 after Joseph's funeral, on December 29th. Joseph's wife, Lucia, sits in the middle with her family around her. Lucia died ten months later, October 19, 1900. Frank Brings is seated on the far right, and if this is in fact 1899, then that would be Helene Morris Brings, age 3, on Frank's lap. Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.

and the beginning of the next were difficult times for Frank Brings. His father, Joseph, died on December 29, 1899. His obituary stated that: "Up to his last, Mr. Brings retained his keen faculties of observation. He was a constant reader of the papers and well versed in the current events of the day."¹⁵ On October 19, 1900, Frank's mother, Lucia, the matriarch of the family, also died. Losing both parents within a year certainly created a void in his life.

The same year that Frank lost his mother, his sister, Gertrude, also passed away. Gertrude's husband, Henry Kopp, disappeared under mysterious circumstances, and Gertrude died six weeks later leaving two small children without parents. His older brother, Joseph, who had been in poor health for a number of years, then died in 1901 in West Superior, Wisconsin, where he was working as a postal employee. Fortunately, a last photograph of Lucia Brings and her family that is thought to have been taken shortly after Gertrude's death captured these family members for posterity.



Frank Brings, seen here in about 1940 wearing his trademark bow tie, owned and operated Brings Flour and Feed at 312–318 West Seventh. Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.

Fire Strikes Brings

Despite the sadness resulting from these family losses, Brings and Company remained a bright spot in Frank's life. The business continued to flourish into the first decade of the 1900s. Then on May 29, 1911, disaster struck. At a time when the wholesale price of hay had pushed to a high of \$27 a ton and trade everywhere was on the upswing, an early morning fire broke out in the wooden Brings establishment.

Several horse-drawn fire companies answered the alarm. As smoke streamed through the wooden shingles, an employee was rescued from a second-story window. Shortly afterward, the roof of the building suddenly erupted into flames, and sparks threatened a wooden structure across the alley, which housed a livery, and prompted a call for more alarms. Additional companies were soon fighting the fire.

As two firemen directed a heavy stream of water against a pile of about 400 bales of hay, the hay, loosened by the flames and the water, toppled over onto the firemen. Both men were trapped under the burning hay. Two policemen and bystanders at

the scene joined firemen digging through the burning hay with their bare hands to rescue the trapped men. Before the day was over, three firemen, two policemen, a bystander, and the store employee who was rescued from the second floor all suffered burns and other injuries and were taken to local hospitals to be treated. The Brings and Company building was destroyed along with a considerable stock of hay, bran, and feed. Having no insurance, Frank Brings estimated his loss at about \$15,000 (about \$350,000 in 2014).¹⁶

As Brings surveyed the damage, he was approached by a friend who pressed an envelope containing \$1,000 into his hand. Initially, Frank refused the money, saying that he might not be able to repay it, but his friend insisted he take it. This friend had faith that Frank would be able to recover from this loss, and Frank did not prove him wrong. Within a year the debt was repaid, and a new brick building stood on the site. Brings and Company was back in business.¹⁷ Except for a later makeover of the front exterior of the store, relocating the office in the early 1930s, and adding an adjacent, framed storage building, the main building remained the same for the duration of the business.

In a feature story on Brings and Company published in the *Pioneer Press* in 1948, Frank Brings was described

as a man of honesty and integrity who treated his employees fairly and expected similar treatment in return. The feature writer related that once Frank had been disappointed:

Not long after the turn of the century, he noticed behind a nearby saloon a small pile of feed, which was not unusual. But each day the pile budged larger until it looked as if Brings might have a new competitor. Curious, he asked the bartender: "What's all the feed doing in back?" "Oh, some men trade a few sacks each day here for liquor." A quick check of Brings' stock revealed a quite sizable shortage of feed, just about as sizable in fact, as the pile behind the saloon. The feed dealer was furious. He told all his men that he wanted to see them immediately in the basement of his building. Brings' son, Bud, who was only a youngster at the time, stole into the basement and witnessed the scene from behind some sacks of grain. The lad was afraid of what his father might do—envisioning a horsewhipping or even a shooting. A silence fell over the employees as Brings stood before them. Suddenly the feed dealer exploded with an outburst that made the horses stabled in the corner leap with fright. When Brings finished, he added quietly: "Now anyone who hasn't stolen from me will have a job waiting for him in the morning." The next day, of the eight employees, four showed up.¹⁸



The original Brings and Company store burned to the ground on May 29, 1911. The store was filled with a new delivery of fresh hay. If hay is baled when it is too moist, there is a significant risk of spontaneous combustion, which may have been the cause of the fire. Several people were hospitalized, suffering from burns received while trying to fight the fire. Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.



Frank did not carry insurance on the Brings and Company building so the fire resulted in a tragic loss for Frank and his family. With the help of friends and neighbors, however, Frank built a new brick building, seen here in this undated photo, within a year. Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.

Frank mellowed in later years in his dealings with dishonest employees. Numerous promissory notes written by delivery men who admitted keeping money paid them on delivery exist in his personal business files. Instead of being fired, these men continued to work for Brings and Company and repaid the money they had stolen. Believing in second chances, Brings also employed men on parole. Brings' integrity and straightforwardness did not go unnoticed. He was elected president of the St. Paul Hay Board of Trade three times. His business, too, reflected his fair dealings, and he always had three or more carloads of oats on track in the local yards.

Even after working twelve and fourteen hours a day to rebuild his business after the fire of 1911, Frank J. Brings still found time to cultivate one of his great passions: horse racing. He provided stables for twenty-two of his horses in the basement of his new brick building. His stables boasted some of the finest teams in the Northwest. One of his favorite animals was Louise Bee, once a get-away horse belonging to the Jesse James gang. It was rounded up by authorities who turned it into the St. Paul Police Department after the Northfield bank

robbery in 1876. Frank bought the horse and drove it to victory in many races on the ice of Lake Como.

The Challenge of the Automobile

Brings would face more business challenges over the years. The arrival of the automobile was probably one of his greatest obstacles. As cars steadily increased in numbers, he saw his carriage trade drop off dramatically. Undaunted, he adapted to the changing community needs by adding product lines. Customers who once bought hay and oats now bought insecticides and dog food. The familiar Brings hay wagons and sleighs were gradually replaced by trucks and smaller delivery wagons. In the early 1920s, Frank began teaching his sons the business.

In 1926, Frank J. Brings decided to make his sons' involvement in the business official. On September 13, 1926, he filed a Certificate of Incorporation of the company at the Office of the Secretary of State, which was duly recorded in the Office of the Registry of Deeds in Ramsey County, Minnesota. The same was published in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* on September 14 and 15, 1926. Now the business was officially "Brings

and Company." According to the minutes of the first meeting of stockholders, "the general nature of its business shall be to buy and sell at retail and wholesale, to job, buy, and sell on commission, farm produce of every nature and description; also salt, fertilizer, seeds, proprietary feeds and medicines, supplies and equipment for poultry, horses, cows, and hogs; and to manufacture, mill, grind and mix food articles manufactured from farm produce; to acquire by purchase, lease or otherwise, and to hold, enjoy, improve, lease, incumber all real and personal property necessary to the purpose of its organization including warehouses, and elevators for terminal and public and private storage purposes."¹⁹

Frank remained the principal stockholder, holding 298 of the 300 shares with sons Hubert and Francis each holding one share. Frank would serve as president of the corporation; Hubert as vice president; and Francis as secretary and treasurer. The Certificate of Incorporation stated that the amount of capital stock of the corporation would be \$50,000, which would be paid in money or property, or both "in such manner at such times and in such amounts as the Board of Directors shall order. The capital stock shall be divided into five hundred shares of the par value of \$100 each. The corporation shall have the power to retire its own stock."²⁰

At the first stockholders meeting, a resolution was adopted that provided for the company to purchase from Frank Brings the land upon which the business was located (Lots 4 and 5, Block 1, Leech's Addition to St. Paul) and also "all horses, wagons, automobile trucks, furniture and fixtures, accounts receivable, bills and notes receivable, cash on hand and in banks, and the entire stock of merchandise and also the goodwill of the party of the first part thereto, representing all of the assets of the business now conducted by said Frank J. Brings at No. 312-18 West Seventh Street, Saint Paul, Minnesota, in consideration of the issue of the stock of this company to him to the amount of \$30,000.00, par value, and whereas, it appears to the stockholders that this property is necessary for the business of this Company and that the same is the value of more than \$30,000."²¹

A second resolution that was adopted authorized Frank, Hubert, and Francis to borrow money from the Merchants National Bank of Saint Paul at their discretion when necessary to conduct the business of the company.

While the by-laws of the corporation provided for a meeting of the board of directors on the third Monday of each month and an annual meeting of stockholders, those formalities seemed to wane after the first year, at least as represented by the minutes retained in the Brings and Company files. All that remain in the files are a number of resolutions. In 1936, the company decided to open bank accounts with the Empire National Bank and Trust Company of St. Paul and the First National Bank of St. Paul. Frank, Hubert, and Francis would continue to be authorized to draw and sign checks on the account and to borrow money on behalf of the corporation.

Introducing New Products

When Hubert and Francis (Bud) began taking an active hand in the business, they introduced new products ranging from grass seeds to poultry mash, supplementing the usual feed stocks. The business also handled the feed trade for local rodeos and circuses. For many years, Ringling Brothers bought hay and oats for their elephants, Arabian horses, and all the animals in the circus' menagerie. Brings supplied hay to local stables and the Como Zoo as well and had the State Fair hay concession for years.

Bud and Hubert were also responsible for the introduction of popcorn and a complete variety of popcorn supplies. In the late 1940s, Brings was selling popcorn by the ton. The brothers also were stocking wheat germ, large quantities of which were sold for human consumption. They continued to inject new life into the business with products like brooms, fly spray, and salt for curing meat. Even salt for keeping the wheels of cars from spinning on icy streets was in the store's inventory.

As Bud and Hubert took over more of the daily operations of the business, they also encouraged their father to retire. Frank, however, resisted and insisted on coming to work every day. He was



Francis (Bud) Brings' son-in-law, Bob Kremer, who was married to Ruth Mary Brings Kremer, joined Brings and Company. Bob attended the "Scotts Training Institute" and learned to sell Scotts products for lawns. The program guaranteed satisfactory results and it helped Brings and Company's profitability as well. "Friendly" Bob Kremer, as he was known to many customers, is seen here at the counter in the Brings office. He was the author's father. Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.

happiest at work. Dressed in his traditional candy-red bow tie and a soft grey Stetson hat, Frank would swing open the big doors of the building every morning at 6:00 a.m. and put in a full-day's work, which included handling the feed sacks as he had done all his life.

During his tenure, Frank watched nearby businesses flourish and die. Taverns, dry goods stores, livery stables, and blacksmith shops would go out of business, but Brings stayed in business by adjusting to the times. In early 1949, at the age of 84, Frank had a stroke at the end of one work day. The man who had weathered the booms and the busts of the feed business since 1884, died on January 19, 1949. He would leave the business in the hands of his sons and daughter, Helene, who had been noticeably absent from the affairs of the corporation prior to her father's death.

Helene was elected president of the firm in 1949 and served in that capacity until she resigned in 1962. Like their father before them, Hubert and Francis provided financially for their sister throughout her adult life. After Frank's death, business continued to be brisk and customers whose accounts had been handed

down through three generations of owners stayed loyal to Brings and Company. In 1950, Bud's son-in-law, Bob Kremer, who was married to his daughter Ruth Mary, joined the firm.

During the next two decades, Brings and Company continued the Brings tradition of adjusting to changing times with the result that the company's income grew. The hay business, which had waned in the past, now became a renewed source of income. A major client was the Minnesota Transfer rail yard in New Brighton. As cattle made their way to slaughtering houses in railroad cars, their journey stopped every few hours as required by law. At the transfer yards, the cattle were taken off the cars to be rested and fed. Brings supplied the hay most of which was trucked in from the Wick Farm in Toivola Township, in Saint Louis County, northwest of Duluth. Brings also supplied much of the hay to the stockyards in South St. Paul and Ramsey County's Workhouse Farm. In addition to selling hay for feeding livestock, they also sold covering hay to major construction companies in the area and to local greenhouses.

Brings became known for their bird

feed mixtures as well. Many of their walk-in customers shopped specifically for the bird feed products. On a bigger scale, Brings installed a large machine that would mix different types of pigeon feed. Pigeon fanciers from around the area bought the mixtures that suited the type of pigeons they raised. Most of the racing pigeon owners fed their birds Brings feed.

Besides feed products, lawn and garden supplies grew substantially during this time. Trained by the Scotts Company, the manufacturer of numerous lawn-care seeds and products in Marysville, Ohio, Bob Kremer was considered one of their local experts. Many a customer sought Bob's lawn care advice. Brings did a brisk business selling landscaping and garden products to many of the city golf courses, the Ford Plant, the Colleges of St. Thomas and St. Catherine, Hamline University, and the Como Greenhouse.

Popcorn and concession product sales continued to be money makers. Brings and Company distributed Midland popcorn, peanut oil, and popcorn salt to the city auditorium, O'Neil and Associates concessions, and the Como Zoo. Kelsey's Candyland, located in downtown St. Paul, and Dave's Popcorn on West Seventh were other major customers for popcorn supplies.

While their large accounts helped Brings turn profits, the business prided itself on the high quality of its service provided to individual consumers. An order of a bale of straw to bed rose bushes for the winter or a few pounds of rabbit pellets or bird seed garnered the same importance as much bigger orders.

Brings was known for its delivery service throughout the local area, and its navy blue Ford pickup truck was a frequent presence on city streets. Frank's great grandson, Steve Kremer, was often behind the wheel of the delivery truck and also helped out at the store part time. As a convenience, Brings was often open for extended hours during the spring and early summer to accommodate custom-

Postcards were sent to all the customers of Brings and Company announcing the final sale, closure, and demise of the store. Many customers wrote notes of appreciation for the great service that was provided over the years. Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.

ers needing lawn care supplies. As in the early years of the business, customers would often drop in on Saturdays to pay their bills and chat a bit.²²

The years after Frank's death also brought changes in the corporate structure. Helene resigned from the firm in 1962. Bob Kremer became vice president with Francis (Bud) elected president and Hubert as secretary and treasurer. Due to failing health, two years later Francis tendered his resignation, leaving Hubert and Bob Kremer in control of the corporation. A year later, Bob was authorized to conduct financial transactions with the First National Bank, and as Hubert's health declined, Bob took over more and more of the financial and organizational responsibilities of the business. Only a few years later, he would have the major responsibility of dissolving the business.

The Last Days at Brings

From the time Bob Kremer and other family members learned the fate of the business on that January day in 1970 until the corporate dissolution was complete on March 18, 1971, employees of the company experienced strong emotions and the disheartening task of severing ties with customers, many of whom were from families who had been loyal to Brings for three generations.

Notices were put in the *Pioneer Press*, and postcards were sent to customers announcing the demise of Brings and Company. Inventory was sold, and final billing statements were prepared. Many customers stopped by to say their good-byes, and others wrote notes of appreciation for the service they received throughout the years. Brings was more than just a business to these customers. Many friendships had been forged since Joseph Brings first opened shop in St. Paul.

Perhaps the saddest result from the end of the family business was the physical toll that it took on Francis (Bud) and Hubert, both of whom were then in frail health. Bud passed away on June 27, 1970, and Hubert died on March 4, 1971.

Neither brother would witness the final fate of Brings and Company as the wrecking crews demolished the office and warehouse shortly after Hubert's death.

Alerted by a local business neighbor, Ruth Mary Brings Kremer and her son Steve were the lone family members present that day. Bob Kremer, the final leader of Brings and Company, was already working his first days in a new job with Bachman's where he would spend the next fourteen years doing what he knew best: selling lawn and garden supplies and eventually managing the lawn and garden store at their Lyndale Avenue location in south Minneapolis.

Today all that remains of Brings and Company are rich family memories and a few artifacts. A sleigh and a wagon box found in the basement before the demolition of the building are currently stored at the Minnesota Historical Society's

warehouse in St. Paul. Ruth Mary Brings Kremer, Steve Kremer, and I were allowed in the warehouse to see them. As a member of the last generation of the Brings family to witness the business and to mourn its loss, I will hold my memories dear to my heart.

As a child, I often visited the “store” with Mom (Ruth Mary Brings Kremer). It was like taking a step back in time. I remember all the different hay and grain smells, my journey down the rickety stairs to the basement to see where the horses were once stabled and touching the thick stone basement walls.

I have fond memories of sitting at the old wooden counter in the office in front of the huge safe that thwarted robbers on a few occasions and walking through the warehouse, where I would stop to weigh myself on one of the grain scales, or wet my finger and place it against a



Demolition of the Brings and Company building began on February 1, 1971. Truly a sad ending to a popular St. Paul company that spanned 114 years and four generations. Today the Sherman-Forbes Housing occupies this site. Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.

salt lick to see how it tasted, or chasing after one of the many cats that controlled the mouse population, all the while asking Dad or Grampa Bud endless questions.

Perhaps my childhood awe and curiosity are what motivated me to share the Brings story with others now. Even though “Brings Is Gone,” the Brings saga is too important to be forgotten. To me, the property on West Seventh bounded by Forbes and Ramsey Streets will always be “Brings land.” Sometimes when I park my car and walk around the area, I swear I can smell those wonderful hay and grain aromas.

Marcia Kremer, born and raised in Saint Paul, is the great-great-granddaughter of Joseph and Lucia Brings and daughter of Ruth Mary Brings and Bob Kremer. Retiring from a 34-year high

school teaching career in 2004 has afforded her the time to pursue her love of genealogy. This story of the Brings family is a product of her research on her family’s maternal line.

Notes

1. Letter from Thomas A. Schaefer, president, West Seventh Street Association For Neighborhood Development, 506 West 7th Street, St. Paul, Minn., to Brings and Company, 318 West 7th Street, Paul, Minn., January 12, 1970, Kremer Family Collections.
2. Letter from Timothy P. Quinn, Meyer, Kennedy and Quinn, Attorneys at Law, to Helene Brings, Mrs. Hubert Brings, and Robert Kremer, March 18, 1971, Kremer Family Collections.
3. Gareth Hiebert, “Brings Is Gone,” in the “St. Paul Pioneer Press Sunday Magazine,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, February 28, 1971, pp. 14–17.
4. Certified Marriage record from Historical Archive of the Archbishopric Cologne, St. Kunibert Church Registers.
5. Ancestry.com. *New York Passenger Lists, 1851–1891* (database online), Provo, Utah: MyFamily.com, Inc., 2003. Original data: *New York Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1820–1897*, Micropublication M237, rolls #95–580, National Archives, Washington, D.C. and *Germans to America*, vol. 10, January 1856–April 1857, edited by Ira A. Glazier and P. William Filby, Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1990.
6. A John Brings and Elizabeth Juelic, his wife, were also on board the *Belgique* and they too settled in St. Paul, but the surviving records are unclear whether Joseph and John were related. John and Elizabeth did, however, hale from the same village as Joseph. John was a farmer and established a produce farm in Little Canada, Minn., which is now known as Brings Company. Later one of John’s sons, Martin, would marry one of Joseph’s granddaughters, Mary Heymel.
7. Gary J. Brueggemann, “Beer Capital of the State: St. Paul’s Historic Family Breweries,” *Ramsey County History*, 16, no. 2 (1980): 3.
8. Ramsey County Mortgage Book T, pp. 131–133 (legal description: Lot 1, Block 50, of lots 4, 5, 6, and 7 Thomas Daly’s subdivision of Dayton and Irvine’s Addition to Saint Paul).
9. 1865 Minnesota State Census, Ramsey County, St. Paul, Ward 4, p. 17, household 308.
10. Ramsey County Book of Deeds, RR, p. 149.
11. Ramsey County Mortgage Book, W, p. 407.
12. Ramsey County Mortgage Book, Y, p. 185.
13. Hiebert, “Brings Is Gone,” pp. 14–17.
14. Gareth Hiebert, “Wonderful Hayride,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, February 5, 1971.
15. *St. Paul Globe*, December 31, 1899, p. 12.
16. *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 29, 1911, p. 1.
17. Hiebert, “Wonderful Hayride,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, February 5, 1971.
18. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 11, 1948, p. 11.
19. Minutes of the First Meeting of the Stockholders, Brings and Company, September 16, 1926, Kremer Family Collections.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. Account information came from Bob Kremer’s business account book, Kremer Family Collections, supplemented by author interviews with Ruth Mary Brings Kremer, Bud’s daughter.

R.C.H.S.

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Bright sun illuminates the details of John Karl Daniels' bronze casting of a Union Soldier that was modeled on Josias R. King more than a century ago. The statue stands atop the Soldiers and Sailors Monument in Summit Park in St. Paul. Photo by Robert Muschewske. For more on Josias King, see page 18.