

# RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*Growing Up in Ramsey County*

## **With a Dash of Foreign Spice**

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*One Hundred Years Serving New Americans*

## **The Centennial of the International Institute of Minnesota**

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## By the Numbers . . .

The world's first golf club, The Royal and Ancient Club of St. Andrews, formed in Scotland.

**1754**

The first eighteen-hole course in the U.S., the Chicago Golf Club, opened.

**1893**

Ramsey County's first nine-hole course, Town & Country Club, opened in St. Paul.

**1898**

University of Minnesota professors sent a solicitation to faculty seeking to form a golf club.

**1915**

Articles of incorporation were finalized for the University Golf Club.

**1919**

The newly named Midland Hills Country Club of Rose Township opened for play.

**July 23, 1921**

Hollywood actors Bing Crosby and Bob Hope played an Army Navy fundraiser at Midland Hills.

**May 9, 1942**

Midland Hills Country Club celebrates its centennial.

**July 2019**

SOURCE: Midland Hills Country Club Archives

Most any new "great idea" often proves to be a monumental effort, full of competing ideas, hurdles, and a bit of handwringing. John Hamburger's article, *Where the Grass is Always Green: The Founding of Midland Hills a Century Ago*, tells the story of the early efforts and challenges in creating a course for University of Minnesota faculty and other members. See page 20.

## ON THE COVER



Karen dancers at the Festival of Nations, sponsored by the International Institute and held in the St. Paul RiverCentre and Roy Wilkins Auditorium, May 3–5, 2013. The Karen people are an ethnic minority from Burma (Myanmar) who first arrived as refugees to Minnesota in 1994. Courtesy of International Institute of Minnesota.

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GARY F. GLEASON

## Message from the Editorial Board

In this issue, we mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the International Institute of Minnesota. Krista Finstad Hanson brings us a comprehensive look at that organization, which began under sponsorship of the YWCA after World War I and has assisted people of diverse countries and ethnicities as they come to live in Minnesota. For instance, the group sponsored Japanese Americans who were allowed to leave U.S. internment camps during World War II, and it helped resettle Eastern Europeans after that conflict. More recently, it's been instrumental in providing support to the growing Hmong, Karen, and Somali communities. The Festival of Nations, still going strong, reflects the compelling cultural heritage of many groups that have contributed to our county. In a companion article, Kitty Gogins provides a more personal view, sharing how the International Institute helped her Hungarian-immigrant parents and reinforced rich family traditions as she grew up in Roseville. The other article in this issue tells a different suburban story: Midland Hills Country Club emerged from farm fields in the early 1900s to provide an opportunity to play the newly popular game of golf. Club member John Hamburger has delved into club archives to illustrate how the organization became a reality, despite the difficult process of acquiring land and raising money from sponsors. Even construction was hard. Designed by prominent golf architect Seth Raynor, the course was completed with rocks removed by hand and fairways cut with a horse-drawn hay mower!

Anne Cowie  
Chair, Editorial Board

*The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the updated design of this magazine. Publication of Ramsey County History is also 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. Thanks also to Midland Hills Country Club and International Institute of Minnesota for their financial support.*



## With a Dash of Foreign Spice

KITTY GOGINS

**M**y family—with our heavy accents, European ways of dress, and foreign customs—moved to suburban Ramsey County in 1959. We were as out of place as a spicy paprika dish at potluck in a Lutheran church basement. My mother loved the story of the time she put me in my best infant dress to get my ears pierced—a practice uncommon in Minnesota at the time, especially for young children.<sup>1</sup> The American nurse who did the piercing found our cultural tradition so different, she felt the need to ask, “Is the baby a boy or a girl?”

The 1960 U.S. Census put numbers to my impression. It measured only 5 percent born outside the United States across suburban areas of the Upper Midwest. Further, it found only 2.5 percent non-white residents in the Twin Cities, with less than 0.1 percent in the suburbs.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, my family strived to give back to this community that welcomed us, and, in the end, we children grew up very American, with a dash of foreign spice.

### **My Parents’ Refugee Journey**

My parents, Olga and Tibor Zoltai, began their journey fifteen years before they settled in Ramsey County. Their country was destroyed in World War II, and they fled Hungary separately as teenagers. With Russian airplanes strafing them overhead and soldiers moments behind, Olga and her family avoided capture by fleeing into the Alps. Tibor left Hungary when he was forced into labor to support the Germans and almost perished in a prisoner-of-war (POW) camp. Like refugees from other war-torn areas, they left only with what they could carry and were unable to return home without facing persecution.

Olga and Tibor met in Austria, where their families lived for several years. The country was overcrowded, food was scarce, and the fear of another war was palpable. Both families immigrated to Canada as indentured agricultural servants.<sup>3</sup> Hoeing sugar beets on the Alberta prairie was backbreaking work, but they considered the opportunity a godsend.

While delighted to live in a new world, they found everything foreign—the culture, the language, the land, and even the food. They knew Canadians would speak a different language but didn’t expect a flat, treeless countryside with distances vast beyond their imagination; the frigid cold that froze the air in their lungs; or women who wore trousers.

Upon completing their servitude, Olga and Tibor married. They took every job they could find and lived frugally until they saved enough for Tibor to continue the university studies he had started in Europe. After he graduated as an engineer from the University of Toronto, the couple moved to the United States, where Tibor pursued a PhD at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), studying the crystal structure of minerals. Upon graduation, the University of Minnesota offered him a professorship.

The Zoltai family, 1974.  
(L-R): Lili, Olga, Kitty,  
Peter, and Tibor. Courtesy  
of the Zoltai/Gogins  
Family Archives.



Over time, Olga and Tibor began to understand and adjust to deeper differences, such as Americans needing more personal space and less touch. One difference that particularly impressed them was the nation's founding principle stating, "All men are created equal." Coming from a society that discriminated against Jews and others who were different, this was a new and powerful concept. They proudly became United States citizens in 1966. My fascination with my parents' many adventures led me to research and capture their journey to becoming Americans in a narrative non-fiction book.

Being the child of refugees has always been important in defining who I am in the world. As an adult, I also realize that because of the color of my skin, I have the privilege of choosing whether I tell people my background, which isn't the case for most refugees and their children today.

### Growing Up Minnesotan Well, Sort Of ...

While still at MIT in 1956, Olga gave birth to their first child, Peter Tibor Zoltai. Two years later, I joined the family. Like Peter, our parents gave me a first name that would help me blend into American culture and a Hungarian middle name that would preserve my roots. I was named Katharina Aniko Zoltai (later nicknamed Kitty).

Peter and I grew up in Roseville with a very different upbringing than our peers. At home, we spoke Hungarian, although our parents insisted we speak English with neighbors. I entered kindergarten able to speak English, but with a heavy accent. Speaking multiple languages—one at home and another at school—was an oddity in the 1960s. Today, however, 31 percent of Roseville Area School students speak a language other than English at home.<sup>4</sup>

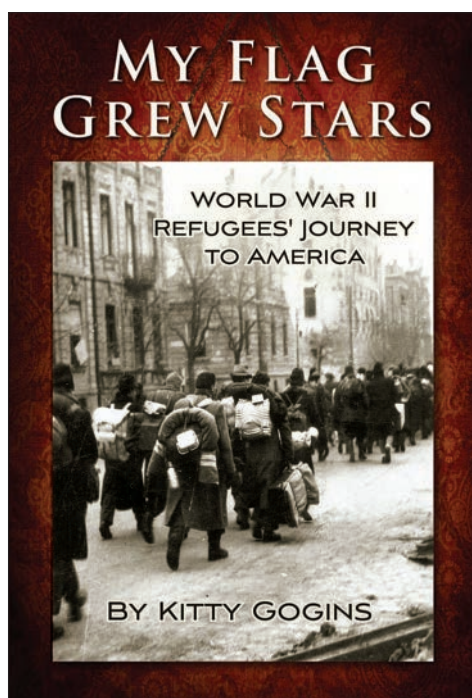
Our parents raised us based on the cultural norms that shaped their socialization as children. We ate Hungarian foods with lots of spicy paprika and celebrated Hungarian holidays. No Santa for us; little Jesus brought the presents on Christmas Eve. Formal politeness was a must; I had to answer the phone, "Zoltai's residence, Kitty speaking," and make sure I greeted and shook hands with my friends' parents before I could play. I absolutely had to complete my homework every night. I greatly benefitted from



Tibor and fellow youth were forced into labor to support the German Luftwaffe, spring 1945. Those with the rifles in front are their German guards. *Courtesy of the Zoltai/Gogins Family Archives.*



Olga and her family were fortunate to live outside of a refugee camp in this cabin they could take apart, move, and reassemble as needed. Olga's father and younger brother are on the left. Olga and her mother are on the right, 1946. *Courtesy of the Zoltai/Gogins Family Archives.*



In 2009, Kitty wrote about her parents' journey as refugees in her book, *My Flag Grew Stars: World War II Refugees' Journey to America*. The cover image is of Tibor and other conscripted youth leaving Hungary, 1945. *Courtesy of the Zoltai/Gogins Family Archives.*





Kitty, Olga, and Peter in 1959, the year the family moved to Roseville, Minnesota. *Courtesy of the Zoltai/Gogins Family Archives.*

Olga's tenacity on this subject. As a first grader, I had trouble reading because of dyslexia. Olga worked with me night after night until my reading improved. She used the Hungarian alphabet as a phonics tool, as it has a separate letter for every sound.

Over time, my parents learned American norms and often adapted. One example seared into my memory is when Peter received his first invitation to attend a classmate's birthday party. Olga dressed him in a suit and tie, as was the custom in Hungary. When they arrived, Peter saw the other kids tearing across the yard in jeans and T-shirts. He was mortified and refused to get out of the car. Olga finally coaxed him out after the tie and jacket disappeared. There were no more suits for American birthday parties after that! The birth of my sister, Lilian Ildiko Zoltai, in 1970 accelerated the pace of our Americanization. Because Lili had Down syndrome, my parents stopped speaking Hungarian at home so she could learn to speak English well.

Olga and Tibor loved the Minnesota tradition of volunteering in schools and other government and non-profit programs. This was

new to them. In Hungary, helping others was family-focused or based on informal support of neighbors and friends. Our parents embraced volunteering and established community service as an absolute expectation for us. Olga volunteered in our schools, with the League of Women Voters, Camp Fire Girls,<sup>5</sup> and the International Institute of Minnesota. Tibor volunteered with Boy Scouts of America, assisted with science fairs, and even tried to help with Peter's American sports.

Sometimes, the mix of cultures resulted in humorous situations, like when Peter's baseball team was short an assistant coach. Tibor volunteered, with the caveat that he was unfamiliar with the game. The head coach enlisted help at an early practice, "Take the outfielders and have them practice catching flies." He handed Tibor a bat and pointed to the outfield. Tibor took Peter aside and asked, "Why are the boys supposed to catch mosquitoes?"

In other areas, Olga and Tibor chose to hang onto their long-held beliefs. For example, learning about and connecting to people of other cultures remained important to them. They were concerned by how little we learned about other countries in school and that we were not learning another language. Olga even asked our elementary school principal if another language could be taught. His answer, "Madam, there is no need. Our students can travel 1,000 miles in any direction and speak English," did not placate her.

My parents made sure we had opportunities to connect with people from around the world without leaving Ramsey County. One of my favorite events was the Festival of Nations, which is hosted by the International Institute of Minnesota. I attended my first festival as a toddler, and it remains an annual spring ritual. I volunteer at the Hungarian food booth and exhibit, and since I turned sixteen, perform with the Hungarian dancers. During the four-day-event, I travel around the world eating local delicacies, watching dancers in colorful costumes, listening to music with unfamiliar rhythms and tones, walking the "streets" of the world bazaar, and talking to the fascinating people who volunteer at the ethnic exhibits. Over the last decade, my volunteering has expanded to long-term planning for the event.

Beyond the festival, visitors from around the world stayed with us. I treasured these opportunities to connect with people from outside my community. There was the visiting professor from Japan who wrote exquisite English letters but arrived with minimal ability to speak the language. Because I was a child, he felt more at ease with me, and we conversed for hours, using a mixture of words and pantomime. There was the graduate student from Iran who felt safe to talk about the oppression of his country's authoritarian ruler, and the Czechoslovakian student who stayed with us for three months after his country's revolution in 1968. The depth of his sadness for a life that no longer existed made a lasting impression. There was Tibor's fellow MIT student from Venezuela who returned home to become an oil magnate living a life of riches, and there were the three Laotian refugee sisters my parents sponsored who provided a glimpse into the beauty of their country's traditions.

My parents also offered opportunities to immerse ourselves in other cultures. We lived for six months in Germany in 1969. I traveled to Hungary for two months at fourteen and spent a year in the Netherlands at eighteen. When I left for my year abroad, I had the cockiness of youth. I thought that because I had so much exposure to European culture, I would have no trouble. It was humbling to learn there were limits to my adaptability. At times, I felt like an outsider and missed having someone who understood my story. It made me reflect on who I was and what was important to me, and I realized that I was more Minnesotan than I thought.

At twenty-one, I took my biggest step toward becoming truly Minnesotan. I married my high school friend Mark Gogins in a wedding that mirrored the movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. His family was very reserved, fiercely independent, and of good northern Minnesota stock. Mine was expressive, flamboyant, and close knit. It took a few turbulent years for my parents, Mark, and me to settle on what being close, but separate, households entailed. My parents wanted the kind of closeness they had with their parents. As newlyweds, they shared a house with both sets and were immersed in each other's lives. However, Mark and I were working and going to school. We thought a once-a-week



Peter, Olga, and Kitty in traditional Hungarian dress at the Festival of Nations, 1967. Courtesy of the Zoltai/Gogins Family Archives.



Kitty and her daughter Karen at the Festival of Nations, 2002. The tradition of participating in the festival continues to the next generation. Courtesy of the Zoltai/Gogins Family Archives.

visit was close enough. When my mother rearranged our furniture, Mark would put it all back. She started to accept that we had boundaries, and, over time, we settled into a close relationship that worked.



## The International Institute of Minnesota Features Prominently in My Story

After many years of volunteering for the International Institute of Minnesota helping other immigrants, Olga began working there fulltime in 1971. The Institute is an organization committed to helping New Americans achieve self-sufficiency and full membership in American life. Olga personally assisted thousands with immigration issues and adaptation to America. She welcomed the first Hmong family officially resettled in Minnesota back on a frigid winter day in 1976, when the new arrivals thought they were dying after taking their first breath of below 0°F air. She assisted a man from Ghana, who had become a U.S. citizen, bring his son over, despite lacking official papers. She helped an Iranian student, who had demonstrated against the government and faced execution in Iran, get political asylum. Hearing my mother's stories about the challenges clients faced always helped me put any first world "crisis" I was dealing with into perspective.

Olga pioneered many new programs—she convinced the Institute to join the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program (1975); partnered with others to start the William Mitchell Immigration Law Clinic<sup>6</sup> (1985); and initiated the Certified Nursing Assistant program (CNA) (1991). In 2012, Olga was recognized for her work, receiving the Immigrant of Distinction Award from the

Students in the nursing assistant class at the International Institute of Minnesota, 2010. Courtesy of Peter Zoltai's son, Alex, who is also an Institute volunteer.



Minnesota-Dakotas Chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, along with a proclamation from the governor and mayors of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

My personal connection to the Institute intensified in 2010. The organization's client focus and ability to achieve strong outcomes for refugees and immigrants attracted me to move from sideline supporter to serving on the organization's Board of Directors and as board chair a year later.

It has been fascinating to see how the Institute has grown since I was a teenager. They have resettled over 23,000 refugees since Olga initiated the program in 1975 and helped 12,000 apply for U.S. citizenship since 2001. The CNA program expanded into a full Medical Careers Pathway that has placed over 2,600 nursing assistants in our community and helped 500 of them become healthcare professionals. I am most honored to be part of an organization that continues to create new services in response to client needs and has dedicated staff who achieve impressive service outcomes. For example, the Hospitality Careers Pathway was created to help immigrants with very limited English find work in 2013 and has already placed nearly 200 graduates in jobs.<sup>7</sup>

## Watching My Community Diversify

It has been wonderful to see the number of ethnicities participating in the Festival of Nations grow from forty-six in 1961 to 104 today, reflecting the growing diversity of Ramsey County. For me, the pace of change is particularly apparent over my fifty-five years associated with Roseville Area Schools.

When I started kindergarten in 1963, there was only a handful of students whose skin color or language did not match the dominant white culture. Even my graduating class in 1976 was less than 3 percent students of color with a similar number of white students, like me, whose families had immigrated recently. By the time my children started school in 1993, the proportion of students of color measured at 12 percent. When my youngest graduated in 2009, the level rose to 35 percent, and it is now at 56 percent. Concurrently, the proportion of students who do not speak English in their homes rose from 22 percent in 2009 to 31 percent today.<sup>8</sup>



Kitty Gogins and students on the Youth Executive Board sharing drawings of their life stories, 2014. Courtesy of Equity Alliance MN.

Watching this growing diversity motivated me to become more involved in our schools. I was concerned that our education system was not designed to meet the community's diverse needs. Wanting to ensure every youth receives the solid foundation a good education provides, I ran for the local school board in 2005 and continue to serve today.

When my parents arrived here sixty years ago, Ramsey County had 3 percent people of color.<sup>9</sup> It now has 32 percent, and 15 percent<sup>10</sup> of the residents were born outside the U.S. The community still enjoys potluck dinners, but today people are likely to find fajitas, fried rice, pad thai, and samosas alongside the hot dishes

at these gatherings. A spicy paprika dish is no longer an oddity; rather, it fits right in.

*Kitty Gogins, the daughter of refugees, has been president of the Board of Directors of the International Institute of Minnesota since 2011. She is the current chair of the Roseville Area School Board and has served on the board since 2006. She has served for seven years on the Equity Alliance MN board, four as chair. Gogins is a business consultant providing strategic and project leadership for non-profits and government entities and helping organizations envision and plan their future with an equity lens.*

## NOTES

1. I was ten in 1968 and the only child in my elementary school who had pierced ears. With the practice becoming more popular, older girls often stopped me and asked to look at my ears.

2. "1960 Census of Population," United States Census Bureau, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

3. Olga's family arrived in 1949, and Tibor's family followed in 1950.

4. Roseville Area Schools Demographics Report, October 2018.

5. Now known as Camp Fire Minnesota.

6. Today, the clinic is known as the Mitchell Hamline School of Law Immigration Clinic.

7. International Institute of Minnesota, "Outreach Materials," 2018.

8. Roseville Area Schools Demographics Reports, 2006–2018.

9. June Drenning Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981).

10. "U.S. Census Bureau, 2012–2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates," American Fact Finder, Ramsey County Minnesota, accessed November 11, 2018, [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_factsxhtml](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_factsxhtml).



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*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 © 2019, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future.

*The mission statement of the Ramsey County Historical Society  
adopted by the Board of Directors on January 25, 2016.*

The Ramsey County Historical Society's vision is to be widely recognized as an innovator, leader, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community, delivering inspiring history programming, and using local history in education. Our mission of *preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future* guides this vision.

The Society began in 1949 when a group of citizens acquired and preserved the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family had acquired in 1849. Following five years of restoration work, the Society opened the Gibbs Farm museum (listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974). Originally programs focused on telling the story of the pioneer life of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, the historic site also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, building additional structures, and dedicating outdoor spaces to tell these stories. The remarkable relationship of Jane Gibbs with the Dakota during her childhood in the 1830s and again as an adult encouraged RCHS to expand its interpretation of the Gibbs farm to both pioneer and Dakota life.

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine, *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, an expanded commitment from Ramsey County enabled the organization to move its library, archives, and administrative offices to downtown St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An additional expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 to better serve the public and allow greater access to the Society's vast collection of historical archives and artifacts. In 2016, due to an endowment gift of \$1 million, the Research Center was rededicated as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

RCHS offers a wide variety of public programming for youth and adults. Please see [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com) for details of upcoming History Revealed programs, summer camps at Gibbs Farm, and much more. RCHS is a trusted education partner serving 15,000 students annually on field trips or through outreach programs in schools that bring to life the Gibbs Family as well as the Dakota people of Cloud Man's village. These programs are made possible by donors, members, corporations, and foundations, all of whom we appreciate deeply. If you are not yet a member of RCHS, please join today and help bring history to life for more than 50,000 people every year.

R.C.H.S.  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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

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The entrance to the Midland Hills clubhouse in 1921 was by means of a gravel road that crossed in front of the old third tee. *Courtesy of Midland Hills Country Club Archives.*