

Three Jewish Writers

STEVE TRIMBLE AND PAUL NELSON, PAGE 1

By the Numbers . . .

The brainchild of James J. Hill, the Minnesota Transfer in St. Paul proved to be an achievement in logistics and collaboration between multiple railroads, beginning in the late 1800s:

Number of cattle transported through the Minnesota Transfer yard in 1884.
218,000

Number of cars serviced at the Transfer in 1910 and 1916, respectively.
566,745 & 700,000

Number of employees at the Transfer at its peak.
1,000

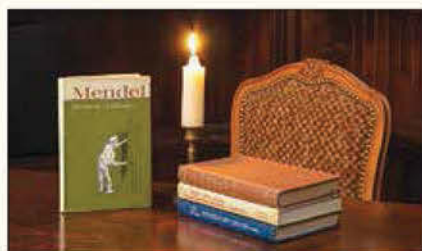
Number of member railroads that collectively operated 55,000 miles of trackage, assuring nearly complete coverage around the country for shippers.
9

Number of cars passing through the Transfer daily in the early 1950s.
2,500 to 3,500

Number of industries in and around the Transfer in the 1950s.
400

SOURCES: See Brian McMahon's article "Creating Communities of Interest: James J. Hill and the Minnesota Transfer," beginning on page 19. This is the story of the phenomenal collaboration and coordination between railroads in St. Paul's Midway.

ON THE COVER



Write what you know. That's what Max Shulman, Norman Katkov, and William Hoffman, did. These writers from St. Paul's West Side Flats infused memories, anecdotes, names, and places into their literary works, giving readers delightful glimpses of the city's old Jewish neighborhoods. *Photograph and design courtesy of Summit Images, LLC—Robert Muschewski and Leaetta Hough.*

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Message from the Editorial Board

History often memorializes transitions. Here, Steve Trimble and Paul Nelson share the stories of three Jewish writers from St. Paul: Max Shulman, Norman Katkov, and William Hoffman. Their families all immigrated to the city, and their St. Paul neighborhoods—Selby-Dale and the West Side—provided fertile ground for their remembrances, novels, and plays, as they moved on as writers after studying journalism at the University of Minnesota. The third article details a much more literal transition story: Brian McMahon's recounting of the Minnesota Transfer project in the Midway area. The railroad's role in commerce may seem less obvious today, but this project, initiated by James J. Hill, moved hundreds of boxcars and sorted tons of cargo on its way to and from destinations around the world. It also spawned the growth of nearby businesses, which took advantage of the convenient shipping facilities. Finally, enjoy the varied book reviews, which should encourage you to dip into three good reads: Melvin Carter Jr.'s memoir; the history of the East Side Freedom Library; and the biography of St. Paul native son, Sandy Boyd.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

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Three Jewish Writers

STEVE TRIMBLE AND PAUL NELSON

Could there be twentieth-century American literature without Jewish writers? Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, and Gertrude Stein, to name several, have populated the bestseller lists, filled curriculum guides, and enriched our literary culture.

St. Paul can't claim a Jewish writer of such stature, but it did produce, starting in the 1940s, a remarkable trio: Max Shulman, Norman Katkov, and William Hoffman. All hailed from St. Paul's Jewish West Side, were born in a five-year span (1914-1919), were educated in St. Paul public schools, studied journalism at the University of Minnesota, and served stateside during World War II. Shulman and Katkov became professional novelists who also prospered in Hollywood. Hoffman made a career as a social worker and professor, while writing columns for local Jewish newspapers on the side. He eventually compiled some of those columns and other community stories into beloved books.

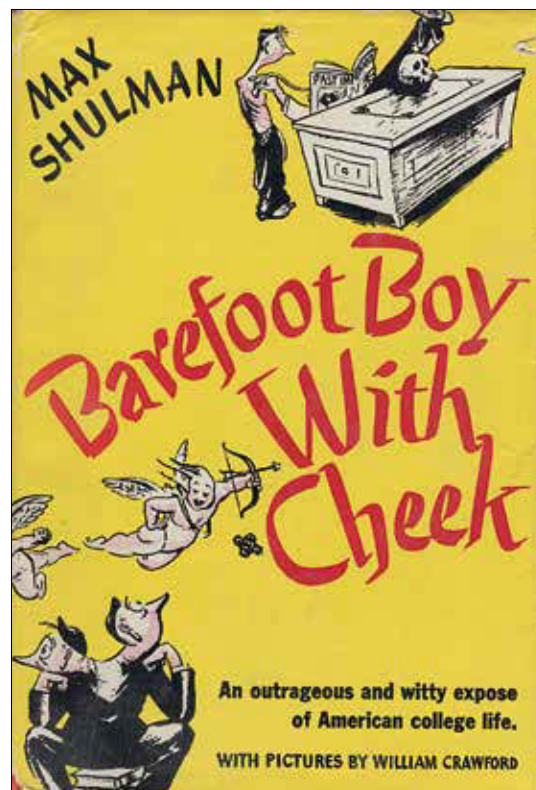
Topography set the West Side, especially the Flats, apart from the rest of the city. The half loop of the Mississippi downtown corralled the Flats on the north, east, and west; the West Side "Hills" and Cherokee Heights drew a straight line across the south. Because it was flat and flood-prone, this was a receptor neighborhood: just 320 acres where penniless immigrants lived. Russian and other Eastern European Jews began arriving in the early 1880s. Many landed and stayed on the West Side until they prospered enough to move out.¹ Such was the case for the Shulman, Katkov, and Hoffman families, all of whom left the Flats, it seems, as soon as they could—by 1921, 1923, and 1930, respectively. The Shulman and Katkov families moved to Selby-Dale, another heavily Jewish neighborhood.

Though their numbers probably never exceeded several thousand at any one time, these Jewish immigrants, living on top of one another, sharing religion, poverty, and language, formed a memorable enclave. The Flats have been gone over fifty years, razed in the mid-1960s for

Riverview Industrial Park. Selby-Dale lost its Jewish identity then, too. But these three writers, in their different ways, have left us the gift of memory preserved and laced with feeling. Their works are now mostly out of print and probably little read, but they likely found millions of readers (and viewers) during their primes. Some of their work still holds up well, despite the passage of time. We introduce you, or re-introduce you, to them here.

Max Shulman

Max Shulman (1919-1988) probably ranks second only to F. Scott Fitzgerald in book sales by an author born and raised in St. Paul. Between 1943 and 1971, Shulman published seven novels: *Barefoot Boy With Cheek* (1943), *The Feather Merchants* (1944), *The Zebra Derby* (1946), *Sleep Till Noon* (1950), *Rally Round The Flag, Boys!* (1957), *Anyone Got a Match?* (1964), and *Potatoes Are*



Max Shulman wrote his first four books in under a decade, including his debut novel *Barefoot Boy With Cheek*, an adaptation of which made its way to Broadway, with Red Buttons and Nancy Walker. Courtesy of the Paul Nelson Collection.

Cheaper (1971). Add to that two short story compilations: *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1951) and *I Was a Teen-Age Dwarf* (1959.) We do not know the sales of these books, but in 1950, *Time* reported that *Barefoot Boy* had sold over 250,000 copies and his next two novels even more.²

These books were more popular with the public than with critics. A *Time* magazine reviewer in 1950 called *Sleep Till Noon* “an aimless gaggle of giggles.”³ To get the giggles, he warned, the reader must endure “the whole Shulman shovelful of wheezes, soggy puns, strained parodies, and cheap leers at the female form. . . .”⁴ But, of course, Shulman was writing for his audience, not for eternity.

He found and held an audience for over thirty years, and not just in books. At twenty-six, Shulman had a musical on Broadway, *Barefoot Boy With Cheek*. By thirty-four, he had three Hollywood films to his credit: *Confidentially Connie*, starring Van Johnson and Janet Leigh; *Half A Hero*, starring Red Skelton and Jean Hagen; and *The Affairs of Dobie Gillis* with Debbie Reynolds, Bobby Van, and Bob Fosse. Shulman’s *The Tender Trap* was not only a book, but a Broadway show and movie. His 1958 novel *Rally*

Round The Flag, Boys! also hit theaters, and the musical *How Now, Dow Jones* graced Broadway briefly. His last and best film was *House Calls* (1978), with Walter Matthau and Glenda Jackson—later a television series starring Lynn Redgrave, Wayne Rogers, and David Wayne.⁵

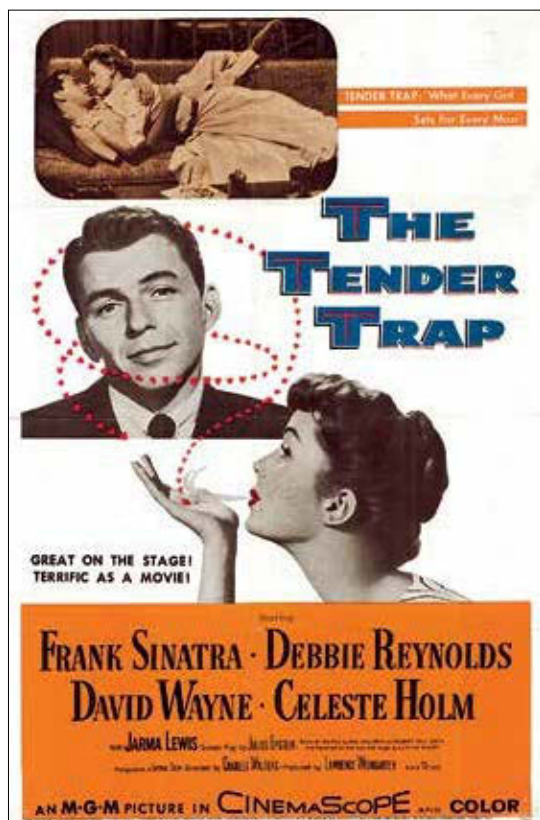
People today may remember Shulman for his TV series, *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, starring Dwayne Hickman, Bob Denver, Tuesday Weld, Frank Faylen, and Florida Friebus.⁶ People familiar only with the TV show would be surprised to learn that the original Dobie, the Dobie of the stories, lived in Minnesota. In most Dobie stories, he is from St. Paul, but sometimes he hails from Blue Earth or even Koochiching County. In all of them, he is a freshman or sophomore at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. He studies law, or Egyptology, or journalism (as Shulman did), or chemistry, or political science, or English, or mechanical engineering. As Shulman put it, “Mean, small, captious, and niggling readers will notice certain discrepancies.”⁷ In all of them, Dobie is girl-crazy.

The stories follow a formula: Dobie is smitten by a beauty and pursues her; problems pop up, usually caused by Dobie’s chronic lack of money; Dobie concocts cockamamie schemes, and a surprise ending wraps things up. Only one story features St. Paul locations. In “You Think You Got Trouble?” the aspiring Egyptologist Dobie lives in Cherokee Heights. On the way to the university, he travels a plausible route that includes Snelling to University Avenue and crosses Cleveland. The girl he chases lives at 1734 Bohland Avenue, in Highland Park, a genuine address where Shulman’s sister, Esther Feldman, lived.⁸ But, setting never mattered much in his novels (except the last one).

Shulman’s career launched at the University of Minnesota. He landed there in 1936 after graduating from Central High School. He studied journalism, wrote a humor column for the *Minnesota Daily*, and edited the monthly humor magazine *Ski-U-Mah*.⁹ His work caught the attention of a visiting editor from Doubleday, who encouraged him to try a novel. And thus *Barefoot Boy With Cheek* came into this world, the title taken from John Greenleaf Whittier’s poem, “The Barefoot Boy.”¹⁰

The plot, paper thin, follows the first year of college for Asa Hearthrug of Whistlestop,

Max Shulman’s story *The Tender Trap*, which he wrote with Robert Paul Smith, reached Broadway in 1954 and starred Robert Preston and Kim Hunter. It hit movie theaters in 1955 with Frank Sinatra, Debbie Reynolds, David Wayne, and Celeste Holm. Courtesy of the Paul Nelson Collection.



Minnesota, on the campus of—you guessed it!—the University of Minnesota. He is torn between two women; the campus radical Yetta Samovar and the beautiful sorority sister, Noblesse Oblige. The story is a succession of funny names—his fraternity is Alpha Cholera, the football star is Eino Ffliikkiinnenn—impossible plot turns, and jokes.¹¹ An aimless gaggle of giggles.

Most of the humor falls flat now, but there is one bit that still resonates. Young Asa shows up unsure of which classes to take. His advisor, Mr. Ingelbretsvold, disdains any university training designed to lead to employment—he is a liberal arts man. So he prescribes Asa a liberal arts course of study: Greek, Latin, Swedish, medieval history, modern philosophy, Japanese government, psychology of art, canoeing, and so on.¹²

“Just one more thing, Mr. Ingelbretsvold,” says Asa at the end of their meeting. “I don’t know quite how to say this, but I think I would like to be a writer when I grow up. Will the program you made out for me help me to be a writer?”

“Why, bless you, child,” Mr. Ingelbretsvold replies, “you follow that program and there’s nothing else you can be.”¹³

The real Asa, that is, Shulman, took courses that a future writer might take—English, French, German, journalism, and composition. He was no Dobie: His course load and grades, despite the demands of his writing and editing duties, suggest a striver, not a slacker.¹⁴

Shulman’s last novel, *Potatoes Are Cheaper*, is also his best. Morris Katz is an uncensored, Jewish Dobie Gillis: dark instead of blond, short rather than tall, sexually successful instead of frustrated, his conquests homely rather than beautiful.

The book is clearly autobiographical in its setting. Morris and his family live at 701 Selby Avenue, Shulman’s home address.¹⁵ Katz’s parents are Yiddish-speaking immigrants, as were Shulman’s. Morris has a sister, Libbie, four years older; Shulman had an older sister, Esther. Morris’s father is a mostly-unemployed housepainter, just as Shulman’s father was. The mother is sharp-tongued, like Shulman’s. The events and other characters are fanciful, but the locations are real: the Lowry Hotel, Foreman & Clark men’s clothing store, Monkey (Montgomery) Ward, John Marshall Junior High, and



Central High School. The plot, not surprisingly, revolves around chasing women. The book reminds us that St. Paul once had neighborhoods of working class (and poorer) Eastern European Jewish immigrants.

And this *was* Shulman’s childhood. He was born on St. Paul’s West Side, where his parents, Abraham and Bessie, had arrived from Belarus. They landed on the Flats, living first at 205 Indiana Street, then 235.¹⁶

The next likely landing place for Eastern European Jewish immigrants was the Selby-Dale neighborhood, on high ground far from the river, and that is where the Shulmans moved in the early 1920s. Here Shulman spent his childhood and youth and attended public schools: Webster Elementary, John Marshall Junior High, and Central High.¹⁷

It was a mixed ethnic neighborhood but heavily Jewish. When Bessie Shulman started sending young Max on neighborhood errands around 1930 between his house and the Selby corner, he would have passed Samuel Rosenblum, fish; Samuel Fidelman, meats; Abraham Katz, jeweler; and several other Jewish merchants between 629 and 687 Selby—all long gone.¹⁸

So Shulman grew up with Yiddish accents in his ears and memories of the shtetls and the pogroms all around, but none of it appeared in his fiction until *Potatoes are Cheaper*, published in 1971, when he was fifty-two years old. As he said

The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis was a hit television show that ran from 1959 to 1963. While on break from filming the second-season episode “Spaceville,” Max Shulman plays cards with a chimp actor (Corporal Kilroy) as Dwayne Hickman (Dobie) and Bob Denver (Maynard G. Krebs) look on. Courtesy of Martha Rose Shulman.

later, Philip Roth (*Portnoy's Complaint*, 1969) set him free.

I wouldn't have written *Potatoes* if Roth hadn't written *Portnoy*. He blazed a trail. After *Portnoy*, all remaining taboos and barriers were down. Jewishness and Jewish mothers were in and so was *total* frankness of sex matters relating to Jewish and other families. He made both Jewishness and sex *respectably* funny.¹⁹

None of his readers then could have known that Shulman *had* written "Jewish" before—long, long before in high school. The first piece he published in his Central High School literary magazine, *The World*, describes a day outside his front door. It is called "Little White Way" (see "Growing Up in St. Paul: Reflections of Three Jewish Writers," page 13). This piece brings the Jewish community along Selby Avenue to life, although no physical trace of the abundantly Jewish, and extremely busy Selby-Dale commercial district of his youth remains. Yet, in "Little White Way" and *Potatoes are Cheaper*, Shulman leaves readers of today with a delightful glimpse of the way things were. —P.N.

Norman Katkov

Norman Katkov (1918-2009) was born in Ukraine when it was part of the Russian Empire. In the

midst of the Russian Revolution, Jews were being slaughtered.²⁰ The family fled and immigrated to St. Paul when Katkov was two.²¹ His first memory was "leaving the Great Northern Station in February 1921 having come down from North Dakota the day after my father took us across the border into America."²²

The family home at 130 E. Colorado was near the West Side dump. Katkov remembered that "we had great fun at that dump, looking for rubber binders and other discarded office refuse that came from the big buildings downtown."²³

He was an avid reader as a youngster. "Every Friday afternoon, after school, I walked to the branch library in St. Paul. I got four books—that was the limit. . . . On the way home there was a goodwill [sic] store right near my house, and they had used pulp magazines. I always had a nickel, so I'd buy two or three of those. . . . So, I was always reading, and I suppose the writing came from that."²⁴

His literary expression started early. "I have always wanted to write," Katkov said. "I won a Woman's Christian Temperance Union essay contest when I was, I think, seven years old." In junior high, he was a finalist in an essay contest for the local tuberculosis association and got his photo in the *St. Paul Daily News*.²⁵

Katkov graduated from Humboldt High School in 1935. According to the Humboldt annual, he was nicknamed "Katch," participated in the chess and Latin clubs, and played on intramural basketball and kitten ball²⁶ teams. He also wrote for and edited the school paper and literary journal.²⁷

Katkov's love of writing led to a degree in journalism from the University of Minnesota in 1940. He then served in the US Army at Fort Snelling, and as a private first class, was editor of the *Fort Snelling Bulletin* starting in 1942. One of his humorous pieces was "How to Pitch a Pup Tent."²⁸ Katkov earned an honorable discharge in 1943.

While still at Fort Snelling, the aspiring writer sent stories to the *Pioneer Press*, hoping to see his name in print. "When I got out of the army I went to the paper and a columnist remembered me and recommended me." Katkov was elated when he was asked to fill in for the regular police reporter. "Here I am, a kid, a police reporter! I thought I'd gone to heaven."²⁹ In an interview,

Norman Katkov's entry into the professional writing world was as a weekend police reporter at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. He later worked for the *New York World Telegram*. Promotional photo for Louise Thomas with Doubleday & Co. Courtesy of the Steve Trimble Collection.



he admitted he sometimes incorporated some of his work anecdotes into his fiction.³⁰

Around then, the ambitious Katkov penned his first novel, *Eagle at My Eyes*, published by Doubleday in 1948. The book was set in St. Paul and White Bear Lake and centered around the challenges of intermarriage and anti-Semitism. Katkov reveals the emotional attitudes of families and friends when his character, Joe, born into an Orthodox Jewish family, weds Mary, a gentile from a socially prominent family:

“How [did I] fall in love with a woman who was actually *verboden*? She was a goy, and I knew all Gentiles were against us from the time I was ten.”³¹

Joe should have known better. He’d seen the butcher Mr. Nudelman react when his own son, Manuel, married a Gentile:

“He beat his chest slowly and rhythmically with one fist. ‘I have no son!’ he shouted. ‘Gone my son! In hell, my son! To the goyim, my son! Dead my son!’ he shouted.”³²

Katkov gained some notice, including a write up in the *New York Times*, although many reviews were not positive. Still, the book sold enough copies to encourage a move to New York in 1951, where he landed a job at the *New York World Telegram and Sun* as a feature writer.

After a time, Katkov quit the paper and focused on magazines, including *Collier’s*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Woman’s Home Companion*.³³ “Biggest mistake I ever made,” he later said. “I loved the newspaper business. I was as good a feature writer as anyone. Everything else, I’m just another hack.”³⁴

Yet, some of that “everything else” included novel writing. His second book, *A Little Sleep, A Little Slumber* (1949), is the story of a Jewish family on the West Side Flats, with scenes set at the Saint Paul Farmers’ Market and other sites around town.

In the story, Mr. Lev Simon insists on giving his son, an avid reader, a reading lamp. He is short the money, however, and meets with Mr. Rosenstiel, a downtown department store owner:

“A lamp,’ Lev said. ‘My boy . . . reads . . . lamp . . . not enough money . . . you understand . . .



‘Ah, shit,’ Lev said. “You talk Jewish, Mr. Rosenstiel?”

‘No,’ Mr. Rosenstiel was smiling now, watching his visitor.

‘But you are Jewish?’

‘And you are Jewish,’ Mr. Rosenstiel said . . .

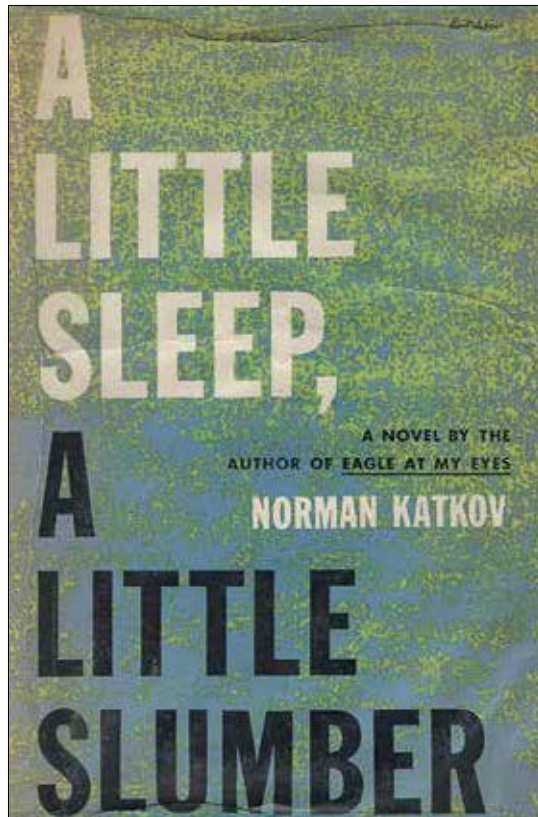
“[Mr. Rosenstiel] listened carefully and waited while Lev Simon put the money on the desk . . . He let Lev lead him to the three-fifty lamp and he, Rosenstiel, wrapped the lamp for Lev and gave him a receipt.”

Lev is grateful for the kindness of a German Jew to a Russian Jew. “Remember, Mr. Rosenstiel, May. Can’t pay before. I bring you the money.”³⁵ Lev does and never shops at any other downtown department store again.

Katkov met his future wife, Betty Nelson, while she was working for Simon & Schuster in New York. They married in 1951 and moved to Westport, Connecticut, where they had two sons, William and Richard. To maintain a steady income in between novels, Katkov focused on the magazine short-story market. He penned a hundred stories that were published in various

In this old, yellowed clipping from a *Life* magazine article, Norman Katkov (center) has earned recognition as a writer. His proud parents and brothers Bob and Harold look on. Photo by Ossie Scott for Louise Thomas with Doubleday & Co. Courtesy of the Katkov Family Collection.

In *A Little Sleep, A Little Slumber*, Katkov borrows some from his own history to the time his family fled Russia. He adds a sub-theme of illegal immigration blackmail when the character Lev Simon brings his family to Minnesota through Canada and North Dakota without papers. *Courtesy of the Paul Nelson Collection.*



magazines. Many were based on his West Side experiences.³⁶

One story, “Joey’s Ball,” features Joey, a member of the Riverview Midgets, a team in the St. Paul softball league. The team needs a new ball but doesn’t have enough money to buy one. Joey schemes to get it by helping his father sell bananas. He overcharges customers and pockets the tips meant for his family. At day’s end, when his father gives a softball to Joey, the boy is shocked and tells Pa what he’s done. Joey is remorseful and returns the money to the customers. On the way home, however, Pa stops at

Norman Katkov in his seventies. *Courtesy of the Katkov Family Collection.*



a store and returns with an additional present, saying, “Here. No son of mine is going to use a bum bat.”³⁷

Another story, “The Torn Invitation,” is set in the 1950s during protagonist Harry Wojick’s first year in high school. One day, Harry picks up the mail and finds an embossed invitation to the school open house addressed to his mother. Harry is embarrassed by her, typical of teens back then and still today. He doesn’t want her there and destroys the invitation before experiencing a change of heart. This piece was frequently reprinted in English anthologies.³⁸

Eventually, the public’s interest in magazine stories began to wane, thanks to the dawn of television. Katkov struggled. His agent suggested he contact the Columbia Pictures Corporation in California. They offered “five hundred a week, which to me was all the money in the world,” Katkov exclaimed, “so I came out. My aged mother was living out here, and I slept on her couch. And I went to work at Columbia on the bus, in Los Angeles!”³⁹

Katkov’s wife and sons stayed in Connecticut, but the long-distance relationship proved difficult. He wrote to a friend saying, “I am really possessed by work. I miss Betty and the boys fiercely.”⁴⁰

Life in the television industry took over. In a letter to his brother Hersh, Katkov wrote, “Things here are rather hectic at the moment. I’ve been working TV exclusively since June, which is exactly like what father did . . . only he sold fruit and I sell stories. I have to go out every week or ten days and find another job.”⁴¹

While TV paid the bills, Katkov told his brother in a 1963 letter, “I’ve wasted so many years, Hersh, and I don’t want to waste anymore; I want to write novels.”⁴² A year later, he completed the medical novel *Eric Mattson* (1964), which was set in a Minnesota hospital and included one scene that directly referenced the old West Side.⁴³ Doubleday, the publisher of his first two novels, gave Katkov a \$30,000 advance. The book was later serialized in *Good Housekeeping*.⁴⁴

Still, Katkov continued to write for television because “the need for tax money forces me to go looking for TV work,” he wrote a friend, “and the prospect is depressing. It becomes more and more difficult.”⁴⁵ “I don’t want to knock it,” Katkov explained later. “But I wrote

television to support my family. . . . I didn't want to write *The Wild Wild West* or *Bonanza* particularly, and yet I needed it." He was successful at it, though. Some of his best work was for the medical drama *Ben Casey*, for which he earned an Emmy nomination in 1963.⁴⁶ He also wrote the popular screenplay, "It Happened to Jane" (1959), starring Doris Day, Jack Lemmon, and Ernie Kovacs. Katkov even landed a cameo in it, playing a bailiff.

In the end, Katkov wrote a biography about radio comedienne Fanny Brice in 1953 and published seven novels. His later novels include *With These Hands* (1974), *Blood and Orchids* (1983), *The Judas Kiss* (1991), and *Millionaires Row* (1996), although unlike the earlier novels, the later books were not set in Minnesota.

Interestingly, Katkov didn't return to his home state for well over thirty years, but shortly after the release of *Blood and Orchids*, the now established writer stopped in St. Paul on a book tour, sponsored, in part, by The Friends of the St. Paul Public Library. Despite his success in Hollywood, Katkov admitted, "I was scared to death about the thing—the deal at B. Dalton in Minneapolis and at the Center. I didn't know how I would act."⁴⁷ While in town, he had a meeting at The St. Paul Hotel and lunch at the Minnesota Club. "Both places I would have never gone in when I worked on the paper or was growing up in the ghettos," he recalled. Katkov also returned to see his former homes on Colorado Street and Ashland Avenue and visited Humboldt High School. Before leaving town, the nostalgic Katkov stopped at Mickey's Diner, where he enjoyed a cheeseburger, a late-night favorite in his early days as a police reporter.⁴⁸

—S.T.

William Hoffman

William Hoffman (1914-1990) was born at 322 Texas Street on the West Side Flats in an attic apartment over a blacksmith shop, the middle of seven children of Jewish parents who came from a village near Moscow.⁴⁹ This home was "the first and the cheapest place available to my parents immediately after they arrived from Russia."⁵⁰ Hoffman's father, a peddler, survived by eating peanuts for months in order to save enough money to bring his family to St. Paul.⁵¹ "We had a barn almost adjoining our house . . .

and once possessed a horse and cow. . . . We also had a large vegetable garden which was sustained by the manure pile at the side of the barn, as well as a small patch of green grass which grew from the oats that fell out of the horse's feed bag."⁵²

Texas Street, really more of a wide footpath, was unpaved and after a hard rain it became a muddy morass. "To live on State Street, which was paved and had sewers and running water," Hoffman said, "was the Mecca and dream of my mother."⁵³ She got her wish in the early 1920s when the family moved to 156 State Street. They later left the Flats altogether but remained close, migrating to 152 Winifred in the West Side Hills. With that move, Hoffman said, his father "threw caution to the winds" and purchased a big yellow house where they "joined the elite, all of whom had trees and lawns in front of their homes."⁵⁴

Hoffman began writing as early as the seventh grade at Roosevelt Junior High School for the school paper, *The Midget*. He edited the Humboldt High School newspaper, as well. In 1930 after he and his family moved from the Flats, he wrote "My Street," for the school's *Humboldt Life* yearbook. The piece recalled some of the residents he loved who lived on the first street he ever knew.⁵⁵

In his new neighborhood at his new school, Hoffman had mixed feelings. "Humboldt High was no picnic for the Jewish students. At best, there were periods of short armistices . . . between the 'goyim'⁵⁶ (non-Jews) and the 'Jew boys.'" On the other hand, Hoffman said it would be wrong to assume that all the students and teachers were anti-Semitic. "For the most part, the students were friendly and outgoing, and lifetime friendships still endure over the years between former Jewish and non-Jewish students."⁵⁷

After graduating high school with honors in 1931, Hoffman attended the University of Minnesota and earned a journalism degree in 1935. Employment during the Depression was scarce. He picked up odd jobs when he could (Civilian Conservation Corp worker, grocery clerk, census taker, and customs inspector).⁵⁸ He married Ruth Orinstein in 1940 and landed his first career job as a boys' worker and nursery school teacher at Central Community House⁵⁹ in the largely Jewish Fourteenth Street neighborhood. After a four-year stateside stint in the US Army,

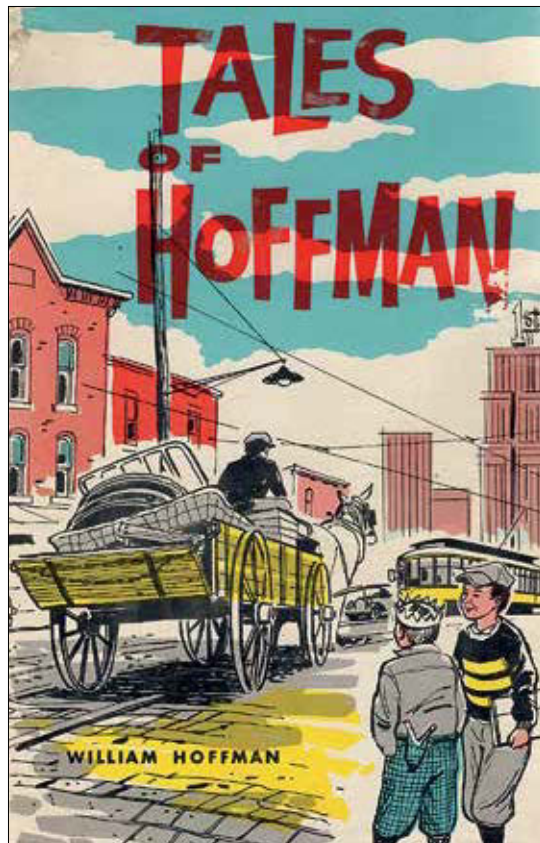


William and Ruth Hoffman around 1940. The couple had two children, Susan and Jon. Courtesy of Jon Hoffman.

he returned to a social welfare job at the Jewish Family Service of St. Paul, where he worked from 1947 to 1951, helping people find housing and jobs and enroll in language classes.⁶⁰

Hoffman returned to the University of Minnesota and earned a master's degree in social work in 1953. His thesis was on the care of the aged. By 1954, he was the Director of Social Services for the Jewish Home for the Aged on Midway Parkway. He began teaching sociology

Tales of Hoffman treated readers to nostalgic stories about St. Paul compiled from columns William Hoffman had written in the Minneapolis-based publication *American Jewish World*. Courtesy of the Paul Nelson Collection.



courses at Macalester College in 1960.⁶¹ By 1967, he was at the University of Minnesota's School of Social Work, developing and teaching courses in social welfare. He published many articles in the field.⁶² While Hoffman's work in sociology progressed, he began writing endearing anecdotes that brought the city's Jewish community to life and brought him recognition.

In late 1954, he introduced "Those Were the Days," a regular column for the *Saint Paul Jewish News*. In an early vignette, he asked, "How does one begin to recapture the memories of youth? Memories of the old West Side . . . It was a little world like none other . . . From it came the backbone and fibre [sic] of the Saint Paul Jewish community of today."⁶³ Readers responded positively to the columns, which reflected their own lives and through which they could identify characters similar to themselves and others. His musings were so successful that Hoffman compiled thirty-eight of them in a 1957 book.

Hoffman's next publication was *Tales of Hoffman* (1961). The writer had a way of capturing the essence of the people *he* knew on the West Side, but those same people/characters could be "recognized" by readers anywhere. He once said:

What I have written about my mother and my father, my brothers and sisters, my friends and others out of love and a compelling concern for them, could well have been written about your own too. Where there is sadness and where there is laughter, it is so only because this is the way of life.⁶⁴

For example, readers might think of a dear elderly aunt when they read "Rivkeh's Operation," the tale of a woman who endures gallbladder surgery and speaks of her "Gold Blotter" removal, as she called it for years. "Closed Is the Bank" captures the reactions of West Siders when the banks shuttered following the 1929 stock market crash—a time in history many readers would have remembered when the book published thirty years later. And the short story "Lei Mir" (Lend Me) looks at the frequent times neighbors rap on the door with a cup asking for flour or a towel to carry eggs away.⁶⁵ What reader couldn't relate to that?

One of Hoffman's most memorable characters is Ma, featured in several stories, including "My Mother's Pots and Pans." Here, a prosperous son is distressed by the battered cooking pots of his youth and offers Ma new cookware, but she resists:

"Ma, how about a small fry pan—just for eggs?"
"If you're going to buy a small one, why not better a big one?"
"All right, I'll buy a big one."
"I don't want any."
"Ma, I saw a little hole in one of the pots."
"It's just a little one."
"Maybe I can replace that one with a copper pot."
"Why should you? I don't use it because it's got a hole."

Ma ends up with a new copper pot—which she mounts on the kitchen wall for decoration.⁶⁶

Hoffman's third book was *Mendel*. The title character appeared frequently in past articles and books, so Hoffman felt it was time to give him the spotlight. "He is a very real person indeed and not a character made up from the 'luft' (air)," Hoffman revealed. "He is the sum total of the best in all the older people you know."⁶⁷

Mendel makes readers cheer for his patriotism—"I just want to become a 'citizen and learn to write my name in English.'" He longs to be able to vote instead of "talking and complaining,"⁶⁸ but when his friend tells him he'll have to take classes at the International Institute,⁶⁹ *Mendel* worries and imagines that "they will laugh at me behind my back, and maybe even in front of me."

Mendel makes readers chuckle at his frugality when his friend cannot convince him to replace thirty-year-old dime store reading glasses; and the lovable character earns readers' understanding when he frets about mortality. "What I am afraid of, Velvel, it is not to die . . . it is that I'm afraid not to be remembered after I die."⁷⁰

A dozen years passed before Hoffman penned his final book, *West Side Story II* (1981), which was somewhat different than previous books. In his late sixties, Hoffman shifted to stories and vignettes with more historical substance, including listings of who lived on which streets,



While some readers and critics referred to William Hoffman as a historian, he shrugged off the label. Courtesy of Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

in a style similar to city directories. He also featured interviews with former West Siders, including Jewish residents and several Mexican Americans whose families began moving to the neighborhood in the late 1920s. Over the years, many of these immigrants were assisted and became United States citizens with the help of Neighborhood House. Hoffman served on the board of Neighborhood House where, as a child, he played marbles on its front sidewalk.⁷¹

Hoffman's contemporary and fellow St. Paul-bred writer Norman Katkov wrote a blurb on the dust jacket of *West Side Story II*. "Bill Hoffman writes with such love and tenderness, and yes, gentlemanliness—with such lack of self-consciousness about the eternal verities, that he makes us believe it is much as he believes it."⁷²

Hoffman lamented to readers, "I do wish so much that I had pages to impress you, who might not have known the neighborhood with the feeling, the smells, the noises, and the lusty people that once lived there."⁷³ Smells brought sweet memories to Hoffman, who was happy to share them. "Once a kitchen was to eat in. It was a place where the best smells were born," Hoffman remembered. "A Jewish kitchen was steeped in the never forgotten smell of freshly baked Friday bread, Sunday pancakes, Saturday herring, homemade pickles and just everyday garlic-spiced dishes. It was the mixing pot of smells that gave strength and new dimensions to living. . . ."⁷⁴

And then there were sounds. Hoffman suggested that "if you listen with eyes shut tight,

you might hear the housewives in front of the . . . butcher shop, the shouts from the bus leaving for Sophie Wirth Camp, the softly muted conversations from a hundred porches, the crack of a bat against a ball, a skipping rope scraping the sidewalk and your father or mother calling you in to eat.”⁷⁵

Hoffman confided that “over the intervening years, I have made several feints at the great American novel, with no perseverance and little feeling. I came to the inevitable conclusion that there is no such thing for me, and that I had better continue with that closest to me—the West Side.”⁷⁶

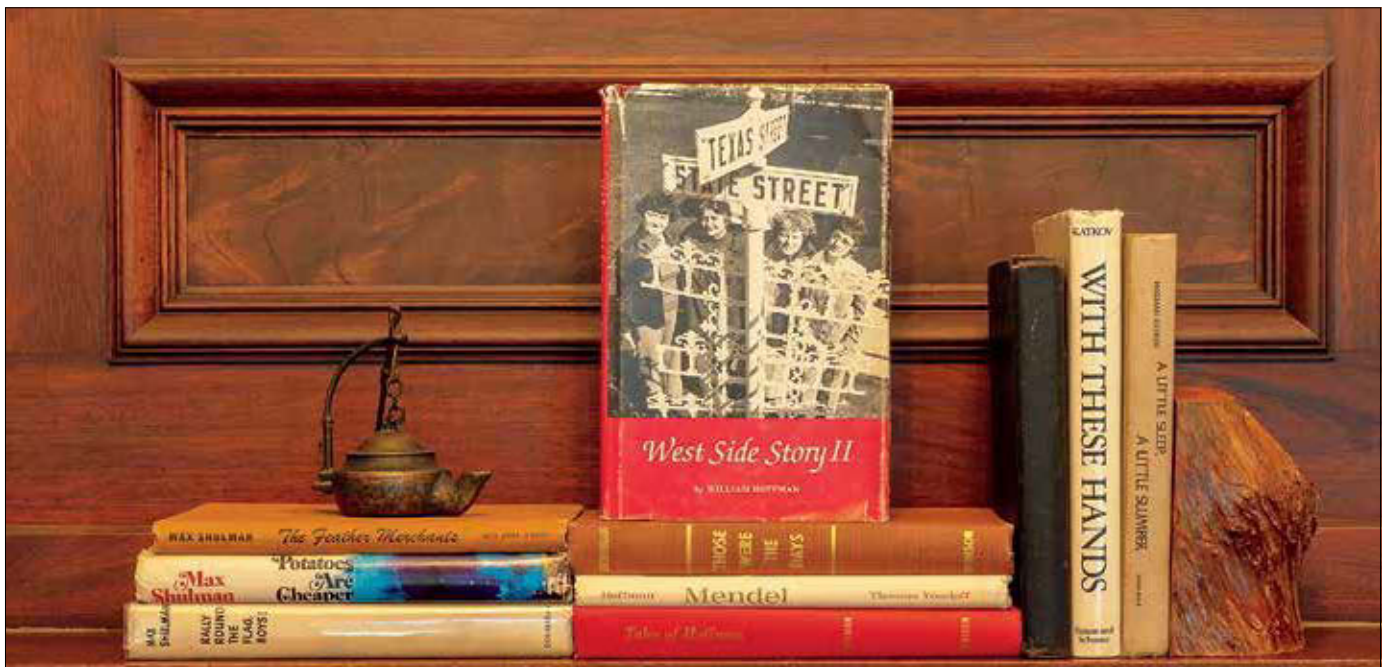
While Hofmann may not have been a degreed historian, his many stories in books and newspapers are a gift to anyone who may be seeking to learn more about Jewish history, the development of the West Side, or the history of immigration. Today’s immigrants who come upon Hoffman’s writings might find them surprisingly affecting. Many of these newer St. Paul residents might feel nostalgia for their own childhood experiences and watch with sadness as the old-country generation passes on. —S.T.

A Small Part of St. Paul History Documented by Three Jewish Writers

The works of these three authors are now mostly out of print and nearly forgotten, even in their hometown. This, of course, is the fate of nearly every writer: *sic transit gloria*— the glory fades. We offer this article as homage and to encourage those interested in St. Paul history to read and reconsider at least some of their work. The pieces we have touched on here add color and feeling to a slice of our city’s history far better than conventional historical writing can do. If only we had more of such writing from other neighborhoods, eras, and ethnic communities.

Steve Trimble is a St. Paul resident and local historian who is a member of Ramsey County History editorial board and a frequent contributor to the magazine.

Paul Nelson is an amateur historian living in St. Paul. Born and raised in Ohio’s Connecticut Western Reserve, he is the author of many publications of Minnesota history and a graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School.



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NOTES

1. Gene H. Rosenblum, *The Lost Jewish Community of the West Side Flats: 1882–1962* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing Co., 2002), 7-25.

2. “Max Shulman,” Library of Congress Catalog, accessed July 25, 2019, https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/search?searchArg=Max+Shulman&searchCode=GKEY%5E*&searchType=o&recCount=25&sk=en_US; “Fallen Arch,” review of *Sleep Till Noon* by Max Shulman, *Time*, April 10, 1950, 99.

3. “Fallen Arch,” 99.

4. “Fallen Arch,” 99.

5. James Barron, “Max Shulman, Humorist Is Dead: Chronicler of Postwar Life,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1988, A16. Shulman, married and a father, left Minnesota in the late 1940s for New York, then suburban Connecticut and, finally, California. According to former actor and television executive Dwayne Hickman, who knew Shulman well, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation rejected Shulman’s script for the movie version of *Rally Round The Flag, Boys!*, much to Shulman’s displeasure. Dwayne Hickman and Joan Roberts Hickman, *Forever Dobie: The Many Lives of Dwayne Hickman* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Corp., 1994), 100-101.

6. Author’s calculation from *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (TV series 1959–1963), IMDb, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052490/>. Viewers of the series may note that Dobie’s high school is named Central, just like Shulman’s.

7. Max Shulman, *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1951), 7.

8. *St. Paul City Directory 1960*, “Esther Feldman,” (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1960), 212.

9. Max Shulman, “Sauce for the Gander,” *Minnesota Daily*, October 4, 1940, 16 and June 4, 1942, 8. “Sauce for the Gander” seems to have debuted in the fall of 1940 and continued to Shulman’s graduation in June 1942.

10. John Greenleaf Whittier, “The Barefoot Boy,” Poetry Foundation, accessed September 12, 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45484/the-barefoot-boy>. Whittier’s poem begins: “Blessings on thee, little man, Barefoot boy, with cheek of tan!” Because the rest of the poem is a paean to a country childhood, the title is probably city slicker Max Shulman’s little joke.

11. Max Shulman, *Barefoot Boy With Cheek* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1943).

12. *Barefoot Boy With Cheek*, 16.

13. *Barefoot Boy With Cheek*, 16.

14. Max Shulman University of Minnesota Transcript, University of Minnesota Archives.

15. St. Paul Building Permits, 701–703 Selby Avenue (Permit # 51801–1909), Ramsey County Historical Society. The house was built in 1916, and the Shulmans were there by mid-1922. It was demolished in October 1971 (Permit # 132662–1971). The parcel remained vacant until construction of a senior living complex began in 2019.

16. Ramsey County Immigration and Naturalization

Records, Minnesota Historical Society, SAM 48, Roll 57, 197. Abraham Shulman’s 1915 Petition for Naturalization indicates that he hailed from Rechytsa (which he spelled Rytchica) in southeast Belarus. According to the 1930 US Census, Abraham immigrated in 1906, and Bessie Karchmer arrived in 1910. They married that year, suggesting their marriage had been arranged beforehand. Abraham Shulman first appears in the city directory as Aaron Shulman, painter, 201 E. Indiana. *St. Paul City Directory 1914*, 1529. By 1915, he and his wife and daughter Esther had moved to 235 E. Indiana. *St. Paul City Directory 2015*, 1478.

17. Hyman Berman, “The Jews,” in Holmquist, June Drenning, ed. *They Chose Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1981), 491-493. Berman reports the Jewish population of St. Paul was 4,450 to 5,000 in 1900; 10,000 in 1920; 13,500 in 1930. The Shulmans show up at 701 Selby, the east half of a duplex with 703, in 1922. *St. Paul City Directory 1922*, 1388. Webster and Marshall were Shulman’s neighborhood schools, both on the same block three blocks from the Shulman home. Reaching Central likely required a streetcar ride.

18. Names and addresses of the commercial establishments on Selby are taken from *Polk’s St. Paul Directory of Householders, Occupants of Office Buildings and Business Places, Including a Complete Street and Avenue Guide 1930*, (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1930), 1879.

19. Glen Evans, “An Exclusive Interview with Max Shulman,” *Writer’s Digest* 52, no. 3 (March 1972): 20-21.

20. Stephen W. Bowie, “Oral Histories: Norman Katkov,” *Classic TV History*, 2007, accessed September 12, 2019, http://www.classictvhistory.com/OralHistories/norman_katkov.html.

21. Claire Noland, “Norman Katkov dies at 91; scriptwriter and novelist,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 2009, accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-norman-katkov23-2009-sep23-story.html>.

22. The introduction to the Katkov papers says the family name was Kateekoffskey, but his father’s petition for naturalization states the name was originally Caticovschi. The family entered the United States from Canada at Crosby, North Dakota. Norman Katkov papers, introduction, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives; “Petition for Naturalization for Hyman Katkov (Haim Caticovschi),” “Certificate of Arrival,” and “Declaration of Intention,” National Archives at Chicago, January 27, 1942; National archivist, email correspondence with authors, July 3, 2019.

23. Norman Katkov, undated note, Norman Katkov papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

24. Bowie, “Oral Histories.” The library to which Katkov referred is Riverview, a Carnegie library built in 1916 that is still open on the West Side.

25. Norman Katkov, letter to Mrs. Parke, August 25, 1964, Norman Katkov papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.

26. An early term for softball.
27. Norman Katkov, photograph and quote, *Humboldt Life* (St. Paul: Humboldt High School, 1935), 10.
28. *Fort Snelling Bulletin*, March 1943, Minnesota Historical Society.
29. Bowie, "Oral Histories."
30. Bowie, "Oral Histories."
31. Norman Katkov, *Eagle at my Eyes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 64.
32. *Eagle at my Eyes*, 93.
33. Bowie, "Oral Histories."
34. Bowie, "Oral Histories."
35. Norman Katkov, *A Little Sleep, A Little Slumber* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 68-69.
36. Betty Katkov, multiple telephone interviews with author, August 2019.
37. Katkov, "Joey's Ball," 46.
38. Betty Katkov interview, *American Magazine*, May 1952. One example of an anthology that included "A Torn Invitation" is *A Matter of Choice And Other Stories for Today-Short Stories of High School*, Scholastic Book Services, 1971.
39. Norman Katkov, letter to Grace and Kermit, November 5, 1957, Norman Katkov papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives; *Westport City Directory*, 1960.
40. Bowie, "Oral Histories."
41. Norman Katkov, undated letter to Hersh Katkov, Norman Katkov papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.
42. Norman Katkov, letter to Hersh Katkov, September 1, 1963, Norman Katkov papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.
43. Norman Katkov, *Eric Mattson* (New York: Avon Books in arrangement with Doubleday, 1964), 155. Several European publishers had agreements with Katkov to publish foreign-language editions of *Eric Mattson*. In England, the title was changed to *Dr. Mattson*.
44. Mike Connelly, "Notes from Hollywood," *Star News*, March 24, 1964, 23.
45. Norman Katkov, letter to Harold Mattson, March 2, 1966, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.
46. Bowie, "Oral Histories."
47. Gareth Hiebert, *City of Seven Hills: Columns of Oliver Towne* (St. Paul, MN: Pogo Press, Incorporated, 1999), 16. The Center to which Norman Katkov refers is the Jewish Community Center on St. Paul Avenue.
48. Hiebert, *City of Seven Hills*, 15-17.
49. Kathryn Boardman, "'Rolling Stone' Hoffman Gathers No Social Work Moss in Career," *St. Paul Dispatch*, October 12, 1966, 10.
50. "Minnesota Authors: William Hoffman," Carmen Richards papers, n.d., Minnesota Historical Society, 1.
51. Gareth Hiebert, "Bill Hoffman's West Side," *St. Paul Jewish News*, December 18, 1957, 6.
52. William Hoffman, *West Side Story II* (St. Paul, MN: North Central Publishing Company, 1981), 38.
53. William Hoffman, *Those Were the Days* (Minneapolis: T. S. Dennison & Company, 1957), 26.
54. *St. Paul City Directories, 1922-4*; Hoffman, *Those Were the Days*, 153.
55. William Hoffman, "My Street," *Humboldt Life* (St. Paul: Humboldt High School, December 1930), 8.
56. Hoffman, *West Side Story II*, 77. In this book, William Hoffman notes that in this instance, 'goyim' "is not intended as a categorical prejudiced description of non-Jews, but rather in connection with the red-necked bullies who continue to foul the air of any community."
57. Hoffman, *West Side Story II*, 77.
58. "Minnesota Authors: William Hoffman," Carmen Richards papers, n.d., 3.
59. A settlement house similar to Neighborhood House that served the Jewish community in Lowertown.
60. Boardman, "'Rolling Stone' Hoffman," 10.
61. *Weekly MAC*, September 30, 1960.
62. University of Minnesota News Service release, September 27, 1967.
63. William Hoffman, "Come, Let Us Stroll," *St. Paul Jewish News*, December 1954, 3.
64. William Hoffman, *Tales of Hoffman* (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison & Company, 1961), introduction.
65. Hoffman, *Tales of Hoffman* 25, 45, 147.
66. Hoffman, *Tales of Hoffman*, 89-90.
67. Hoffman, *Those Were the Days*, 241.
68. William Hoffman, *Mendel* (Cranbury, NJ: Thomas Yoseloff, 1969), 13.
69. The International Institute of Minnesota in St. Paul recently celebrated a century of serving immigrants, refugees, and asylees. They offer an array of services including English classes and assistance with citizenship papers. For more information, see the article on the institute in the Spring 2019 issue of *Ramsey County History* at <https://publishing.rchs.com/publishing/magazine/ramsey-county-history-magazine-volume-54-1-spring-2019/>.
70. Hoffman, *Mendel*, 83.
71. William Hoffman, *Neighborhood House: A Brief History of the First 75 Years, 1897-1972*. Neighborhood House was founded in 1897 by the women of Mount Zion Temple who initially worked to help Eastern European Jewish families settle in St. Paul. Hoffman credits long-time director Constance Currie with fueling his own compassion. In 1972, he wrote this booklet for the organization's seventy-fifth anniversary.
72. Hoffman, *West Side Story II*, dust jacket.
73. Hoffman, *West Side Story II*, 90.
74. Hoffman, *Tales of Hoffman*, 85.
75. William Hoffman, *St. Paul Jewish News*, May 1955.
8. The camp in White Bear Lake was a Neighborhood House program started in 1919. The first Jewish camp in Minnesota, it was named in honor of the leader of the Jewish Relief Society, the camp's founding organization.
76. Hoffman, *West Side Story II*, 2.

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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 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.

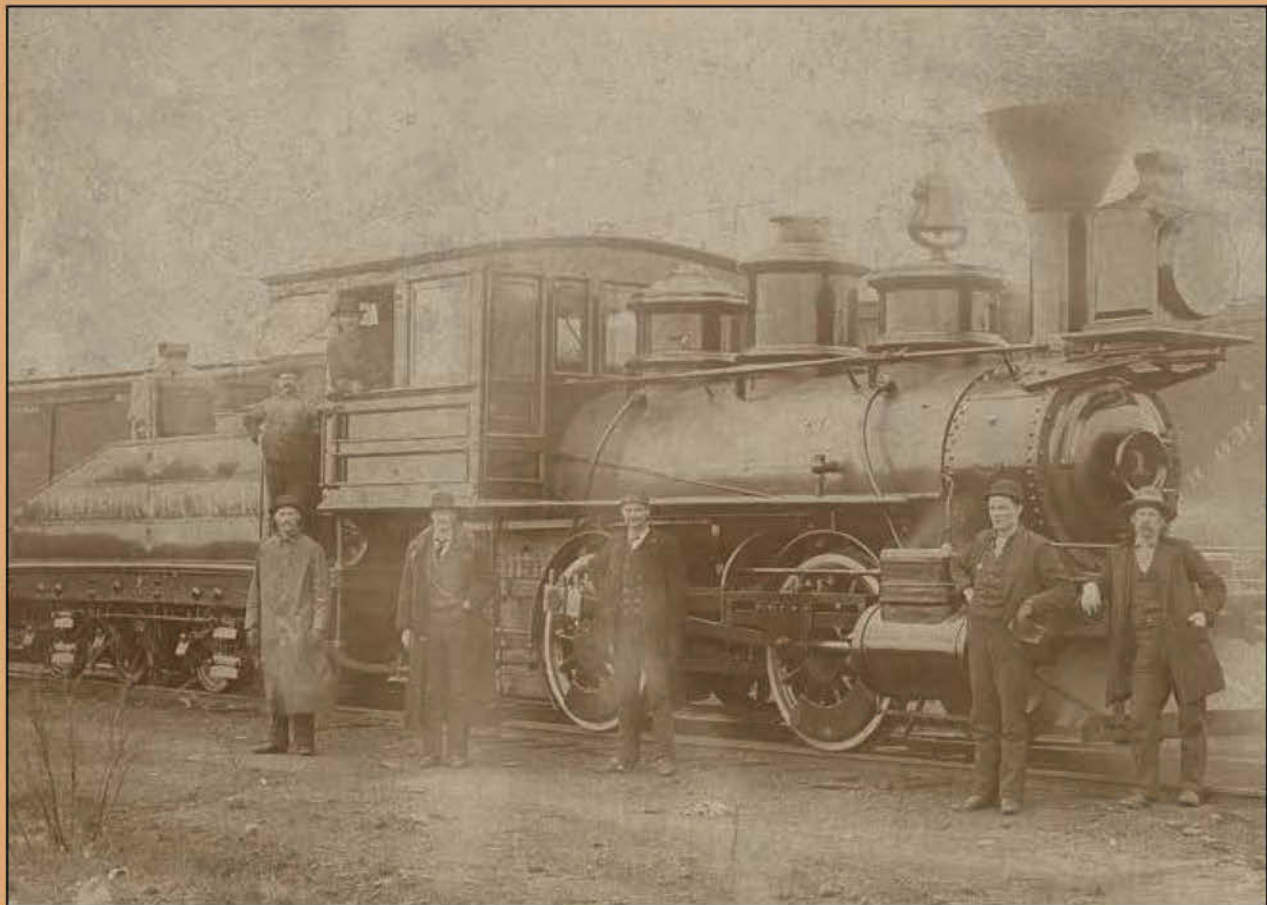
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