

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*A Slow Track to Nowhere*

**St. Paul's Downtown People Mover**

MATT GOFF, PAGE 13

*From a Star on the  
Ball Diamond to a  
Star at the Minnesota  
State Capitol*

# Billy Williams

FRANK M. WHITE, PAGE 1





## By the Numbers . . .

Historian Johannes R. Allert has written multiple articles about Ramsey County citizens who served in one way or another during World War I. Below are a few general facts to consider before you explore Allert's newest article, "Faith, Advocacy, & Service: A Snapshot of Ramsey County's Welfare Workers in the Great War," which begins on page 22.

Number of men in the US Armed Forces during WWI:  
**4,800,000**

Number of men serving in the US Army during WWI:  
**4,000,000**

Number of Minnesotans serving in WWI:  
**99,116**

Total deaths in the US Army in WWI:  
**115,660 (50,280 battle, 57,460 disease, 7,920 other)**

Number of Ramsey County residents (Armed Forces and service workers) who died overseas during and shortly after WWI:  
**358**

SOURCES: Col. Leonard Ayres, *The War With Germany: A Statistical Study* (Washington, DC: US Gov. Printing Office, 1919); Gold Star Roll Index, Minnesota Public Safety Commission; "List of WWI casualties—Memorial Hall Veterans," Ramsey County Minnesota War Memorial, <https://data.ramseycounty.us/stories/s/6r2q-8miu>.

## ON THE COVER



Billy Williams, who served as aide to fourteen Minnesota governors over fifty-two years, welcomed the press to his home on occasion of his eighty-sixth birthday in October 1963. *Photograph by William Seaman, Minneapolis Star Tribune, October 24, 1963, Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

## Contents

- 1 *From a Star on the Ball Diamond to a Star at the Minnesota State Capitol*  
**Billy Williams**  
FRANK M. WHITE
- 13 *A Slow Track to Nowhere*  
**St. Paul's Downtown People Mover**  
MATT GOFF
- 22 *Faith, Advocacy, & Service*  
**A Snapshot of Ramsey County's Welfare Workers in the Great War**  
JOHANNES R. ALLERT

## Message from the Editorial Board

This issue, we share remarkable examples of commitment and purpose by ordinary men and women from Ramsey County. Despite loss and hardship, criticism, racism, and sexism, nothing diminished their beliefs in the importance of their service.

Frank White paints a compelling picture of Billy Williams, a Black St. Paulite who juggled multiple jobs while making a name for himself playing baseball for mostly white regional teams at the turn of the twentieth century. His leadership on and off the field did not go unnoticed by John A. Johnson, who tapped Williams as his messenger when becoming Governor of Minnesota in 1905. That was the beginning of Williams' remarkable tenure at the Capitol.

During and immediately after World War I, dedicated volunteers with welfare organizations endured the deprivations of war to serve at home and abroad. Despite hardships, they prevailed in their commitment to pray for and comfort weary soldiers and tend to their basic needs. Johannes Allert scoured dozens of service records to offer a glimpse of six of these devoted souls.

Another story of commitment and purpose is an urban development and transportation concept that was, perhaps, ahead of its time. The mostly forgotten Downtown People Mover overcame many obstacles before voters put an end to the introduction of a shuttle transit system in St. Paul in 1980.

To serve a greater cause isn't always popular or successful. Yet, sometimes determined people devoted to the tasks at hand create many ripples of good—often unnoticed and often extending far into the future. *Ramsey County History* is pleased to bring you these stories of dedication this spring.

*Anne Field*  
Chair, Editorial Board

*The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks former Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the 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.*

## A Snapshot of Ramsey County's Welfare Workers in the Great War

JOHANNES R. ALLERT, M.A.

James B. Ostergren's initial impressions of France and its people were a bit underwhelming compared to America's progressive standards. Nevertheless, the twenty-five-year-old was struck by the beauty of the French countryside and the authenticity of its people. Writing to a pastor in St. Paul in September 1918, Ostergren remarked,

In a spiritual way, if I might so speak of their life aside from the physical considerations, the French can teach us much for our own good. They are socially the most obliging, cheerful, and in a certain sense delicately refined folk I have ever met.<sup>1</sup>

He added that while Americans did not receive ovations upon their arrival, ". . . from merchant to laborer they give us the open hand of heart-warming fellowship."<sup>2</sup>

The young man's reasons for being there, however, did not involve sightseeing. Attached to the 357th Infantry Regiment of the US Army's 90th Division, (Tough 'Ombres), Ostergren and countless others were overseas in his words, ". . . to tackle the most serious business that opportunity ever offered . . ." as welfare workers.<sup>3</sup>

In a world immersed in global conflict and on the verge of entering the modern era, welfare work encompassed a broad range of volunteers with a twofold mission. One involved "keeping men clean" spiritually, morally, and physically, while the other provided critical support for the troops.<sup>4</sup> Without it, military efficiency could suffer. But was it merely do-gooder-work for the pious, or was there something more?

Historically, World War I, known as the Great War, is remembered as the catalyst that ushered modernity and secularism into the twentieth century. However, accounts from Rev. Ostergren

and other individuals connected to Ramsey County—Fr. William L. Hart; Rev. Benjamin N. Murrell; Ada Dahlgren; and Adjs. Charles and Anna Nelson—contradict America's religious decline.<sup>5</sup> These devoted men and women offered prayers, comfort, peace, and hope. They, in turn, were touched and grew spiritually through their interactions with the brave men who put their lives on the line—something they never forgot.

### **US Army: Chaplain James B. Ostergren (1893-1974)**

When the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, the need for army chaplains grew in proportion to the four million soldiers entering the ranks. The necessity of "keeping men clean" stemmed from moral and practical reasons. Analysis of European armies noted that, in some cases, thirty percent of their fighting force was "rendered ineffective" through sexually transmitted diseases. Therefore, the inclusion of clergymen into the ranks signaled to the nation that its sons would not be exposed to the temptations that might arouse their "baser instincts" and that the military would have sufficient numbers to fight.<sup>6</sup>

Raised in New Canada Township and baptized in St. Paul's First Swedish Baptist Church, James Ostergren graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1916. He was no stranger to the military. While attending university, Ostergren enrolled in the school's cadet program, where he served two years. According to his draft registration, he marked his graduate studies in divinity at the University of Chicago as an exemption but added, ". . . at the same time tak[ing] training in the University Officers' Reserve Corps."<sup>7</sup>

Ostergren was sent to France to begin his service. Far from the peaceful and orderly confines



of Ramsey County, he wrote to his new bride, Effie, in September, describing the throes of warfare in brutal honesty:

These [bullet] holes are not exactly ancient souvenirs either for the upturned earth looks as fresh as a newly plowed field. Jerry (a new name for the [Germans]) shelled this field this morning until our artillery got the range of his batteries and gave him an explosive invitation to go out of business.<sup>8</sup>

On November 1 from Romagne-sous-Montfaucon, he wrote:

. . . The whole American army is pushing forward along our entire front. . . . The newspapers will be full of accounts of the glory they have won, but my little black notebook will be full of records of the tragedies that are to be the price of victory. As the line moves up, I must take my burying detail forward to clear the field of dead.<sup>9</sup>

For two months until Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, Ostergren's unit remained in motion. He adapted to the constant din of artillery fire, gas attacks, "cooties" (head lice), and aerial attacks. Ostergren confided to Effie, "For really this is the most human life I ever lived. It's the best place in the world to find out what sort of stuff a man has in him, and I see and experience all the phases of life from the darkest tragedies to the sort of funny things that set my sides a heaving with laughter." To lighten his letters after detailing the darker news, he shared stories of a cook dressed in German boots and a stovepipe hat while "bending over the stove and stirring a kettle of mess." Ostergren was especially tickled when a captain assigned to night duty at the colonel's office stripped to his underwear to pick off fleas—just as the colonel walked in.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the continuous shellfire and movement, conducting religious services was out of the question. Not until weeks after the armistice was signed could the chaplain lead his first "church service" in a German village the Sunday before Christmas in a room above a wineshop.



US Army Chaplain James B. Ostergren spent his first two months before the November 11 armistice in France supporting the soldiers through prayer and encouragement and burying the dead. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

In retrospect, Ostergren surmised that although war fostered soldiers' rough exterior, their spiritual lives remained intact:

. . . do not think for all of that that religion and Christianity were strangers to the battlefield. . . . I have heard many [men] tell me that war had made them think more and deeper than they had ever done before. In that danger zone where we walked around for weeks at a time in the valley of the shadow of death, we saw life and death stripped naked before us. Then it was that God was especially near to us, and we felt his presence with us, a living reality and close personal friend.<sup>11</sup>

### **Knights of Columbus: Father William L. Hart (1865-1953)**

When America entered the war, Fr. William Lawrence Hart was accustomed to the role of a journeyman traveling in foreign lands. Hart was born in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, in 1865.

Fr. William Hart (*back row center*) helped start what is thought to be one of St. Paul's first Boy Scouts of America troops and the nation's first Catholic troop—based at the Church of St. Mark in Merriam Park. Informally named the “George Washington Scouts,” and, formally, Troop 1, in 1910, the organization of nearly 100 boys said goodbye to their leader, when he was reassigned to a new church in 1911. *Courtesy of Northern Star Scouting.*



As a young adult, he attended St. Michael's College in Toronto, Canada, where he studied the classics and philosophy and, later, theology at Grand Seminary in Montreal. Ordained in 1895 to serve the Diocese of Toronto, Hart soon transferred to the Diocese of Saint Paul around 1897. He was assigned to St. Patrick's as an assistant before briefly serving as pastor at St. Anastasia in Hutchinson and then leading the Church of St. Mark in St. Paul for a decade. In that time, he became a US citizen.<sup>12</sup>

Hart had a knack for delivering short homilies. Lasting not more than ten minutes, he often incorporated the idea of, “[l]ove thy Creator with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself,” into his messages. His other talent lay in bringing people together. For example, while at St. Mark's, he organized a sizeable Boy Scout troop, then successfully petitioned for formal recognition as the first Catholic troop in the state and nation.<sup>13</sup>

Hart's service caught the attention of Archbishop John Ireland, who assigned the priest the unenviable task of ministering to a congregation in Morton in southcentral Minnesota. Tensions between Catholic and Protestant townspeople there were palpable. Hart wasted no time. Gathering youngsters from his parish, he marched them to the Morton Methodist Church, where an ice cream social was in progress. “I'm Hart, the new pastor at St. John's,” the priest announced, adding, “I hope we always have pleasant relationships.” In an era where ethnic, racial, and religious identities were strong, this direct act of diplomacy may have helped lessen the friction.<sup>14</sup>

When America entered the war, Hart applied for the Chaplain Corps but was considered too old for national service. Undeterred, he volunteered with the Catholic fraternal service order Knights of Columbus (K of C) and was assigned to the 140th Regiment, 35th Division.

Comprised of Army National Guard members from the the nation's Bible Belt, the men from Missouri and Kansas initially considered the priest a distinct anomaly—an outsider—but his warm personality, sincerity, and devout nature won them over:

Chaplain Hart was the Knights of Columbus Chaplain, but we felt that he belonged to the regiment. He was an older man, and was indeed “Father Hart” to everyone. Protestants and Catholics alike loved him. Brave, kindly, gentle, there was not a man in the 140th who did not feel proud of him.<sup>15</sup>

The affection was mutual. In an article published in the Catholic *Extension* magazine, Hart considered his placement a blessing. Unlike army chaplains who held formal ranks, his position with the K of C allowed soldiers the opportunity and freedom to speak openly and candidly. Above all, Hart believed the war was a cleansing experience that would rid the world of the menace threatening human progress and serve as a catalyst to unite disparate people together in a common cause, asserting, “the days of bigotry and calumny of the Church are nearing an end. . . .”<sup>16</sup>

History chronicled the chain of errors that culminated in the 35th Division's poor performance in the forests of the Meuse-Argonne.<sup>17</sup> The one exception was the 140th Regiment. Enveloped into the ‘fog of war’ with several of the regiment's officers and sergeants either killed or wounded, word spread among the enlisted ranks to withdraw. Amid the chaos, a familiar figure emerged to take charge:

It was interesting to see [Hart] suddenly become Division Headquarters. “You are a Captain” he would say to one doughboy. “You are a Lieutenant” to another “take charge of those men. . . .” He was a Knights



In the midst of a fierce battle, Fr. William Hurt, who remained alongside the young men, nourished weary and nearly defeated soldiers with instruction, prayer, and sweet treats of candy and raisins, which he kept in his coat pockets. *Courtesy of University of St. Michael's College Archives.*

of Columbus Chaplain and not compelled to be with the regiment, yet he was always in the thickest of it and ever with a cheery word.<sup>18</sup>

For his actions in 1918, Hart received a citation for bravery:

Chaplain William L. Hart,  
140th Infantry, not only rendered  
spiritual aid to the wounded,  
but gathered stragglers together,  
and by word and example,  
without regard for his personal safety,  
encouraged them to action.

—H. S. HAWKINS, COLONEL,  
GENERAL STAFF, CHIEF OF STAFF<sup>19</sup>

Upon returning stateside, reporters clamored around ‘The Fighting Parson’ as he became known, probing for details of his bravery. Hart deferred to the litter bearers—the medics who retrieved the wounded from the battlefield:

These men, who go up under the shells and machine gun bullets to bring back the wounded, are supposed to be below the usual mark of fighters. But they have displayed the coolest nerve I have ever seen.<sup>20</sup>

### **YMCA: Reverend Benjamin Murrell (1877-1972) and Entertainer Ada Dahlgren (1888-1969)**

Since the American Civil War, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) had earned a strong reputation for ministering to and aiding soldiers in battle. Organized and efficient, the YMCA carried out its mission admirably, including supporting then Major General John J. Pershing’s ‘Punitive Expedition’ along the Mexican border in 1916.<sup>21</sup> Compared to the K of C and the Salvation Army, the YMCA’s presence was far greater than the two combined.

But unlike past conflicts, the Great War was a modern industrial battle between larger armies, making welfare work more difficult than it had been. For example, the organization ran canteens where soldiers could purchase snacks and necessities. However, shipping and transport restrictions placed by the US government inevitably constrained the YMCA’s ability to deliver the goods and services they heavily advertised.<sup>22</sup>

Complaining in his diary, Twin Cities’ Private Edward Gilkey, serving in the 6th Engineers, grew impatient over the YMCA’s inability to deliver. The shortages stressed both soldiers and volunteers alike. Gilkey wrote:

... continued to Y.M., but could only get two small packages of cookies, hours were from four to five, the Y.M.C.A. people don’t hurt themselves any, we evidently aren’t considered, they treat you as though they were lowering themselves by it, as though they were conferring some great honor on you, wouldn’t take much to get the fellows to raid the place and send the expensively uniformed robbers to the hospital, there certainly will be an outbreak of some kind...<sup>23</sup>

Others noticed some volunteers were more interested in sightseeing than in working, leaving one Minnesota officer to quip, “The Y.M.C.A. is in rather a disrepute in some places and I have heard them referred to as You Must Come Across.”<sup>24</sup>





Rev. Benjamin Murrell (third from left) was forty years old in 1917 when he went to officers' school. His age may have been the reason he did not become an officer. However, he put his training as a pastor to work for the service men fighting and dying in the trenches. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Other challenges involved President Woodrow Wilson's policy of strict segregation. Faced with such unreasonable restrictions, the YMCA did its best to comply while trying to meet the needs of all. Most YMCA volunteers were not there to travel and took their jobs seriously, working hard to accomplish their missions.

One such man was Rev. Benjamin Nathan Murrell. Born in Tennessee around 1877, Murrell graduated from the University of Illinois in 1907. In late 1914, he and his wife, Francis, were called to St. Paul. He was to serve the congregation of Pilgrim Baptist Church on Cedar Street. In March 1917, the Murrells lost their first child—a toddler they'd adopted—to gastric enteritis.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps it was the boy's death or the reverend's commitment to serve his country, but three months later, Murrell was at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. He'd joined Company 4, 17th Provisional Regiment of the Officers' Training Camp for Colored Military Officers. He did not become an officer. Instead, he was named religious secretary as a member of the American Expeditionary Forces with the YMCA. He worked briefly out of Camp Sherman in Ohio and was then sent to the front.<sup>26</sup>

For five months overseas, Murrell worked with the famed 369th Infantry Regiment (Harlem Hellfighters). Following the armistice, he transferred to the 92nd Division (Buffalo Soldiers). Murrell's record reveals an effective worker who ascended the organization's hierarchy quickly. By June 1919, Murrell was promoted to regional secretary, responsible for the management of all YMCA services catering to over 4,000 colored soldiers in France who, "during four months buried all Americans (Black & White) in our National Cemeteries."<sup>27</sup> The unpleasant and unsung task of exhuming, identifying, and reburial of soldiers killed in action marked the first step on the road

to closure for America's mothers and widows that ultimately concluded with the Gold Star pilgrimages of the 1930s.<sup>28</sup>



War also opened doors for women to serve as welfare volunteers overseas—including Minnesotan Ada Dahlgren. The twenty-two-year-old daughter of Swedish immigrants from Fergus Falls moved to St. Paul to attend Macalester College in 1910. While here, Dahlgren, a noted contralto, worked as music director for House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul and taught at Minnesota College and other venues before joining the war effort.<sup>29</sup>

Because of Sweden's neutral stance on the war, Scandinavian Americans were suspected of harboring sympathies for Germany. Consequently, Dahlgren's acceptance into the YMCA—first as an entertainer then as a staffer in a canteen—was delayed until after the armistice. When newspapers informed the nation that more women were needed overseas, the announcement provided an opportunity for women like Dahlgren to demonstrate their capabilities and, coincidentally, a chance for the YMCA to rehabilitate its image. Most importantly, it helped the soldiers, who were "at risk to fall into a sour mood and 'I don't care' frame of mind. . ." She arrived in Le Havre, France, in February 1919, after an unpleasant and turbulent journey by ship.<sup>30</sup>

Dahlgren described her first musical performance as "a weird sensation" when she sang before soldiers "whose mouths were tied up" with flu masks to prevent the spread of influenza. She entertained many groups, including "Whites, Indians, Negroes" and even German prisoners of war. On Christmas Eve, the vocalist performed at the quarters of Major General Henry Allen, Pershing's successor. Impressed, Allen later mentioned the singer in his memoir, *My Rhineland Journal*.<sup>31</sup>

Following tours of Europe's battlefields, Dahlgren noted the abject destruction of Belgium's Cloth Hall in Ypres and the ruins of Châtea-Thierry in France, "I could feel the spirits of countless men who had given up their lives . . ." When not performing, Dahlgren recalled:

[We] "always visited with the boys, and talked 'states," and I believe they enjoyed these



Ada Dahlgren visited with an “All Minnesota baseball team” of soldiers at Audernauch after the war. As she traveled, she saw much of Europe’s war-torn countryside and cities. In this second photo, identified as “The Chapel Quartette of Koblenz, Germany,” Dahlgren notes that the Army of Occupation held services in this former palace. *Both images courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

talks more than the formal program. And through the days we served as companions and confidants to many a home-sick boy.<sup>32</sup>

Nearly twenty years later, she felt sharing these private moments was “almost sacrilegious . . . for it meant so much to the soldiers, and—to ourselves.”<sup>33</sup>

Aside from her recollections, Dahlgren’s war survey included remarkable photos of the Luedendorff Bridge at Remagen, the remnants of Cloth Hall, and socializing with soldiers from the North Star State. Content with her role as sort of a jack-of-all-trades, Dahlgren concluded in her survey, “We did everything. Our motto was ‘Service!’”<sup>34</sup>

Some initially doubted women’s usefulness overseas. After witnessing a few bad examples, one skeptical staff officer attached to Minnesota’s 151st Artillery chauvinistically remarked, “The old saying that a woman’s place is in the home is just about true.”<sup>35</sup> Months later, however, this same officer acknowledged that, compared to male counterparts, the women of the YMCA were “doing all of the work and doing it well.”<sup>36</sup>

### **The Salvation Army: Adjutant Charles Nelson (1878-1958) and Adjutant M. Anna Nelson (1874-?)**

Unlike the YMCA’s entry into the war, the Salvation Army started small. They focused on fundamentals (not advertising)—providing hot food, running errands, and tending to the wounded. The long-held philosophy of “Christianity in action” was their watchword. Letters written by countless soldiers conveyed the Salvation

Army’s good deeds to families in the states. This translated into financial support from the public. One such windfall came in spring 1918 when the organization asked for \$1 million in financial support. The nation eagerly donated over twice that amount.<sup>37</sup>

But the Salvation Army’s work was not just abroad. The rapid pace of postwar demobilization in 1919 created unforeseen problems state-side beyond the government’s purview. Men accustomed to regimented supervision summarily received their last paycheck and were discharged from service. Lacking a firm foundation, many squandered their final earnings. They were alone and rudderless. Fortunately, St. Paul’s Salvation Army provided a safe harbor to which they could turn.

Recognizing the growing crises for struggling and sometimes unhoused veterans, the local Salvation Army opened a hostel at 317 Robert Street in 1919. It was the brainchild of the husband-and-wife team Adj. Charles Nelson and Adj. M. Anna Nelson. As a former US sailor, Charles related to fellow veterans. Anna, known as “Mother” to the men, practiced tough love. The couple made the perfect team. In its first year, the hostel served over 7,000 soldiers, sailors, and marines from across Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Montana. The cost spent on veterans totaled \$63,806, but the payback was enormous. In all, 10,200 veterans received temporary lodging; 145,600 meals were served; 2,400 veterans found jobs; and another 1,162 were given money for transport home. Over 6,000 veterans received temporary loans, giving them a head start at new lives.<sup>38</sup>





The Salvation Army's Adj. Charles Nelson and Adj. Anna Nelson made a positive difference in St. Paul. Their faith—demonstrated through their actions—proved that winning the peace (providing for veterans after the war) was just as important as winning the war. Both images courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

The secret of the organization's success was its simplicity. Volunteers performed acts of "practical humanity" where "[s]ervice to one another is truly service to God."<sup>39</sup> Rather than preach, the couple attended to basic needs. Food and shelter were top priorities. Mrs. Nelson explained, "I never believed in cramming religion down their throats. The institution in which I played the roll [sic] of 'Mother' was first of all a home, not a church." She added this caveat:

Religion was never lost sight of, and every opportunity I had I would send the men to the church of their boy-hood days. I probably sent more men to church than any other woman in St. Paul.<sup>40</sup>

From a former Army physician burned out by service in Siberia to the enlisted man falling prey to alcohol, the Nelsons witnessed "the stream of humanity flow through. . . ." Mrs. Nelson maintained that actions along with "[t]he right word at the right time, has changed the entire direction of a man's life, and it is one of the joys of my life that sometimes I have spoken that encouraging word."<sup>41</sup>

In 1920, the War Department officially recognized the couple for their intervention. Echoing earlier statements printed in *Social News*, Mr. Nelson concluded in his war survey that the Salvation Army's mission, ". . . differed from that of other societies, in dispensing with a great deal of red tape. Where an urgent need presented itself, we rendered the necessary help first, and then investigated." Mrs. Nelson confirmed, "Numerous letters sent me from all parts of the country indicate that my efforts have not been fruitless."<sup>42</sup>

### Lasting Impressions

As was their custom, the US Army conducted a postwar analysis. Hastily surveying fifty-five soldiers over forty days, the army learned of the

impressions of welfare agencies—specifically the YMCA. The report concluded that most of the YMCA's problems stemmed from supply issues, miscommunications, and misperceptions. By comparison, interviewees scored the Knights of Columbus and the Salvation Army higher.<sup>43</sup>

In response, the YMCA conducted a separate inquiry, asking army and navy chaplains for feedback. Among the replies came a seven-page letter written by none other than James Ostergren. The chaplain asserted the YMCA's primary difficulty lay in its extensive advertising and subsequent inability to deliver what it promised, adding its feeble attempts at conducting religious services often had "a typically stale Y.M.C.A. flavor." Ostergren conceded that under the circumstances, many workers performed admirably, but it was the few poor individuals who stood out. Recognizing the average soldier's lot was often unpleasant, Ostergren asserted, "He [the soldier] wanted somebody on whom he could vent his spleen, and he did not dare to vent it on Army men. Under those circumstances the Y.M.C.A. was a very convenient goat, on whom all the pent up irritations of the doughboy were unloaded." Despite criticisms, Ostergren remained optimistic about the organization's future and supported its good work but believed honest feedback was the best policy.<sup>44</sup>

Other chaplains responded similarly; however, in most cases, the YMCA's women workers escaped the scrutiny that was piled on the men. One chaplain maintained, "Your men were good but the women outclassed them." Recalling the work of an exemplary woman, he concluded, "One woman like her will make a thousand men good."<sup>45</sup>

Upon returning to the states, ministerial obligations took Ostergren to Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New York state where, during World War II, he served on a committee affiliated with the United Service Organization (USO). Learning from the missteps in welfare work of the Great War, the USO combined the resources of social service agencies under one umbrella, offering recreational outlets and responding to personal issues while leaving matters of religion up to the Chaplain Corps—a marked improvement. Relocating to Arizona, Ostergren, accompanied by his family, continued his ministerial work until he retired to Washington state.<sup>46</sup>

As for Rev. Murrell, scant records indicate he and his wife moved to Illinois and afterward, Indiana. His connection to military service remained strong. While residing in Illinois, Murrell joined Company K, 8th Infantry of the state's National Guard, and served as a lieutenant.<sup>47</sup>

Returning to Europe in 1928, Ada Dahlgren marveled that the battle scars of war, once so prevalent upon the landscape, were nearly gone. A lifelong learner, she continued her education, graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1936 and later receiving her master's degree from New York City's Columbia College. Ultimately, she returned to Fergus Falls. According to one source, her neighbors recalled enjoying listening to music waft across their lawns on warm summer evenings. Dahlgren died in 1969 and was buried in the family plot in Oak Grove Cemetery. Her obituary highlighted her role as a YMCA entertainer during the Great War.<sup>48</sup>

Just as quickly as they emerged as the Salvation Army's celebrated couple of St. Paul's hostel, Charles and Anna Nelson disappeared from the limelight. They moved to Hennepin County, where they remained quietly active in the Salvation Army. Although the couple's personal legacy faded into obscurity, the social ministry of the Salvation Army still blooms. Based on biblical principles, the organization prioritizes the needs of the individual through emergency assistance, rehabilitation, compassion, and character formation.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, Fr. Hart returned to his parish in Morton—a celebrated hero. He later ministered to parishes in Lakeville, Le Sueur, Savage, and the Church of St. Stephen of Anoka. Inevitably, the infirmities of age caught up to the priest. He retired in 1948 and lived his remaining days at St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Paul. Hart died in January 1953. His remains were laid to rest in an unmarked grave at Mendota Heights' Resurrection Cemetery.<sup>50</sup> As decades passed, memories of the beloved priest faded in the hearts of nearly all—but one.

Returning to visit relatives in his former home state, World War II Navy Veteran Bernard Ederer stopped to pay respects to the late priest—a family friend. He discovered Hart's resting place was the only unmarked grave in the cemetery.<sup>51</sup> Ederer vowed to make things right.

Assisted by Lakeville's VFW Post 210, where Hart was once a member and where his picture remained above the post's entrance, Ederer also reached out to US Senator from Minnesota Rudy Boschwitz and Michael Labovitch of Dakota County's Veterans Services. Together, they petitioned the Minnesota Department of Veterans' Affairs for a grave marker. Dissatisfied by the government's lack of progress and uncertain if the request would even be honored, Ederer hired a stonecutter to create a marker for \$135. With donations from the Lakeville VFW and other interested parties, the stone was cut and the memorial laid on Flag Day 1985:

Rev. Father W. L. Hart  
The Fighting Parson  
K of C Chaplain WW I  
1865-1953

Catching wind of the story, journalist Oliver Towne (Gareth Hiebert) followed up with a newspaper column highlighting the team efforts and the importance of comradeship.<sup>52</sup>

The dedicated work of Ostergren, Hart, Murrell, Dahlgren, and the Nelsons performed through these various welfare organizations, though sometimes imperfect, reminded the common soldier lost amid the chaos of a global conflict that the individual still mattered.

To that point, the veterans who ultimately honored Fr. Hart's selfless service to the individual understood this. So should we.

**Acknowledgments:** Thanks to Dr. Carole Butcher and Dr. Al Koenig, University of St. Michael's College Archives, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Northern Star Scouting, Otter Tail County Historical Society, Renville County Historical Society and Museum, the University of Minnesota, Minnesota Military & Veterans Museum, and the Minnesota Historical Society.

*Johannes Allert is finishing his PhD in American studies at Swansea University, Wales. He holds a BS degree from Minnesota State University, Mankato, and an MA from Norwich University, Vermont. He writes for Minnesota History and Ramsey County History magazines.*



## NOTES

1. James Ostergren, letter to John Swanson, September 1, 1918, in Swen Bernard Collection, War Records Commission, collected materials 1909-1936, box 109.F.7.12F, Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter War Records Commission files, MNHS).
2. Ostergren, letter to Swanson, September 1, 1918.
3. Ibid.
4. Chaplain George J. Waring, *Chaplain's Duties And How Best To Accomplish His Work* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912), 2-10. Advising against religious dogma and proselytizing, Chaplain George Waring suggests appealing to a broader audience inherent within military culture. For chaplains new to the service, Waring lists duties to include: spiritual and individual counseling; visiting troops, hospitals, and guard houses; encouraging literacy and educational advancement; and providing entertainment and physical activity while steering men away from town, "where usually everything that tends to degrade them is supplied in abundance. By fostering entertainments, the chaplain will find that the men will rally round him, and that he will be able to influence them for good more easily."
5. Andrew Preston, "To Make The World Saved: American Religion and the Great War," in *Beyond 1917: The United States and the Global Legacies of the Great War*, edited by Thomas Zeiler, David Ekbladh, and Benjamin C. Montoya (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 142-143.
6. "American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics," Congressional Research Service, updated July 29, 2020, 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/RL32492>; William H. Zinsser with the Council of National Defense, memo on hygiene to Governor J. A. A. Burnquist, Minnesota Commission of Public Safety records, box 103.L.8.1B, MNHS; "Safe-guarding our Soldiers from Venereal Diseases," Council of National Defense: Committee for Civilian Cooperation in Combating Venereal Diseases, n.d., 1-3.
7. "James Blaine Ostergren," Svithiod photograph, *The Gopher Yearbook* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1917), 371, accessed January 17, 2023, [ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com); "James Blaine Ostergren," World War I Draft Registration Card 1917-1918, accessed January 17, 2023, [ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com); "J. B. Ostergren," *Jubilee Book 1873-1923* (St. Paul: Swedish Baptist Church, 1923), 53, 63.
8. James Ostergren, letter to Effie (Anderson) Ostergren, September 14, 1918, War Records Commission files, MNHS.
9. James Ostergren, letter to Effie Ostergren, November 1, 1918.
10. James Ostergren, letter to Effie Ostergren, October 4, 1918.
11. James Ostergren, letter to John Swanson, March 5, 1919.
12. "Biography of Fr. William Lawrence Hart, 1865-1953," Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, records; "William Lawrence Hart, US Passport Application, May 10, 1918, [ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com).
13. Oliver Towne, "Fighting parson's heroism carved in stone," *St. Paul Pioneer Dispatch*, August 28, 1985, 1; J. L. Alexander, letter to Rev. W. L. Hart, September 26, 1910, in Northern Star Scouting files, Fort Snelling, Minnesota.
14. Bernard F. Ederer, "My Most Unforgettable Character," transcript circa 1951 on file at the University of St. Michael's College Archives and Renville County Historical Society and Museum.
15. Evan Alexander Edwards, *From Doniphan to Verdun: The Official History of the 140th Infantry* (Lawrence, KS: The World Company, 1920), 46-47.
16. William Hart, "The Best Job in the World," *Extension*, republished by *Franklin Tribune*, April 11, 1918.
17. Robert H. Ferrell, *Collapse at Meuse-Argonne: The Failure of the Missouri-Kansas Division* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 1-24. Ferrell deftly lays out the underlying problems in chapter one. He surmised the failure of the 35th stemmed from problems related to the US Army's negative perception of the National Guard, outdated training, politics, lax discipline, and the last-minute replacement of National Guard officers with regulars on the eve of the offensive, which summarily dissolved unit cohesion.
18. Edwards, 87.
19. "Former St. Paul Priest Wins Bravery Citation," *Star Tribune*, December 14, 1918, 18; "Fr. Wm. L. Hart Retired Since 1948, Dies at Age of 88," *Catholic Bulletin*, no. 38 (January 9, 1953), in record of Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis; "General Orders, No. 100—from Headquarters 35th Division, American Expeditionary Forces," November 15, 1918, in Carl E. Haterius, *Reminiscences of the 137th U.S. Infantry* (Topeka, KS: Crane & Company, 1919), 241.
20. "Litter Bearers Called Bravest Men of All," *Star Tribune*, March 17, 1919, 11.
21. "Y.M.C.A. Follows Army Everywhere to Ease Soldier's Life," *Star Tribune*, May 20, 1917, 56.
22. George W. Perkins, "Report on Activities of the YMCA with the AEF," 8, YMCA and YWCA Records, box 103.K.8.10F, War Records Commission, MNHS.
23. "Edward Norman Gilkey," Gold Star Roll, box 114.D.4.3B, Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, MNHS. "Edward Norman Gilkey," *His Diary of His Life in the Warzone, France, 1917-1918*, 19. Edward Gilkey was killed in action on July 20, 1918. His father, a printer, made copies of his son's diary and included one with his Gold Star file. See [http://media.mnhs.org/people/goldstarroll/wwi\\_goldstarroll\\_11150422.pdf](http://media.mnhs.org/people/goldstarroll/wwi_goldstarroll_11150422.pdf).
24. Charles Green, letter to parents, August 19, 1918, Minnesota Military & Veterans Museum, Camp Ripley, Little Falls, Minnesota.
25. "Rev. B. N. Murrell 1914-1918," Pilgrim Baptist Church History, accessed January 1, 2023, <https://www.pilgrimbaptistchurch.org/history/>. While Rev. Benjamin Murrell served Pilgrim Baptist, "... the present church site was purchased. On this site was a tiny wooden structure in which both the St. Paul Urban League and N.A.A.C.P. were organized. It was

later moved to the alley when the construction on the present sanctuary began. . . . When the St. Paul Ministerial Alliance was formed at Pilgrim in 1916, Rev. Murrell became its first secretary. This organization is the forerunner of the now powerful Ministerial Alliance;” Vergil V. Phelps, editor, *University of Illinois Directory* (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois, 1916), 478; “St. Paul,” *The Appeal*, November 17, 1917, 4; “Rev. Benj. N. Murrell,” *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1915, 1916, 1917), 97, 1173, 91, 1196, 1174; “Everywoman Suffrage Club List,” accessed March 27, 2023, [https://rchs.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/RCHS\\_Summer-2020\\_Everywoman-Club-List.pdf](https://rchs.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/RCHS_Summer-2020_Everywoman-Club-List.pdf). Mrs. Murrell met congregant Nellie Francis and joined the Everywoman Suffrage Club. In 1917, Mrs. Murrell, Mrs. Francis, and two other women from St. Paul’s Rondo neighborhood served as delegates at the thirty-fifth convention of the Minnesota State Suffrage Association; “Benjamin Nathan Murrell, Jr.,” Minnesota US Death Index 1908-2017, certificate 022083, accessed February 23, 2022, ancestry.com; “Benjamin Nathan Murrell, Jr.,” *The Appeal*, March 17, 1917, 4.

26. “Murrell, Benjamin Nathan,” War Service Records for Non-Military Service E through Z, box 109.1.2.6F, MNHS.

27. “Murrell, Benjamin Nathan,” War Service Records, MNHS.

28. G. Kurt Piehler, *Remembering War the American Way* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 102-105; Contance Potter, “World War I Gold Star Mothers Pilgrimages, Part I,” *Prologue Magazine* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1999).

29. “Ada Dahlgren—Freshman Class,” *The Mac* (St. Paul: Macalester College, 1910), 44; “Dahlgren, Ada,” *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1913, 1914, 1915), 511, 2110, 432, 1906; “Dahlgren, Ada,” *Minneapolis City Directory* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Directory Company, 1916, 1917, 1919), 552, 561, 487. “Miss Dahlgren’s Career,” *Wheelock Weekly*, January 2, 2013, 1; “Ada Dahlgren Dies at 81,” *The Daily Journal*, February 9, 1969, 5.

30. Ada Dahlgren, letter to Dorothy (no last name), February 26, 1939, Dahlgren Family Collection, files 29 and 30, Otter Tail County Historical Society Archives; “War Work Agencies Face Task to Outlast Struggle,” *The Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, November 4, 1918, 9; James Ostergren, letter to John Swanson, March 5, 1919.

31. Ada Dahlgren, letter to Dorothy; Henry T. Allen, *My Rhineland Journal* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923), 64.

32. “Ada Dahlgren,” War Service Records for Non-Military A through D, box 109.I.2.5.B, Minnesota War Records Commission, MNHS.

33. Ada Dahlgren, letter to Dorothy; “Ada Dahlgren,” War Service Records, MNHS.

34. “Ada Dahlgren,” War Service Records, MNHS.

35. Charles Green, letter to parents, February 24, 1918.

36. Charles Green, letter to parents, October 17, 1918.

37. Edward H. McKinley, *Marching to Glory: The History of the Salvation Army in the United States, 1880-1992* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 160.

38. “Charles and Anna Nelson,” War Service Records; “Salvation Army Hostel Becomes Byword of Hospitality and Practical Service,” clipping from *Social News*, June 1920, 4, 5, 13, in War Service Records for Non-Military Service E through Z, box 109.1.2.6F, MNHS.

39. “Salvation Army Hostel.”

40. “Charles and Anna Nelson,” War Service Records.

41. “Salvation Army Hostel.”

42. “Charles and Anna Nelson,” War Service Records, MNHS.

43. W. W. Wise, memo to Inspector 7th Army Corps, American Expeditionary Forces, May 20, 1919, “Investigation of Y.M.C.A. Armed Services World War I,” 580-583, in Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota (hereafter YMCA Archives, U of M).

44. James B. Ostergren, letter to Percy T. Edrop, November 17, 1919, 6, YMCA Archives, U of M.

45. F. W. Street, letter to Percy T. Edrop, October 16, 1919, 1, YMCA Archives, U of M.

46. “USO Minutes,” September 24, 1945, accessed January 15, 2023, ancestry.com; “James B. Ostergren, Find a Grave Index, accessed January 15, 2023, ancestry.com; Michael E. Shay, *Sky Pilots: The Yankee Division Chaplains in World War I* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2014), 167-168. The creation of the USO was not the only outcome of the Great War. The massive influx of chaplains into the US Military during the war spawned the creation of the Chaplain Corps in 1920.

47. “Murrell, Benjamin N 1st Lt.,” US Select Military Register, accessed January 15, 2023, ancestry.com.

48. “Anti-American Feeling Dying Away In Europe,” *Fergus Falls Daily Journal*, September 14, 1928, 11; The author briefly met and interviewed the former owner of the Dahlgren home, which she purchased from the family in the mid-1970s. She recalled neighbors telling her of the free music concerts, stating that she’d heard all the Dahlgren offspring were musically inclined; “Ada Dahlgren Dies at 81,” *Fergus Falls Daily*, February 8, 1969, Dahlgren Family Collection, Otter Tail County Historical Society.

49. “Nelson, Charles,” Fifteenth Census of the United States, Minnesota, Hennepin, enumeration, 27-204, sheet 16B, ancestry.com; McKinley, 348-349.

50. “Biography of Fr. William Lawrence Hart,” “Rev. William Hart,” Minnesota Department of Health Certificate of Death, no. 79, in Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis records.

51. Ederer.

52. Towne.



## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

*President & CEO*

Chad P. Roberts

*Editor*

Meredith Cummings

*Editor Emeritus (2006-2018)*

John Lindley

*Founding Editor (1964-2006)*

Virginia Brainard Kunz

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### **Board of Directors**

Mari Oyanagi Eggum

*Chair*

Robert W. Mairs

*First Vice Chair*

Elizabeth J. Keyes

*Second Vice Chair*

Lorraine Griffin Johnson

*Secretary*

Marc J Manderscheid

*Treasurer*

Jo Anne Driscoll, Jo Emerson, Tim Glines, John Guthmann, John Hamburger, Judy Kishel, Debbie Lee, Joe Lutz, Peter Nguyen, Chad P. Roberts, Roxanne Sands, George T. Stephenson, Joe Twomey, July Vang, Glenn Wiessner, Helen Wilkie, Lee Pao Xiong

### **Directors Emeriti**

W. Andrew Boss, George A. Mairs, Richard T.

Murphy Sr., Paul A. Verret

### **Editorial Board**

Anne Field, *Chair*, Thomas H. Boyd, Anne Cowie, John Diers, Kate Dietrick, Renoir W. Gaither, John Guthmann, Lisa L. Heinrich, Kyle Imdieke, John Milton, Laurie M. Murphy, Paul D. Nelson, Richard H. Nicholson, Jay Pfaender, David Riehle, Chad P. Roberts, Linda Schloff, George T. Stephenson, Mark Taylor, Steve Trimble, Mary Lethert Wingerd, Matthew Wright

### **Honorary Advisory Board**

William Finney, George Latimer, Joseph S. Micallef, Marvin J. Pertzik, James Reagan

### **Ramsey County Commissioners**

Commissioner Trista MatasCastillo, *Chair*

Commissioner Nicole Joy Frethem

Commissioner Mary Jo McGuire

Commissioner Rena Moran

Commissioner Rafael E. Ortega

Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt

Commissioner Mai Chong Xiong

Ryan T. O'Connor, Manager, Ramsey County

*Ramsey County History* is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, Saint Paul, MN 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 2023, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors.

# RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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

The Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) strives to innovate, lead, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community, deliver inspiring history programming, and incorporate local history in education.

The Society was established in 1949 to preserve the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family acquired in 1849. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, the original programs told the story of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, RCHS also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, now telling the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of Ĥeyáta Othújwe (Cloud Man's Village).

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, the organization moved to St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 and rededicated in 2016 as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

RCHS offers public programming for youth and adults. Visit [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com) for details of upcoming History Revealed programs, summer camps, courthouse and depot tours, and more. The Society serves more than 15,000 students annually on field trips or through school outreach. Programs are made possible by donors, members, corporations, and foundations, all of whom we appreciate deeply. If you are not a member of RCHS, please join today and help bring history to life for more than 50,000 people every year.

### **Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, & Inclusion**

RCHS is committed to ensuring it preserves and presents our county's history. As we continue our work to incorporate more culturally diverse histories, we have made a commitment to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion that is based on this core idea: RCHS exists to serve ALL who call Ramsey County home. To learn more, please see [www.rchs.com/about](http://www.rchs.com/about).

### **Acknowledging This Sacred Dakota Land**

Mnisóta Makhóche, the land where the waters are so clear they reflect the clouds, extends beyond the modern borders of Minnesota and is the ancestral and contemporary homeland of the Dakhóta (Dakota) people. It is also home to the Anishinaabe and other Indigenous peoples, all who make up a vibrant community in Mnisóta Makhóche. RCHS acknowledges that its sites are located on and benefit from these sacred Dakota lands.

RCHS is committed to preserving our past, informing our present, and inspiring our future. Part of doing so is acknowledging the painful history and current challenges facing the Dakota people just as we celebrate the contributions of Dakota and other Indigenous peoples.

Find our full Land Acknowledgment Statement on our website, [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com). This includes actionable ways in which RCHS pledges to honor the Dakota and other Indigenous peoples of Mnisóta Makhóche.



[www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com)

[info@rchs.com](mailto:info@rchs.com)



(651) 222-0701

## *It's Summer at Gibbs Farm!*

Fridays—June 23–August 25, noon–3 pm  
Saturdays—May 27–October 28, 10 am–4 pm

### JOIN US FOR GIBBS FARM OPENING DAY 2023

May 27, 10 am–4 pm

- Meet furry and feathered farm animals;
- Learn about RCHS's book, *Grasshoppers in My Bed*, and meet the author and illustrator;
- Enjoy *Light of the Moon* band;
- Make a craft and taste homemade ice cream;
- Tour Gibbs Historic Farmhouse;
- Learn about the Dakota of Cloud Man's village.



#### Don't miss these upcoming events:

June 2, 10:00 am–noon	Friday Farm Chores
June 7, 5:30–7:30 pm	Farmhouse Tour
June 16, 10:00 am–noon	Friday Farm Chores
June 17, 11:00–11:45 am	Saturday Nature Tour
June 22, 5:30–7:30 pm	Early Summer Grounds & Gardens Tour
July 13, 7:00–9:00 pm	Minnesota Sinfonia Concert

#### Consider Membership!

Did you know an RCHS membership includes free admission to Gibbs Farm, discounts at the Gibbs Giftshop, a quarterly subscription to our member magazine *Ramsey County History*, and more! Visit <https://rchs.com/support-us/> to learn more and join.

Visit our website to learn about summer camps and other events for families and adults in 2023.

2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Saint Paul, Minnesota 55113  
[www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com) • [gibbs@rchs.com](mailto:gibbs@rchs.com) • 651-646-8629





ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

*Faith, Advocacy, & Service*

## **A Snapshot of Ramsey County's Welfare Workers in the Great War**

JOHANNES R. ALLERT, PAGE 22



Recognizing the growing crises for struggling and, sometimes, unhoused veterans following World War I, Adj. Charles Nelson and his wife, Adj. Anna Nelson, spearheaded the effort to open a local Salvation Army hostel at 317 Robert Street in 1919. They were among thousands of welfare workers who shared faith and hope with the nation's brave warriors through prayer, music, and service. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*