

# 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

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## Billy Williams

FRANK M. WHITE

**S**t. Paulite Billy Williams loved to play baseball, and he was good at it—so good that he *might* have had a chance at the “big” leagues—if not for the color of his skin. Instead, a different opportunity—right out of left field—would ultimately place Williams in an executive office at the Minnesota State Capitol. There, he served as the loyal aide to fourteen consecutive governors from 1905 to 1957. He was and is the longest-serving, fulltime employee at the capitol to this day.<sup>1</sup>

### Young Billy

William Frank Williams—or Billy—was born to George B. S. and Barbara Schmitt Williams on October 24, 1877. His father was African American; his mother white. Billy was the fifth of six children including Ida Louise (1867), Ella Marie (1869), Charles Ralph (1872), George Clermont (1875), and Annie Belle (1883). The family lived at 160 West Ninth Street near the newly constructed Church of the Assumption.<sup>2</sup>

Making a living was challenging. Mrs. Williams took in laundry. Mr. Williams was a janitor and, it is said, sporadically found work on a steamboat line that ran between St. Louis and St. Paul, further complicating family life when away.<sup>3</sup>

Biographer Maurice W. Britts summarized a story Billy once shared:

... one day [Billy] accompanied his father to the river front where he saw him board a steamboat. At the gangplank, the elder Williams patted his son on the head, took his small hand in his, and said goodbye. Wide-eyed Billy watched the big boat gather steam and sail down the Mississippi, its paddle-wheel shooting sprays of water on the figure of his father standing waving at him. . . . After a while [Billy] shrugged his small shoulders, ‘Oh, well, he’ll be back,’ and trotted off for home.<sup>4</sup>

Eventually, the children realized their father wasn’t returning. The financial and emotional impact of the patriarch’s decision was difficult for the struggling family, but it made Billy determined to help his mother—most of the time. For he loved to play ball—anytime, anywhere. This often left his mother hollering from her porch for Billy to get on home.<sup>5</sup>

The youngest Williams’ son attended Mechanic Arts High School, where he excelled in football, basketball, and track. His favorite sport was baseball. In fact, in 1897, he led his school in hitting. He also joined a city baseball team—the Spaldings—in the mid-1890s. He and others then played for Hamm’s Exports baseball club. Billy became one of the top amateur players in St. Paul.<sup>6</sup>

### Loss, Baseball, and a Big Decision

As a child, Billy lost both his sister, Annie Belle, and his disappeared father. In 1897, his twenty-two-year-old brother, George, died of tuberculosis. Under a year later, his mother fell ill. Before passing, she implored her son “to promise her that he would not leave his sister Ella alone but would always care for her as long as she was single.”<sup>7</sup>

Billy stayed by his sister’s side. Ella kept the house on Ninth Street in good shape until 1901, when the siblings moved to 264 W. Central at the corner of Jay Street to be closer to their sister, Ida; her husband, William Gardner; and what would become a family of eleven children. The Gardner’s lived at 369 Jay.<sup>8</sup>

During this time, Billy landed (and sometimes lost) part-time jobs, including one as a waiter at the Minnesota Club and a brief stint at the capitol in 1900 when John Lind was governor. After that, Williams worked as an attendant and coach at the St. Paul YMCA through 1904. Of course, there were the baseball gigs, but to Billy, baseball didn’t seem like a job, despite the





Despite the loss of family members, or, perhaps, because of it, Billy Williams graduated from Mechanic Arts High School in 1897 at the insistence of his sister, Ella. He was twenty. From the Gardner Family Collection.

fact that the sport helped provide much needed additional income—part of the year.<sup>9</sup>

Billy signed on with several regional teams: Chippewa Falls, Austin Western, Red Wing, the Prairie Leaguers, Litchfield, and others. In 1901 while playing with Litchfield, the ballplayer gave it his all at St. Paul's new Lexington Park in front of 9,270 fans in a rivalry game against the Waseca EACOS. Waseca prevailed. Still, the more Billy played, the more he was in demand. He was even hired by teams to play against the Minneapolis Millers and the St. Paul Saints.<sup>10</sup>

Teams, managers, fans, and sports writers took notice. In a 1904 article about the newly formed St. Paul Amateur Baseball Association, one journalist noted, "It is a fitting recognition of his ability for 'Billy' Williams, the only Afro-American in the association, to be chosen captain."<sup>11</sup>

Over time, the regionally acclaimed slugger received offers from Minnesota, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota, and Iowa to play ball. Some interest came from East Coast teams, with one invite a little later in life to coach amateur athletes at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan.<sup>12</sup>

Billy played across the Midwest, bringing in enough money to support himself and Ella. Then came an interesting offer—in fact, two offers. One was an invitation to play for what was at that time a minor league Baltimore team called the Orioles. The other came from John A. Johnson—the newly elected governor of the State of Minnesota. Johnson was an avid baseball fan. He'd seen Billy play for several teams and was impressed with his determination and professionalism. He'd introduced himself to the ballplayer a few years earlier, and they'd become friends.<sup>13</sup>

Billy fully understood, because of experiences on and off the ballfield, what it meant to be a Negro in a country where people worked diligently to maintain a segregated society. He also knew a job at the capitol was quite something for a Black man at the turn of the twentieth century. Billy trusted his gut, kept the promise to his sister, and accepted Johnson's

offer to serve as his messenger. Surely, it would work out fine. After all, the governor reminded his new hire that he could still play ball on weekends and vacations.<sup>14</sup>

## Into the Governor's Reception Room

### John A. Johnson

As the governor's inauguration approached, Billy doubted himself.

The thought of my becoming a part of the working force of the governor's executive family with so little experience along these lines especially state and office work and my fear of the lack of higher educational training . . . overwhelmed me somewhat.<sup>15</sup>

But, when Johnson, a Democrat, became the state's sixteenth executive leader on January 4, 1905, twenty-seven-year-old Billy fell in step beside his new boss. He set up the office, kept the governor on schedule, and remained in the background, listening to understand what was needed before Johnson even asked for it. According to one oft-told story, Billy heard his boss complaining about the unorganized filing units in the vault. The resourceful aide put the drafting skills he had learned in school to work and, in six short hours, presented drawings of an improved filing system. The governor was so impressed that he spoke about Billy's efforts at a meeting of the State Educational Society. The press jumped on the story. A hyped headline in *The Appeal* even read, "Williams An Architect. Governor's Messenger Designs Vault Fixtures. . ."<sup>16</sup>

Billy—always dignified and always busy—was the first person most visitors met when they entered the stately reception room. In his papers, he noted:

I had charge of all personal mail . . . charge of executing all notarial commissions . . . charge of filing executive documents . . . I had charge of making the appointments of committees and individuals who had executive business with the chief executive . . .<sup>17</sup>

When Billy wasn't working for the government, he was on the ballfield. The papers made note:



While working, Billy Williams tried never to show favoritism toward his bosses. He admitted, years later, that he was especially fond of Gov. John Johnson, who first offered him the job. Billy worked in a beautiful reception room with plush chairs, heavy curtains, and elegant chandeliers. The governor's private office is behind the door at the far back right. Billy sat at a small desk in front of the door. Both photos courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.

Governor Johnson's affable, efficient and popular messenger is taking his vacation. And just to keep his hand in, is playing first base with the Chaska ball team. He left Wednesday for Long Prairie to join the club. On Tuesday, August 6, the Chaska club will play the St. Paul Gophers for a purse of \$150.00. . . .<sup>18</sup>

While Billy tried to keep his athletics separate from work, sometimes, that proved difficult,

including in 1907, when boxer Jack Johnson came to town. The governor invited the "fellow Johnson" to the theatre as his guest and boasted about the athleticism of his aide. The next day, the soon-to-be heavyweight world champion met Billy, who was taller by a few inches at 6'3". The boxer conceded, "No doubt, Gov. Johnson, you are right, for the young man is big enough and he certainly looks the part."<sup>19</sup>

Billy's job was never dull, but less than four years into his service, the work nearly ended when the governor, who had long battled health issues, died on September 21, 1909, following surgery.<sup>20</sup> Lt. Gov. Adolph Eberhart, a Republican, stepped in for the remaining term.



Billy Williams in 1907 as part of the Chaska team, which lost to the St. Paul Colored Gophers that summer. The Gophers were proclaimed the National Black Champions two years later. Courtesy of Frank M. White and Minnesota Historical Society.

### Select Remembrances of Reappointments<sup>21</sup>

#### Adolph O. Eberhart

Billy would miss the man who first recognized his administrative potential, but he learned that Eberhart also appreciated Billy's character and work ethic. The new governor kept him on. Still, when Eberhart ran for and won his own term, some didn't think a former aide to a Democrat should be the right-hand man to the elected Republican. Letters of support for a past Republican aide (also African American) came from government officials, lawyers, and others. Eberhart retained Billy. Not only that, he gave him a raise.<sup>22</sup>

The present legislature has done many things that THE APPEAL is not pleased with, but there is one thing they did that

### There's More to the Story:

• To learn more about Billy Williams' baseball career and later honors, see our on-line supplements at [rchs.com/publishing/catalog/ramsey-county-history-spring-2023-billywilliams](https://rchs.com/publishing/catalog/ramsey-county-history-spring-2023-billywilliams).

To learn more about the governors Billy Williams served, see an additional supplement at the address above or visit our *March of the Governors* podcast at <https://rchs.com/publishing/march-of-the-governors-podcasts/>.

### Billy Williams Tribute Day at the St. Paul Saints

June 10, 6 pm  
pre-game program

More info at <https://www.milb.com/st-paul/schedule/2023-06>.

is quite pleasing, viz: the raising of the salary of the very efficient and gentlemanly messenger of Governor Eberhart, Mr. "Billy" Williams from \$920 to \$1,200 per year.<sup>23</sup>

Most of Billy's duties were routine, but when issues of race arose, the messenger took special notice, including in 1913, when the Minnesota Legislature considered a bill outlawing mixed-race marriages. The year prior, Jack Johnson was back in the news—accused of violating the Mann Act—crossing state lines with a white girlfriend, whom he later married. In response to this and other events, State Representative Frank E. Nimocks introduced a bill to ban marriage between the races. According to Britts, while Billy felt that anyone who committed a crime should be held responsible for that crime, he thought this bill unfair. He'd dealt with similar attitudes as a ballplayer and in the community, and now the legislature was considering banning interracial marriage. The bill was defeated.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, occasionally, there were out-of-the-ordinary challenges. For example, once, a man armed with a Bible appeared in the reception room demanding to see the governor. Frank Peterson wanted "to gain an appropriation of \$2,000,000 for a monument to 'long suffering humanity.'" Besides the odd request, Billy noticed an odd bulge in the man's hip pocket—a gun. Billy and other aides were able to remove Peterson from the building.<sup>25</sup>

### Winfield S. Hammond

When Winfield Hammond took office in 1915, Williams continued as the governor's gatekeeper—to the dismay of some. One paper complained:

The governor keeps to the sanctity of his chamber. No one is allowed to enter the sacred precincts without being certified by "Billy Williams," executive messenger. It's like going to see the king. The governor is retired. He fails to enthuse.<sup>26</sup>

Such criticism didn't bother Billy. It meant he was doing his job. Still, his time with Hammond didn't last, as the governor died of apoplexy at year's end while in Louisiana.<sup>27</sup>

### Joseph A. A. Burnquist

No one could have predicted all Joseph Burnquist would face as governor from 1915 to 1921. It was the beginning of the Great Migration, as African Americans left the South, seeking livelihoods, peace, and prosperity in the North. *That* was wishful thinking—for *all* Americans, for it wasn't long before the US joined World War I. In response, Burnquist created what would become a controversial Commission of Public Safety and an affiliated Home Guard to maintain patriotism and control. But war, politics, social unrest (strikes), and public opinion are difficult to control. Add to that an influenza pandemic that decimated thousands of Minnesotans and fires in Cloquet, Duluth, and Moose Lake that scorched 1,500 square miles and killed 450 people. Then, on June 16, 1920, Billy delivered a message to his boss that left them both stunned: a white mob had lynched three Black men in Duluth the night prior.<sup>28</sup>

A circus—the Jack Robinson Show—performed in the northern city on June 14. Early the following morning, a group of Negroes employed by the circus was thrown in jail, accused of rape. That night, a massive mob forced the men from their confines, conducted a mock trial, and declared three—Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie—guilty. The men were lynched to riotous approval. Burnquist, who, incidentally, was president of the St. Paul Chapter of the NAACP (white membership and leadership were common then), ordered the National Guard to the city.<sup>29</sup>

Before the trials of the other accused men began in late November, Billy wrote to an African American friend—Attorney Charles Scrutchin—expressing his concerns and those of St. Paul's Black community. The NAACP hired three attorneys to represent the defendants—F. L. Barnett of Chicago, R. C. McCullough of Duluth, and Scrutchin from Bemidji. Barnett served as the lead attorney for Max Mason. Mason was tried, convicted, and sentenced to up to thirty years in prison. William Miller's trial came next. This time, Scrutchin led the defense and ripped apart the accusations, revisiting the doctor's confirmation that there was no evidence of rape. Miller's case was dismissed, as were the remaining cases, thanks to the legal team and vocal protests of Black Americans and others throughout the state



and nation. In less than a year, members of the St. Paul and Minneapolis chapters of the NAACP had helped Duluth secure its own chapter, and the state adopted an anti-lynching bill that was signed into law on April 21, 1921. Years later, Billy remembered that this was “the greatest leap forward in the Negro’s coming of age in Minnesota.”<sup>30</sup>

### Jacob A. O. Preus

As Billy approached nearly twenty years as messenger to the governors, newspapers continued to make note of his reappointments, although by this time, they were expected.<sup>31</sup>

Now in his late forties, Billy’s days of playing ball were over, but he enjoyed his half-mile walks to and from work, especially when he could watch the neighborhood boys enjoying the sport. Billy shared pointers about hitting and throwing. Of course, he attended local games when he could, but baseball wasn’t his only love. Now, when he vacationed, he’d head north to the lakes and woods to fish and hunt. When home, gardening with his family helped him forget stressful days at work.<sup>32</sup>

And there was stress. Despite the adoption of the anti-lynching bill, the Klan remained ever present. During Preus’s term, the Ku Klux Klan was finally addressed. Many states were adopting anti-Klan legislation. Minnesota was no different. In 1923, a bill made it a misdemeanor to wear masks and regalia in public view. Still, this did little to stop member recruitment and the addition of new chapter charters (including in St. Paul) through most of the remaining decade.<sup>33</sup>

During this time, reports in Black-owned papers and even in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* suggested Billy and the other longtime messenger, George Hoage, were asked their opinions by the governors on issues concerning race. They likely were. Likewise, members of the community, including newspaper editors, made it clear they expected the messengers to share their concerns with the governors. Both men had to walk a fine line.<sup>34</sup>

### Theodore Christianson

Over his years in office, Republican Gov. Theodore Christianson restructured state government, reduced expenditures, and controlled taxes. This was important given that Minnesota



found itself in the midst of a Great Depression, which led to the Wall Street Crash in October 1929.

Pressure from community and work must have been a tremendous burden to Billy. In fact, on April 21, nearly six months after the crash, he had had it. Billy returned from the capitol and told Ella he wanted to be left alone—no company, no phone calls, no messages. She followed his instructions, unwittingly turning away a dear friend—Helmer Engstrom from Minneapolis—who paid a visit to the house. Upon learning that Engstrom had been dismissed, Billy penned an apology:

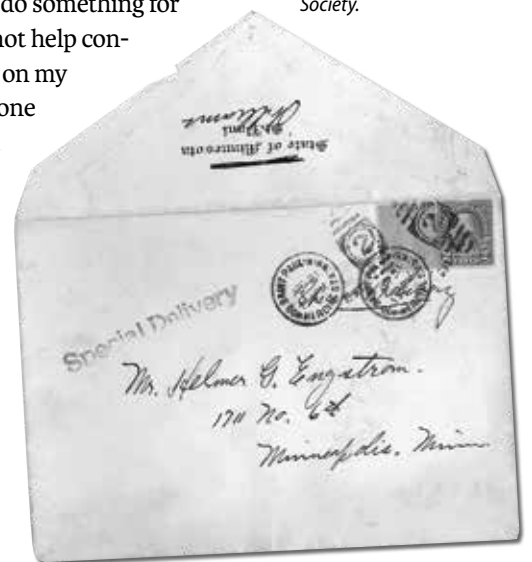
I am heartbroken to-day my “Pal” and here is the reason.

After 12 oclock yesterday I had one caller after another and each one of them with one exception was up against it, and without work and wanted me to do something for them and Helmer I cannot help confess to you that they got on my nerve and after the last one left I said to my sister . . .

I am not going to be home even if my boss calls . . . I certainly did not mean this for you my Pal . . . Please Helmer do not feel badly or unkindly toward me—only feel sorry for me—for a situation I am not in the least to blame for.<sup>35</sup>

After the move to Central Avenue, Billy Williams and his sister, Ella, shared a large garden with their sister Ida’s family—the Gardner’s. Here, (L-R) Ida Lucia Gardner (Ida’s daughter), Ida Gardner, Ella Williams, and Billy Williams harvested vegetables for a family gathering. *From the Gardner Family Collection.*

Under pressure at his job and in his community in the throes of the Great Depression, Billy Williams sent a special delivery apology to friend Helmer Engstrom, who had paid a visit and had been sent away. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*





One of Billy Williams' tasks was to schedule interviews between family members and the Minnesota Board of Pardon. Board members in 1932 included (L-R): Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Samuel B. Wilson, Gov. Floyd B. Olson, and Attorney General Henry Benson, along with an unidentified secretary. Billy stands behind the group. The board met multiple times a year to hear from family members whose loved ones were incarcerated. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

### Floyd B. Olson, Hjalmar Petersen, and Elmer A. Benson

In the early 1920s, a newly formed political party in Minnesota—Farmer-Labor—gained interest and traction, especially from farmers, laborers, and union members. Theirs was a rocky start. Occasionally, members were elected to local, state, and even national office. And then, in 1936, Minnesota celebrated the first of three Farmer-Labor governors, starting with Floyd B. Olson, who had his hands full as the Great Depression barreled on. It was an era of desperation, local kidnappings by gangsters, and hope—with the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Olson, for his part, improved employment benefits, helped settle a number of strikes, and established public relief programs. He was fairly popular—liked by the state's citizens (for the most part)—and his right-hand man Billy Williams. He died in office in 1936 after battling cancer.<sup>36</sup>

Lt. Gov. Hjalmar Petersen completed Olson's term, but the Farmer-Labor Party did not endorse him for his own term. Instead, another Farmer-Labor politician, Elmer Benson, took control at the capitol.<sup>37</sup>

Benson and Billy got along—two gentlemen who loved baseball and bonded over sports. Benson had played for a time in his hometown of Appleton, Minnesota. Both were thrilled when, in 1937, boxer Joe Louis visited the capitol and the legislature, but an editorial in *The Minneapolis Journal* accused lawmakers of “wasting half an hour of good time on a sports figure.”<sup>38</sup> The *St. Paul Recorder* hit back:

... The Minneapolis Journal's editorial criticism of the legislature recessing for the

Louis visit . . . comes with poor grace. We . . . believe that the Journal would not have criticized the legislature had the color of the boxer honored been of different hue.<sup>39</sup>

Billy, like most African Americans, kept a watchful eye on race relations in the US, including when it was revealed that President Roosevelt had been unaware that his US Supreme Court nominee—Hugo L. Black—had been a member of the KKK years earlier.<sup>40</sup> Back in Minnesota, according to a diary entry, Billy felt the new governor was paying closer attention.

Some 20 colored pastors called on the governor today re: more employment for colored people in state work. Governor Benson encouraged them by saying that he would gladly look into this matter and see what could be done.<sup>41</sup>

### Harold E. Stassen

In 1939, Harold E. Stassen became the state's youngest governor at thirty-one. He cleaned house, retaining just two members of the previous administration—Billy Williams and George Hoage.<sup>42</sup>

Stassen was a hard-working, energetic, down-to-business leader, but he would meet visitors in the reception room when he could. Stassen signed the Minnesota Labor Relations Act; created a mediation structure to reduce strikes; and promoted tourism. After the US Congress declared war on Japan in 1941, President Roosevelt desegregated war production plants and began to focus on fair employment practices. In Minnesota, Cecil E. Newman, the outspoken editor of the *Minneapolis Spokesman* and *St. Paul Recorder*, who often had plenty to say about the state's governors, was named director of Negro personnel at the Twin Cities Ordnance Plant. He and Ethel Maxwell Williams helped integrate nearly 1,000 Black workers at the facility. As war continued and Minnesotans stepped up to do their part, Stassen felt called to do his. He resigned as governor on April 27, 1943, and soon joined the US Navy.<sup>43</sup>

As if all that came with politics and war was not enough, Billy lost his two dear sisters. Ida passed in 1937, and Ella, with whom he'd lived all his life, died five years later. Billy said that,



at times, it was a toss-up as to who was taking care of whom. Ella's absence left a void in his life. Soon, Billy accepted an invitation from his niece, Ida Hanna, to share her house at 520 Western Avenue.<sup>44</sup>

### Edward J. Thye

Upon resignation, Governor Stassen passed the reins to Lt. Gov. Edward J. Thye, who retained all staff. Billy continued to assist the State Parole Board when it met. During one meeting, Billy informed the governor of a soldier waiting in the reception room. He had no appointment but had shared his grievance with Billy, who felt it pertinent to inform the board. The soldier met the board and left with “a pardon extra-ordinary for a juvenile crime conviction.” The pardon made all the difference, and according to a letter Gov. Thye wrote to Britts, the soldier later earned a “distinguished military record with decorations.”<sup>45</sup>

Early on, the governor met with Black and Jewish Minnesotans and others to better understand employment, housing, civil rights, and education concerns. History demonstrated that racial tensions escalated following World War I, and even before the end of the second war, issues and incidents continued to simmer, or, in some places, explode—including in Detroit in summer 1943. By December, Thye established an Interracial Commission tasked with strengthening the work of agencies across the state, supporting soldiers and their families returning from war, focusing on economic and business discrimination, and fighting against racial injustice by opening lines of communication between newspapers, organizations, and everyday citizens.<sup>46</sup>

In 1945, the committee presented the governor with *The Negro Worker in Minnesota*, a sixty-two page report that documented the history of African Americans in the state, the current population, and the urgent need to continue to address housing, civil rights, and employment. It identified roadblocks among employers, citizens, press, and government entities, and suggested solutions.<sup>47</sup>

### The Later Years

#### Luther Youngdahl

As Thye predicted, war ended in 1945. Minnesota's twenty-sixth governor moved on to the

US Senate in 1947. Luther Youngdahl took his place. Shortly thereafter, George Hoage retired at seventy-one. He, with Billy, had served twelve governors.<sup>48</sup>

As 1947 continued, Jackie Robinson made sports history, becoming the first African American in the twentieth century to play Major League Baseball—nearly forty-five years after Billy had once dreamed of doing the same. Of course, Robinson's journey—along with the journey of all African Americans would not be easy. The national fight for civil rights and justice marched on.

The Interracial Commission, which began under Gov. Thye, continued its work under Gov. Youngdahl and presented two additional reports—*The Negro and His Home in Minnesota* (1947) and *The Negro Worker's Progress in Minnesota* (1949).

In 1948, Youngdahl appealed to President Harry S. Truman, seeking permission to integrate the Minnesota National Guard. Youngdahl's was a long political fight with both state and federal government entities, and he often grew frustrated. Billy encouraged the governor to keep fighting. Finally, in November 1949, Youngdahl announced that the Minnesota National Guard would no longer be segregated.<sup>49</sup>

Other successes during his term included increasing funding for public education and sanctioning a mental health act. In 1950, Minnesota voters returned Youngdahl to office for a third term. He continued to fight for fair employment practices and against racial bigotry. Youngdahl's term ended early, however, with his resignation after President Truman appointed him to the United States District Court for the District of Columbia.<sup>50</sup>



Gov. Luther Youngdahl finalized his executive order opening the Minnesota National Guard to all. He was joined by (L-R): Major Samuel L. Ransom, who served on the governor's Interracial Commission; Brig. Gen. J. E. Nelson; Billy Williams; and Clifford Rucker. *In the St. Paul Recorder, November 25, 1949, 1.*

### C. Elmer Anderson and Orville Freeman

Between 1951 and 1957, Billy served two more governors, beginning with C. Elmer Anderson, who worked to reform mental health, law enforcement, and the penal system. In 1953, Dwight Eisenhower became president. That same year, US Senator from Wisconsin Joseph McCarthy exacerbated the nation by amping up more “Red Scare” subversion and espionage charges. On a happier note, in 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Also, Billy marked fifty years as executive aide. Of course, Minnesotans knew of Billy’s devoted work, but the milestone brought national recognition, including a mention in *Ebony* magazine. That fall, prior to elections, Billy learned from Secretary of State Virginia Paul Holm that the upcoming *Minnesota Legislative Manual* would be co-dedicated to Billy.<sup>51</sup>

In January 1955, Orville Freeman took charge. The twenty-ninth governor—the state’s first Democratic-Farmer-Labor leader—signed the Minnesota Fair Employment Practices Law, something that Gov. Youngdahl had pushed for but couldn’t make happen. Billy was pleased. He was even more pleased when the legislature passed a bill that gave him a \$300 monthly pension for life.<sup>52</sup>

Still, some believed Billy deserved more. In fact, the *St. Paul Recorder* noted as much as early as 1945 when people applauded the efforts of Billy and his colleague, George Hoage:

We smile and agree with the merited praise. . . . Their outstanding records as confidential and receptionist messengers and later as executive clerks have won them state-wide reputations for efficiency, tact, and good sense. Had the two men been white, we believe they would long ago have been elevated to important posts in the state government.<sup>53</sup>

Years later, in reflecting specifically on Billy, Gov. Benson agreed:

. . . if it were not for the prejudice and ignorance of too many of us toward colored people, Mr. Williams would have been able to make a much greater contribution

to the state and the nation than he did.

He was a very remarkable and fine human being.<sup>54</sup>

### Paying Tribute

When Billy finally resigned in 1957, Gov. Freeman was not surprised. After all, Billy had worked well into his retirement years—on the job for over a half century. He’d backed fourteen executives, knowing what they needed and when. He’d handled routine office work, watched for would-be instigators, and, proudly served the citizens of Minnesota with small kindnesses—like when he sent a certified bottle of Minnesota soil to a soldier overseas to remember a home so far away. Over the years, Billy invited delighted students to twirl in his desk chair, brought capitol tours to life with animated stories, introduced dignitaries, including Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and actress and North Minneapolis native Hilda Simms during the Anderson administration, and, in his quiet way, likely helped advance civil rights in Minnesota when he was asked occasionally for his perspective on difficult matters. Certainly, much had improved, although he knew there was a long way to go.<sup>55</sup>

On Billy’s last day of work, Gov. Freeman and his young son, Mike, presented Billy with a fishing pole and a personal and official introduction letter “To Whom It May Concern” that the new retiree could use on an upcoming fishing trip to Canada. In addition, the governor promised Billy that if the Milwaukee Braves won the pennant, “you and I are going to see the World Series.” That they did. When the Braves played the Yankees at Milwaukee County Stadium on October 6, the governor and Billy were in the stands for Game 4. Also that year, Billy was honored with speaking engagements, a portrait ceremony, and recognition in the *US Congressional Record*.<sup>56</sup>

Several years later on October 23, 1963, Gov. Karl Rolvaag, with *Minneapolis Star* journalists in tow, visited Billy at his home on the occasion of the local legend’s eighty-sixth birthday (the following day). While a photographer snapped photos of Billy surrounded by walls lined with black-framed memories—images of Billy with governors, US presidents, movie and sports stars, and world leaders—Billy held tight to his





In late 1957, Billy Williams' family members, friends, and colleagues gathered for the unveiling of a portrait of Billy by Theodore Sohner, who also painted the official portraits of Gov. Thye and Gov. Youngdahl. Family in attendance included (L-R): William Hannah, Rosella Gardner Limon, William Gardner Jr., Ida Lucia Hannah, Keyah Dorothy Davis, Marie Louise Gardner Rhodes, Billy Williams, Manly Rhodes, Mildred Jones, Ralph Gardner, William Gardner III, Manly Rhodes Sr., Agnes Bailey, Evelyn Gardner Hill, and Marionne Williams. *From the Gardner Family Collection.*



Six Minnesota governors (L-R)—Edward J. Thye, Elmer L. Andersen (who served after Billy Williams retired), C. Elmer Anderson, Elmer A. Benson, Sitting Gov. Karl Rolvaag, and Luther W. Youngdahl—celebrated the life of their colleague on a chilly November day at Willwerscheid and Peters Mortuary. Former Gov. Hjalmar Petersen also attended, although he is not pictured here. *Photo by Dwight Miller, Minneapolis Star Tribune, November 17, 1963, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

signature cigar and happily shared stories with those who were there to celebrate with him. Three weeks later on November 13, Billy died in his sleep.<sup>57</sup>

The tributes were many then and, remarkably, continue seventy years after Billy's death. This one by former Minnesota Attorney General Miles Lords in 2005 sums up the aide's work well, "He was the most important person at the state Capitol . . . the personification of state government. Gracious, welcom[ing], courteous, and ebullient."<sup>58</sup>

William F. "Billy" Williams was a true star—on the ballfield and at the Minnesota State Capitol, and it seems he'll never be forgotten.

**Acknowledgments:** Thanks to Billy Williams' family members who helped with this story: Rosella Limon, Evelyn Hill, and Dr. Joe Gothard. Thanks, also, to Mary Britts.

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## NOTES

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Index, ancestry.com; "George Clermont Williams" and "Barbara Schmitt Williams," Rosella Gardner Family Tree, ancestry.com.

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7. "Williams, George," *St. Paul City Directory* (1886, 1888), 997; Britts, 17. Billy Williams cared for his sister. Their brother, Charles, was pursuing a boxing career, while sister, Ida, had married. Neither Billy nor Ella Williams married; "Charles R. Williams," *The Appeal*, December 20, 1919, 2. Charles, like George, would also die of TB—in 1919.

8. "Williams, Wm. F.," *St. Paul City Directory* (1902), 1669; Jim Brown with City of Saint Paul Public Works Department, email correspondence with author, March 17, 2020. Jay Street was renamed Galtier between St. Anthony and University in 1940; Rosella Limon, interview with author, Summer 2019.

9. Todd Peterson, *Early Black Baseball in Minnesota* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 10; Britts, 18–20. "Williams, Wm. F.," *St. Paul City Directory* (1900), 1580; "William Williams," *US Federal Census*, 1900, enumeration 87, ancestry.com. Some news articles and books state that Billy Williams worked as a messenger for Governor John Lind. The city directory lists Williams as "janitor State Capitol." The 1900 US Census also lists occupation as janitor. "Williams An Architect," *The Appeal*, December 30, 1905, 3. First known newspaper to describe Billy Williams as "private janitor and messenger to John Lind."

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11. "The St. Paul Amateur Baseball Association Formed," *The Appeal*, March 19, 1904, 3.

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13. "1903 Baltimore Orioles Roster," StatsCrew, <https://www.statscrew.com/minorbaseball/roster/t-bo10300/y-1903>; Bob LeMoine, "Orioles return to Baltimore after 52 years," Society for American Baseball Research, <https://sabr.org/gamesproj/game/april-15-1954-orioles-return-to-baltimore-after-52-years/>; Mike Klingaman, "In the rough-and-tumble baseball of the 1890s, Baltimore rose to the top with skill and guile," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 7, 1996. A professional Baltimore Orioles team did exist in the late nineteenth

century and competed on and off in various leagues between 1882 and 1899. The team, under Ned Hanlon, was especially successful between 1894 through 1897. Between 1899 and 1901, amid league changes, the team moved to New York, eventually becoming the Yankees. A minor league team, also named the Baltimore Orioles, formed in 1903, as part of the Eastern League (and, in 1911, the International League). A professional Baltimore Orioles team returned to the state in 1954. Some news articles and books about Billy Williams suggest Hanlon of the professional Baltimore Orioles sent a contract to Williams in 1903 encouraging the Black ballplayer to pass himself off as an American Indian. As of this printing, RCHS is unable to corroborate this story. It is more likely Williams received an offer (contingent on hiding his race) from the minor league Orioles, and the story has morphed into an urban legend over the last 120 years; Britts, 1–10.

14. "Billy Williams, St. Paul," *The Sauk Center Herald*, January 5, 1904, 2; "Billy Williams," *Star Tribune*, December 31, 1905, 29.

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16. LeClair G. Lambert, "The assistant governor: African American aide served 14 chief executives from 1904 to 1957," *Session Weekly* 17, no. 4 (February 25, 2000): 19–20; "Williams An Architect. Governor's Messenger Designs Vault Fixtures for Governor's Vault," *The Appeal*, December 30, 1905, 3.

17. Billy Williams, personal papers, in Britts, x–xi.

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“Negros Oppose Class Legislation,” *The Twin City Star*, February 8, 1913, 4; Britts, 58.

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## St. Paul's Downtown People Mover

MATT GOFF

The 1979 session of the Minnesota State Legislature was one for the history books. Minnesota's House was split perfectly between Independent Republicans (IR) and the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Party. Gridlock set in, a speaker could not be elected, committee chairs could not be appointed, laws could not be passed. Eventually, both parties agreed to a deal in which Republicans chose the speaker while Democrats controlled key committees. Still, House members operated under intense divisiveness.<sup>1</sup>

That May, the *Pioneer Press* covered the chaotic final days and hours of that legislative session:

Independent Republicans in the House had proposed trading the people mover

project, which [was] in the bill, for a change in election laws allowing [Robert] Pavlak [a representative ousted the week prior] to run for his old seat. Democrats objected to the trade, and the deadlock was not resolved before the midnight adjournment time.<sup>2</sup>

A one-day special session followed that would bring the contentious matters to a close.

Twin Cities' citizens were well aware of the drama in the legislature *and* surrounding the downtown people mover (DPM)—a planned shuttle transit system meant to alleviate traffic congestion and help transform St. Paul's city center. In fact, from 1976 to 1980, the local news ran hundreds of stories on the subject. It seemed almost everyone had an opinion.



An early rendering of a proposed view of the people mover from Wabasha to St. Peter Street in *A Proposal for a Downtown People Mover System* compiled by the Metropolitan Transit Commission (MTC). The concept would have integrated shops beneath the transit line to create an open mall and entertainment district. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Nearly half a century later, the intense legislative session has faded from memory. So, too, has talk of St. Paul's once propitious transportation project. Today, its history exists mostly in institutional archives.

### **Moving Toward Progress: The UMTA**

The story of the St. Paul downtown people mover began gathering speed in 1975 when the Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA) under the US Department of Transportation announced "a project to demonstrate the benefits of fully automated people mover systems in urban downtown areas."<sup>3</sup> US cities were encouraged to submit a proposal to be chosen as a select demonstration city. The DPM idea would:

[s]how whether simple automated systems can provide a reliable and economical solution to the local circulation problems in congested downtown areas. 'Such systems have proven effective in controlled environments such as airports. . . . We want to test their feasibility and public acceptance in the harsher and more demanding environment of a real city.'<sup>4</sup>

Thirty-five cities submitted proposals; nineteen were selected for further consideration.<sup>5</sup>

Although these DPM initiatives launched in 1975 were rolled out in the Nixon and Carter Administrations—and built in the Reagan administration—the history dates back to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. In a 1962 message to Congress, Kennedy acknowledged a small sum of money received for mass transit, but he wanted more:

I have previously emphasized to the Congress the need for action on the transportation problems resulting from burgeoning urban growth and the changing urban scene. . . .The ways that people and goods can be moved . . . will have a major influence on their structure, on the efficiency of their economy, and on the availability for social and cultural opportunities they can offer their citizens.

. . . [T]he problems of urban transportation have been studied . . . I recommend that long-range Federal financial aid and

technical assistance be provided to help plan and develop the comprehensive and balanced urban transportation that is so vitally needed. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Kennedy pushed again for more ambitious mass transit action from the 88th US Congress, but his work was left unfinished upon his assassination in 1963.

President Johnson took up his predecessor's initiative, and, in July 1964, signed into law the Urban Mass Transportation Act, creating the Urban Mass Transportation Administration mentioned above. Its purpose: focus on housing and urban renewal affected by traffic congestion and inefficient transportation systems, create jobs, encourage closer cooperation between all levels of governments, and reduce overall energy consumption.<sup>7</sup>

First, the UMTA identified companies that could develop new transit technology using federal grants. Its next mandate was to implement this technology in cities. Early research culminated in the Morgantown Personal Rapid Transit (PRT) system, designed by Boeing Aerospace Co. This PRT was one of the earliest automated, driverless, and electric urban transit systems, eventually serving as a model for similar transports worldwide. It began operating in 1975 (with substantial fits, starts, and controversy early on), connecting to locations around the University of West Virginia campus and into central Morgantown.<sup>8</sup>

Despite seeing the Morgantown PRT project in action, other cities were reluctant to embrace a transportation system that could cost between \$50 and \$100 million. So, UMTA announced it would select a few cities to receive federal money to implement a "downtown fixed-guideway transit system." Minnesota State Senator John Chenoweth brought this news home from Washington, DC, announcing that the Twin Cities were early leading candidates.<sup>9</sup>

### **Coming to a Station Near You**

Through spring 1976, both Minneapolis and St. Paul prepared bids. Either city would need the support of the Metropolitan Transit Commission (MTC). As the governing transit body in the Twin Cities, federal money passed through the MTC.<sup>10</sup>

## Town Square

In the last half of the twentieth century, US cities struggled with lost population and aging infrastructure. St. Paul was no different. The way civic and business leaders responded was in keeping with other cities: using mostly federal money, local governments (typically a Housing and Redevelopment Authority) purchased land, cleared buildings from it, then worked with the private sector to redevelop it. Case in point: in an attempt to modernize and revamp St. Paul's city center in the 1960s, twelve blocks were purchased and almost all of the structures demolished.<sup>a</sup>

In a history of Twin Cities' urban renewal, Judith Martin and Antony Goddard observed: "An especially trying problem was the 'hole in the doughnut,' a four-block-area bounded by Wabasha, Minnesota, 5th and 7th streets." The redevelopment of two of these blocks would play a crucial role in the people mover story.<sup>b</sup>

In February 1975, Canadian-based Oxford Development unveiled a plan—eventually named Town Square—seemingly ambitious enough to fill part of the donut hole in the downtown landscape. Town Square became a mixed-use development straddling the blocks between Cedar, Minnesota, Sixth, and Seventh Streets, capped by two office towers and a hotel. Retail shops filled the lower floors, with a parking lot beneath the complex. Its most distinctive feature was a third-floor atrium that served as an interior park filled with live plants and a waterfall and stream all under a glass roof.<sup>c</sup>

Oxford's proposal made St. Paul a stronger candidate for a people mover. In turn, the transit system helped push Town Square from concept to reality. David Thompson with Oxford Development remarked, "If we had a commitment for a people mover system, we could secure the [Town Square] tenancies required within eight weeks."<sup>d</sup> A US Federal Transportation Administration release made it clear that the development was a win for the city:

St. Paul . . . presents the best opportunity to evaluate the role of a DPM in stimulating new downtown investments. The city is rebuilding its central core and is committed to a major transit/pedestrian mall and to "skyways" that will connect existing and proposed new buildings.<sup>e</sup>

The two Town Square towers included in the complex plans were redesigned to accommodate the people mover so the system could pass between them in a diagonal direction.



St. Paul Mayor George Latimer, standing in Town Square around 1980, worked to bring this complex to fruition. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*



Original Town Square plans were revised to incorporate the downtown people mover, as it was intended to be the transit hub where two lines would connect. A model illustrates what might have been had the transport system been built. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*

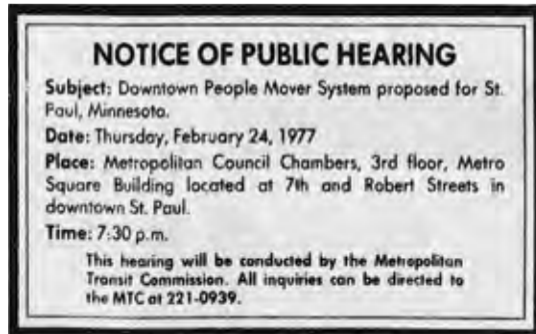


The question was: Which city would the MTC choose as home for a downtown people mover? The question answered itself when Minneapolis withdrew from the race, citing lack of an approved financial plan, concerns with the DPM's economic viability, less room downtown for redevelopment, and other issues. The MTC thus supported St. Paul's bid, forwarding it to the UMTA.<sup>11</sup>

With St. Paul a leading candidate and with a vague idea of what a people mover might look like, Bill Farmer at the *St. Paul Dispatch* suggested that simply choosing sixty people to receive a million dollars to move downtown would be a better use of the expected \$60 million from the government:

St. Paul is an easy town around which to move. We need a people mover the way

The Metropolitan Transit Commission held many public hearings about the DPM. There, citizens learned about alternatives and new ideas and voiced opinions for and against the project. *In Minneapolis Star Tribune, February 22, 1977, 4.*



Meeting attendees learned about proposed guidelines and responded to mock ups illustrating possible affected views of downtown landmarks—including Union Depot, the McColl Building (Merchants National Bank or Brooks Building), the Hamm Building, and Landmark Center—if the people mover system were to pass near them. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Kansas needs a ski tow. What downtown St. Paul needs is people. The richer the better.<sup>12</sup>

On December 22, the UMTA announced that St. Paul, Cleveland, Houston, and Los Angeles would receive federal funding as demonstration cities for a downtown transit system. Detroit also received funding but from a previous grant. The *Pioneer Press* predicted, “People-mover may trigger Loop boom.”<sup>13</sup> Journalist Aron Kahn described the technology succinctly, “If you were forced to categorize the People-mover, it would be better to call it a development tool than a transportation one.”<sup>14</sup>

And development was important to new St. Paul Mayor George Latimer, who, along with many city leaders, believed the DPM would “complement existing development and be a catalyst for new development.” Council Member Leonard Levine hoped it would “bring everybody together. . . . We need something like this to get people to live downtown.”<sup>15</sup>

Why such concern for development? In the 1970s, US cities—St. Paul included—were struggling. Among other issues, the country was still reeling from the fallout over the 1973 oil embargo; manufacturing jobs had moved overseas, and companies locally were closing, meaning cities were losing their tax base; unemployment was high; bond debt was high; and more and more people were vacating cities for the suburbs. The people mover, along with several bigger development projects, could help turn things around.

### Questions & More Questions

Just weeks after the win, an MTC steering committee that included Mayor Latimer, Metropolitan Transit Commission Chair Doug Kelm, City Council Member Robert Sylvester, Metropolitan Council Chair Tom Boland, and a representative of MNDOT, held the first of many public hearings. Attendees learned that an early plan (which would change later) would include 2.6 miles of fixed guideway on two intersecting routes. The first 1.9 miles would connect the major city centers in St. Paul, another .7 miles would serve the capitol complex. Ten stations would host an expected 13 million riders per year. The UMTA was to cover 80 percent of the projected costs—at the time, \$56 million (up from \$45 originally stated), and the city and

MTC would split the remaining 20 percent or \$11.2 million.<sup>16</sup>

From the initial meeting came questions. First, should there be alternatives to the proposed route? One configuration looked like a loop on a stick with a line running to the capitol. Another was shaped like a shamrock with three loops jutting out from the center. A route that included the capitol building was almost always assumed, and, from early on, Cathedral Hill was to be included. City Council Member Patrick Roedler called for the DPM to extend east to Payne Avenue, and Victor Tedesco, who represented the West Side, insisted the transit system cross the river into that neighborhood.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout 1977 and well into the following year, the steering committee (now with additional members), the Capitol Architectural Planning Board, engineers, citizens, and journalists asked questions, created plans, nixed ideas, and slogged along. If only the city could look at similar transit systems for comparison, but of the fifteen existing, nine operated at amusement parks, four at airports, one at a shopping center, and one at a university. It was impossible to compare apples to oranges. Many were leery. After all, Minneapolis had dropped its quest to participate. Some skeptics could see why. One news headline begged the question of the DPM, “Can it Revitalize Downtown?” followed by a second question, “Boon or Boondoggle?” There was much to consider: effects on environment, safety, ridership (projected numbers dropped substantially), potential development, and, of course, cost, cost, cost.<sup>18</sup>

Farmer, the journalist who made his disdain of the DPM known early on, continued his written assault. In the summer of '78, the estimated project cost had skyrocketed, and exactly what the MTC would contribute was yet to be determined by the Minnesota Legislature. Farmer balked, “Anyone have change for \$130 million?”<sup>19</sup> Worries about who would pick up these additional costs—St. Paulites, Ramsey County residents, or even folks in counties throughout the state—hit a community nerve.

The final MTC plan presented that August dropped the price to a projected \$90 million. One line connected the capitol building through Town Square to Lowertown, and another line spurred off from Town Square to the Civic Center (now Xcel Energy). Other options were scrapped.<sup>20</sup>

## Next Stop: The Minnesota Legislature

When the steering committee finalized the route, details began to fall into place. The Minnesota Transit Commission submitted a new report—*Preliminary Engineering and Related Studies for Saint Paul Downtown People Mover* in February 1979. This would be helpful for Metropolitan Council approval (which it gave) and useful when state lawmakers prepared to authorize funds for a portion of DPM construction costs.<sup>21</sup>

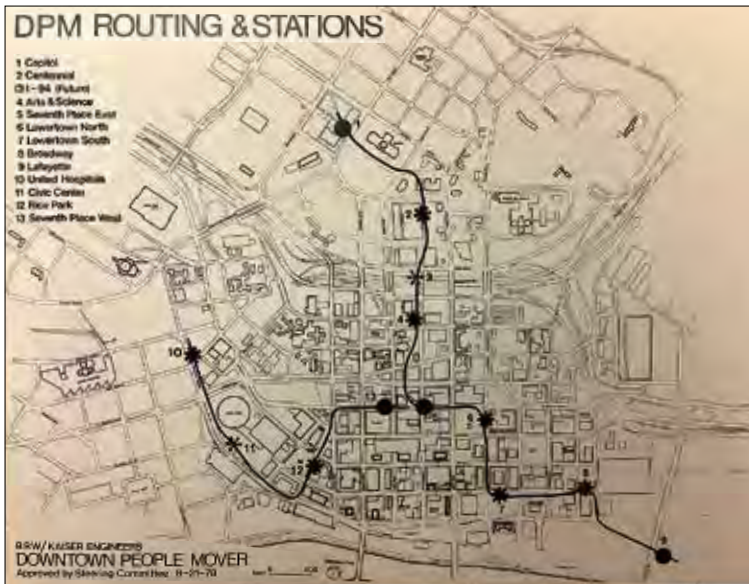
In the months before the legislative vote, a Citizens League Transportation Task Force prepared a detailed memorandum favoring the DPM as a transportation and development tool working in conjunction with skyways, parking facilities, buses, and public land development programs and managed and financed cooperatively by the city, the MTC, and downtown businesses. But in April, the local Farm Credit Banks of St. Paul Board of Directors voted to oppose bills that would appropriate funds for the DPM. This was followed by letters from Bank for Cooperatives, Federal Land Bank, and Federal Intermediate Credit Bank to legislators in early May with concerns the project would “open businesses and citizens of Minnesota to liability of cost overruns and operating deficits.”<sup>22</sup>

Still, on May 18, as part of a larger transportation bill, the Senate approved \$9 million in bonds that the MTC (state) would contribute to the DPM project (in addition to \$9 million from the city).<sup>23</sup> But when it came time for the House to vote on a separate bill in the final hours and minutes of its long and divisive legislative session on May 21, chaos erupted:

House Independent-Republicans were holding the St. Paul ‘people mover’ transit system hostage, hoping to force DFLers to allow ousted West St. Paul rep Robert Pavlak to run in a special election. . . . all of the Democrats filed out of the exits leaving the Republicans with themselves and not enough votes to approve anything.<sup>24</sup>

Disappointed and frustrated supporters held out hope that legislators would ultimately include the people mover in its transportation bill, passing the legislation during a special one-day session set by Governor Al Quie for May 24. It wasn't to be. That day, in a whopping 103 to 26 vote, the Minnesota House kept the

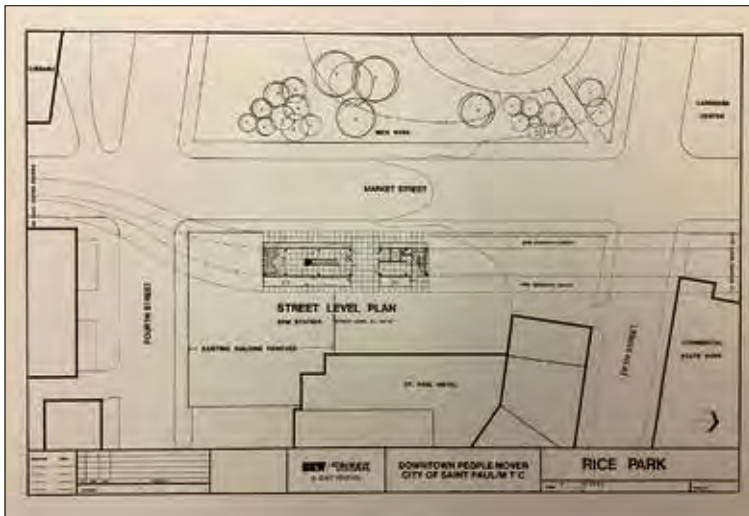




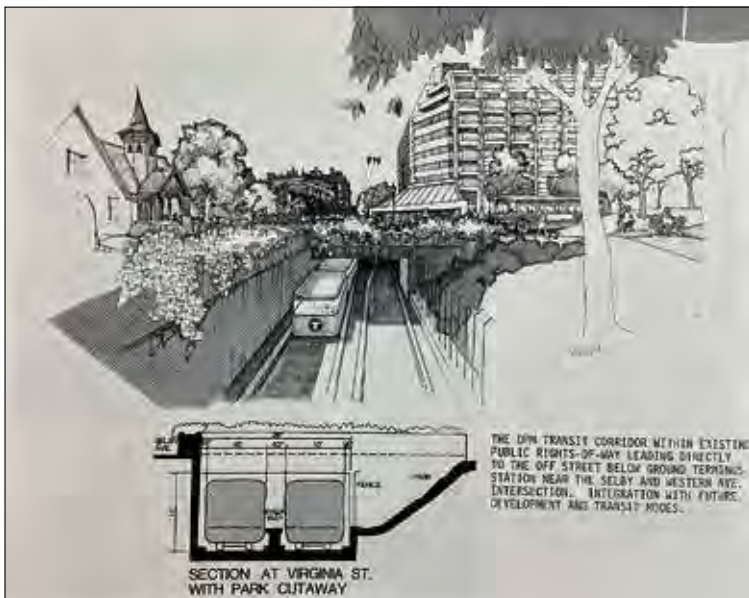
authorization for the people mover out of its transportation bill. The *St. Paul Dispatch* quoted Mayor Latimer, “I learned a long time ago that the people mover had no public support. The House vote reflected the feelings of St. Paul residents very accurately.”<sup>25</sup>

### One Last Ticket to Ride?

Still—in the remaining months of 1979, the St. Paul City Council approved a request for a three-month study by DPM supporters, including an organization of downtown businesses called Operation '85, to look into other finance options (including private funds) to resuscitate the defeated project. In October, the Metro Transit Commission authorized previously approved unused planning funds as the group moved ahead to bring the fight back to the legislature. Operation '85 hired four lobbyists, and a rebranding effort changed the transport system's name to “shuttle transit,” although it appears most everyone continued to call it the people mover.<sup>26</sup>



The 1980 legislative session was the last hope for St. Paul's DPM. Robert Van Hoef, a banker and spokesperson for Operation '85 fretted, “It's go for broke this year or there isn't even a ball-game.” The legislation bounced from committee to committee. Ultimately, DPM supporters managed to get the legislative sanction necessary to keep the federal money for the program, but St. Paul and downtown businesses would now have to come up with twenty percent of the construction cost (which was creeping back up over \$100 million) and all operational expenses.<sup>27</sup>



Now it was time for the city council to weigh in. Most members favored moving ahead with the project on May 22, but council minutes note the opinion of Council Member Ruby Hunt, “. . . she is going to vote no because she does not feel the DPM has the support of the community.”<sup>28</sup> Plans moved forward.

At a council meeting September 2, the downtown people mover was addressed yet again. A resolution to order an advisory referendum on the DPM was unanimously approved. Such

The final route presented by the MTC and plans for the DPM Rice Park station between Fourth and Fifth Streets. One location that didn't make the cut was a proposed route on Selby Avenue past the Virginia Street Swedenborgian Church, pictured on the left. *Images courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*



a referendum allows citizens to weigh in on an issue to inform lawmakers, in this case the city council, of their will on a particular matter. Supporters welcomed the prospect of putting the issue directly before voters. Council Member Tedesco “. . . suggested that a good selling job be done on this issue and then let the people vote.”<sup>29</sup>

The actions of the city council became moot soon after this meeting, however, when a group of mostly college-educated women called Stop the People Mover Committee obtained 5,340 signatures to get *their* referendum on the election ballot. The council dropped its efforts and, after signatures had been verified, directed the city clerk to add the new ordinance to the November 4 ballot.<sup>30</sup>

Supporters and opposition groups urgently made their cases in the media and at public forums, discussions, and info sessions. Those in favor of continuing to fund the project spoke of the benefits of new development downtown, less traffic congestion, and job creation. Those against pointed to ever-escalating costs and the fact that St. Paul was a walkable city and didn't need this white elephant, as some called it.<sup>31</sup>

### **The DPM Has Left the Station**

November 4, 1980, was a turning point in the history of the United States. Ronald Reagan trounced incumbent President Jimmy Carter, winning nearly ten times as many electoral college votes, although Minnesota's electoral votes supported Carter. The US Senate became majority Republican for the first time since 1955. However, Democrats held the majority in the US House. The DFL Party won the majority in Minnesota's Senate and House, which would continue to be led by IR Governor Al Quie, who assumed office in 1978.<sup>32</sup>

In local elections, St. Paul's downtown people mover finally met its match—despite a last-ditch mail and telephone campaign by DPM advocates. In the end, over 66,300 people voted *for* a St. Paul city ordinance “prohibiting the city from spending any money to acquire, build, or operate a People Mover System.” About 26,000 voted against it.<sup>33</sup>

Minnesota State Senator David Schaaf, who, among others, had fought tirelessly for the success of the public transit system, summed up the final outcome: “A couple of years from now

when cars still clog the streets of St. Paul, maybe some of those who voted against the People Mover will get the message. . . . Certainly there is no hope anytime soon.”<sup>34</sup>

Schaaf's “no hope anytime soon” prediction was spot on. Iterations of local transit systems continued to be studied for two more decades. Finally, in 2001, the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority initiated a transportation impact study. Nearly fifteen years later, an eleven-mile light rail transit line—METRO Green Line—that connects Minneapolis to St. Paul opened to passengers in 2014.<sup>35</sup>

Of the three other people mover cities selected in 1976 by UMTA, Cleveland dropped the project in 1977 after Mayor Dennis Kucinich objected to rising costs and other factors. In 1979, Houston pulled out. Finally, in 1981, the Reagan Administration put the kibosh on the LA people mover. A few other cities (not part of the original four-city demonstration program) did build versions of people mover systems—Miami Metro-mover (1986), Detroit People Mover (1987), and the Jacksonville Skyway (1989)—which continue to operate today with varying success.<sup>36</sup>

And what about Town Square? The author remembers visiting the indoor mall with his father on weekends in the 1980s—with its bustling shops, restaurants, dining areas, and the magnificent atrium. Eventually, though, many retail businesses shuttered, and the facility morphed into more of an office complex. The city sold the indoor park in 2002. A buyer turned it into a wedding venue, but it has been closed for years. Today, there are few reminders of what was and what could have been, other than the two Town Square Towers in the complex built diagonally to accommodate the DPM. In 2023, Town Square houses a smattering of retail businesses and fast-food restaurants and several government offices, including the Minnesota Department of Public Safety's Division of Homeland Security & Emergency Management. The facility remains a node for pedestrians traveling across downtown via the city's Skyway System.

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## 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.

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## NOTES

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2. Ostergren, letter to Swanson, September 1, 1918.
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10. James Ostergren, letter to Effie Ostergren, October 4, 1918.
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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.
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21. "Y.M.C.A. Follows Army Everywhere to Ease Soldier's Life," *Star Tribune*, May 20, 1917, 56.
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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.
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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.

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

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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.

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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.”

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41. “Salvation Army Hostel.”

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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 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.



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- Tour Gibbs Historic Farmhouse;
- Learn about the Dakota of Cloud Man's village.



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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.

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## **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.*