RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Growing Up at Fort Snelling

Honoring the First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteer Infantry for Fifty Years

JOHN H. GUTHMANN, PAGE 11

Hmong Foodways in Ramsey County

KRISTINA HER, PAGE 1

Summer 2023 Volume 58 • Number 2

By the Numbers . . .

For nearly fifty years, a large population of Hmong from Southeast Asia have called Ramsey County home. As the community grew, they brought seeds, planted gardens, opened grocery stores, joined co-ops to learn American farming practices, sold produce at farmers' markets, and opened innovative restaurants. Today, an integral part of the Hmong foodways community is the twelve-year-old Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA). This group of farmers owns 155 acres in nearby Dakota County and supplies fresh produce to Twin Cities' markets, schools, hospitals, and individual families. To learn more, see Kristina Her's cover story "Hmong Foodways in Ramsey County" on page 1.

Number of acres owned by HAFA:
155

Number of fruit, vegetable, herb, and flower varieties grown by HAFA farmers and sold to customers in the Twin Cities:
160

Percentage of Hmong American farmers among all farmers contributing to Twin Cities' markets:
50%

Number of years a typical farmer member at HAFA has been growing produce or flowers:
20

Typical plot size each farmer at HAFA works:
5-10 acres

SOURCES: Hmong American Farmers Association website, accessed July 2023, https://www.hmongfarmers.com/.

ON THE COVER

This exquisite Hmong village story cloth in the Minnesota Historical Society collections depicts the Hmong relationship with food and farms in Laos. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Contents

Message from the Editorial Board

What defines us as a place or a people? The Civil War stamped the new state of Minnesota as the proud home of the First Regiment of the Minnesota Volunteer Infantry and shaped its future. Over 100 years later, Hmong refugees fleeing from war in Southeast Asia began arriving here, forever changing and enhancing the culture of Ramsey County. The struggles and triumphs of these disparate events are reflected in two of our articles this summer. Kristina Her writes lovingly of the important role that food has always played for the Hmong and how, after a rocky start, Hmong foodways thrive today in St. Paul and beyond. John Guthmann tells tales of his beloved *second* First Minnesota, a group of devoted reenactors faithful to the authentic experience of our original volunteer infantry. These and other articles in this issue offer insights into the many stories that define us.

Anne Field
Chair, Editorial Board

Corrections: In "*A Slow Track to Nowhere:* St. Paul's Downtown People Mover" (Spring 2023), Metropolitan Council Chairperson John Boland was misidentified. Also, Saint Paul City Council Member Vic Tedesco did not represent the West Side. At that time, council members were elected at-large and represented the entire city. RCHS regrets the errors.

The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks former Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the design of this magazine. Publication of Ramsey County History *is also supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr., and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon. Sincere thanks to The First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteer Infantry for their financial support.*

Hmong Foodways in Ramsey County

KRISTINA HER

The Hmong people lived a peaceful, seminomadic life first in the plains and then in the more protective southern mountains of China. The majority were farmers. But after two centuries of oppression and conflict with the Chinese government, most Hmong had fled by 1854, making their way to Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. There, they continued to farm. Then, in the 1960s and '70s, many Hmong men and boys in Laos became soldiers, replacing garden hoes for weapons.[1]

In January 1961, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) formed a Special Guerilla Unit (SGU) made up of Hmong, Lao, Mien, and other minority groups. Throughout the Vietnam War, a section of the SGU assisted the CIA in northeastern Laos under General Vang Pao. These locals knew the trails and hideouts that could help the Americans gain traction in the war. The soldiers also rescued US military from the dense jungles. This clandestine operation, in which 40,000 Hmong fought, became known as the "Secret War." In return for assistance, the US government promised military training, food, medicine, weapons, money to build schools, and, later, assurance they'd take care of the Hmong. However, in spring of 1975 when American military personnel left Laos, the Hmong who worked with them were left behind to defend themselves against communist regimes.[2]

In a brief, formal evacuation from May 12 through May 14, 1975, the US sent just three airplanes to carry 1,600 people (mostly Hmong military leaders and their kin) from Long Tieng Airbase in Laos through Nam Phong, a former military camp the US had used for training. There was not enough room for everyone. Families were separated. Those left behind escaped to the forests and embarked on the dangerous journey across the Mekong River to Thailand over decades.[3]

According to Lee Pao Xiong, director of the Center for Hmong Studies and instructor of Asian studies at Concordia University in St. Paul,

> [o]ver 50,000 people died trying to escape to Thailand for safety. The Hmong had lost more people than they did in the war. Many drowned in the river, many were killed by communists, and many children were unintentionally poisoned with opium used in hopes of keeping them quiet while escaping. Children were also abandoned . . . because there wasn't enough food and because their cries would give away the escapees' position to the enemy. Children were [sometimes] too much of a burden for the parents [who] couldn't risk getting caught. . . .[4]

Many of the Hmong who managed to board planes early on were able to resettle in Minnesota and other states willing to accept Southeast Asian refugees. What happened to the others? In late 1975, the UN-sponsored Ban Vinai Refugee Camp opened. It would become "home" to 48,000 Hmong and other refugees, until people could secure passage to distant countries. Because the Hmong belong to a collective culture and wanted to stay close to their leaders and families, many more Hmong followed the first sponsored refugees to the US. They brought little with them, but they did carry hope—and some—carried seeds.[5]

This article focuses on a few of the many "seed carriers" and other Hmong food "influencers" who came to Ramsey County. The problem was—at least for the very first arrivals—seeds don't grow in the middle of a Minnesota winter.

Dang Her and Shoua Moua: Comfort Food

Dang Her and Shoua Moua were the first sponsored Hmong people to come to Minnesota—through the United Methodist Church of Anoka—on November 5, 1975. When the shy, scared couple arrived with their young son Touvi, Moua remembers, "It was [nearly winter] because the sun wasn't visible to the eye." She

was seven months pregnant. With such gloomy weather and the drastic change of lifestyle, Moua couldn't bear being so far away from everything she knew. "We could not go out. I always looked outside and cried constantly. I missed all my Hmong family members, comrades, and my Hmong community so much." Her and Moua had lost everything they were familiar with, and now they had to start anew. Thanks to US Agency for International Development (USAID) connections, they lived with sponsors—Scott and Mary DeLong—for two months.[6]

During Moua's pregnancy, their hosts shared American meals, including "comfort food," such as mashed potatoes and gravy. Moua hated the taste. It wasn't what she was used to, and it wasn't the proper nourishment to help grow her baby. She knew she needed meat, vegetables, and herbs. "At breakfast, they gave us two pieces of bread each and a little bit of oatmeal. . . . There were fruits on the table, but we were not sure if we were welcome to eat any, so we did not take any."[7]

> We were so hungry. When my husband went to ESL class, he would go to the vending machine and get a Twinkie that came in a two-pack and bring it home. . . . We would share those Twinkies and drink a lot of water to make us full. It was all that we could afford.[8]

Baby Bill arrived in February—the first Hmong child born in Minnesota. "In our culture, we have our postpartum meal, the chicken diet, but our sponsors didn't know how to provide that for me when I had my baby." In the Hmong tradition, once a baby was born, the mother's first meal was "egg cooked in water." This was followed by a month of rest and a healing diet of *tshuaj Hmoob hau nqaij qaib* (boiled chicken soup with Hmong herbs).[9]

Soon after Moua gave birth, the family moved to their own place. The DeLongs were kind, and they and other people continued sending cooked food day and night. But, "we were not accustomed to their food yet . . . [and kept] thinking about our pot of white rice. After a certain time, our sponsors brought us to [American] grocery stores. . . . We bought the one-pound rice bag and used our small pot to cook the rice. [We were relieved] that we [would] not go hungry again."[10]

Before long, Her and Moua met a Lao man and his Chinese wife who had lived in Minnesota longer and knew their way around. "They started to take us to Asian stores. That was when we discovered that we can buy food to make *fawm* (a chicken or beef broth soup or pho with rice noodles) [and] *qhob poob* . . . (red curry chicken soup with noodle)," Moua said. With access to Hmong comfort food, Her and Moua began to settle in. They even purchased a

The First "Hmong Grocery" in Ramsey County Was Thai

Nine-year-old Lee Pao Xiong arrived in Minnesota in 1979 with his parents Song Khoua Xiong and Mee Vang, a few years after Dang Her and his family. In the early days, when the Xiongs did not read or understand English, they searched American groceries for familiar foods. In Laos, US planes would airdrop canned meat for the hungry. The Xiongs remembered this meat and found "familiar cans" in US stores. They were excited to eat something they "knew of" in this strange land. To their surprise, however, the "meat" turned out to be cat food. Today, after all these years, they laugh about the memory, but they still look closely at cans to make sure they know what they're getting.[a]

So, what *could* they eat that was actually familiar? Eventually, Xiong and his family learned of a Thai woman living in Little Canada, Minnesota. Xiong doesn't remember her name, but he and his family were grateful for her help, as were other Hmong families. Aware that American grocery stores sold few, if any, Asian food products, the woman occasionally drove to Chicago to purchase wholesale groceries to bring to St. Paul. She sold dry goods, including ramen and pho noodles, bamboo shoots, Thai candy, and canned goods, out of her small garage—comfort food. While there is no known documentation available, Xiong believes this makeshift market was the first or one of the first to serve Asian immigrants. The creative entrepreneur collected phone numbers and called her customers to let them know what she had in stock after each trip. It was "first come, first served," so people drove north as quickly as they could to shop.[b]

Dang Her and Shoua Moua made news as the first sponsored family to arrive in Minnesota after spending six months in Nam Phong military camp in Thailand. Her told a *Minneapolis Star* reporter he'd grown up farming with relatives, raising chickens, rice, and corn, although he did not continue farming in the US. The couple and their two sons eventually moved to an apartment at Liberty Plaza on Marshall Avenue and Arundel Street, where a growing number of Hmong lived. In just four years, nearly 2,000 Hmong followed in the footsteps of Her, Moua, and others to the state—most settling in and around St. Paul. *Courtesy of Shoua Moua.*

used car so that they could go grocery shopping by themselves. After many months of work and saving, they were able to sponsor most of Her's extended family, who joined them in St. Paul.[11]

Eventually, Her collaborated with other immigrants to open one of the earliest Hmong markets near Rice and Pennsylvania Streets in July 1981. They named it MA Oriental Grocery Store (Mong Association Oriental Grocery Store). There was not a lot of wholesale in St. Paul, and there was just one other Hmong store, so Her and his team drove to Chicago to purchase herbs, rice, and meat to help other struggling families find comfort in the familiarity of Hmong food.[12]

MA Oriental Grocery operated for several years. Today, Moua is grateful for the many Hmong markets and restaurants Hmong people have to choose from. There is a sense of being home where it is safe, familiar, and comfortable.

Early Farm to Table Efforts

In the early 1980s, federal grants helped universities and church organizations create cooperative farm training programs. The plan was to teach interested Hmong "modern agricultural production methods."[13]

Early on, two Minnesota projects emerged. The first—Hiawatha Valley Farm Cooperative (HVFC)—formed in 1981 under the auspices of the Christian-based Church World Services (CWS) Sponsorship and Refugee Program (SARP). A year later, the University of Minnesota's Agricultural Extension Service formed a similar project—Minnesota Agricultural Enterprise for New Americans (MAENA). The goal for both programs? "By learning American agriculture, [the participating Hmong will] become individual entrepreneurs and not be long term dependents on welfare." Her, who, by 1983, was also director of the social services organization Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc., believed that such programs could be beneficial for members of the Hmong community.[14]

Grant money paid for seeds, training, land, equipment, paychecks, and other costs. Using some of that money, CWS purchased 1,300 acres near Homer in Winona County. Participants moved from the Twin Cities to the southeastern Minnesota farm with the expectation that they'd be trained, would own five acres, and make roughly $10,000 three years in. The MAENA program, located in Farmington in Dakota County was closer, with an easier thirty-mile commute. Hmong farmers were projected to earn $12,000 a year.[15]

When Hmong families first settled in Ramsey County, they had to navigate intimidatingly large, unfamiliar American grocery aisles, hoping to find produce and other food that would accommodate Hmong diets. Here, a young woman examines fruit to purchase for her family around 1981 at the Country Store, 351 N. Lexington Parkway. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Many Hmong farmed in Laos. Upon coming to the US, this group committed to learning English and American farming practices through a Minnesota Agricultural Enterprise for New Americans (MAENA) program overseen by University of Minnesota Extension.

The first year in the program, most planting was done by hand. The second year, the new American farmers began working with more mechanical equipment and tractors.

This MAENA field coordinator (*right*) worked directly with the farmers and field hands as a teacher and mentor.

Farm workers in the MAENA program prepared fresh produce for market.
All images courtesy of the Xang Vang Collection at the Center for Hmong Studies.

The first year of the HVFC program (despite objections from a vocal but small group of local citizens) was relatively successful thanks to the work of nine Hmong farm hands and five support staff guided by American mentors. They planted and grew cucumbers, corn, string beans, and other vegetables and began working a small hog operation. An expanded hog operation was meant to increase the financial success of the farm the following year, but because a large portion of promised funding never materialized, this did not happen. The program shuttered.[16]

The university's MAENA project met with a little more success, with their focus solely on produce.

> During the project's first year, a temporary processing and packaging facility was constructed one mile from the field site providing on-the-job training in sorting, washing, grading and packaging produce. Two marketing stalls were established at the Minneapolis Farmers' Market and four major wholesale outlets were contracted. . . . A co-op board was organized composed of five people, four of whom were Hmong.[17]

The second year, more mechanical and trucking equipment helped the group with their mission. But, funding gaps, the national farm crisis, and growing government aversion to

subsidies for immigrants brought this program down, as well.[18]

Eventually, however, some farmers and farm workers involved with HVFC pooled their resources, education, and determination to purchase seventy-three acres in Hugo, not far from St. Paul. They grew cucumbers and other produce and set up a cultural center and public gardens—with little help from overseers. They still used the HVFC name but created a "different approach to running a farm cooperative, one not solely focused on profit and self-sufficiency but on community needs and serving Hmong refugees in Minnesota and around the country, whether or not they were official members of the co-op."[19]

Encouraged, four Hmong families bought their own small plots of land near the cooperative, including Lee Pao Xiong's mother's family—the Vangs. They farmed 100 acres, growing green beans, cucumbers, bell peppers, corn, and mustard greens. They were able to sell their products to people at the Minneapolis and Saint Paul Farmers' Markets and attempted to sell them to grocery stores nearby.[20]

Tong Vang: Uplifting Community

Tong Vang, an SGU soldier in Long Tieng, escaped Laos and eventually followed a cousin to Minnesota, thanks to sponsorship through the now closed Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church in June 1976. A few years after Vang arrived, he got involved with the HVFC mentioned above, serving as a Church World Service case worker for the refugee program.[21]

Around the same time and shortly before MA Oriental Grocery Store opened, Vang and thirty-five other Hmong families partnered to open LH Oriental Grocery Store (Lao and Hmong Oriental Grocery Store) at 173 Western Avenue. Vang served as the CEO and president. Each family secured between $200 and $1,000 as a one-time payment to help rent the 2,000-square-foot facility and purchase produce such as *zaub ntsuab* (mustard greens) and *tshuaj tsawg nqaij* (Hmong herbs).[22]

When Vang first came to Minnesota, the only Asian store in St. Paul that sold rice was Kim's Oriental Market on Snelling Avenue. But, as more and more Hmong relocated to the state, Kim's elevated rice prices. The staple food became unaffordable for most. This prompted Vang to open the store. There were challenges along the way because he and his Hmong partners knew little about business. Few had taken business courses, many did not go to school, and there was a lot to learn between retail stores and wholesale.[23]

Vang and his team visited Chicago in a van to look for wholesale foods. They would purchase rice, dried noodles and fish, and soy sauce. LH served the community for about ten years. They offered candy, meat, canned food, pop, and cigarettes and sold vegetables including onion, cilantro, and mustard greens from local Hmong farmers in Minnesota. Later, they were able to source additional produce from Fresno, California.[24]

Eventually, Vang and his partners had to close the store. He stated that that place was only rented and not owned. He and his investors purchased Laska Drug Store nearby and moved LH there. He maintained it for a while, increased staffing, and had more produce to sell. However, after a few years, he closed that store, too, and paid back the thirty-five investing families with the remaining money that the store made.[25]

Vang did a lot to help the Hmong community with the farm co-op, through the co-op grocery

Thanks to early grocers like Tong Vang, Dang Her, and others, the community could celebrate special Hmong gatherings such as this wedding in the early 1980s with traditional foods they remembered from home. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

business, and as the founder and current national president of the nonprofit SGU Veterans and Families of USA, Inc. He is proud of how far the Hmong as a people have come and "how much we've grown since the war," he said. "Though many were lost, we [have] gained more knowledge through the stories and the foods the Hmong people [have brought and] bring to us, here in St. Paul, Minnesota."[26]

To Market, To Market

Once the first wave of Hmong settled here, many planted the seeds they'd carried with them in personal gardens to help feed their extended families—just as their ancestors did in the centuries prior when fleeing to safer refuge. According to Lee Pao Xiong, in the early 1980s, some gardeners moved to larger community gardens in Frogtown or other locations. Even Ramsey County Historical Society welcomed community gardeners—new Hmong Americans among them—to plant and cultivate produce on what is currently pasture and prairie at the historic Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights. One such grower was Xiong. Before long, the Hmong began selling their harvest at the Saint Paul Farmers' Market downtown and at other open-air locations. Today, community gardens remain common, and for Hmong American veterans—some living with PTSD—spending time turning the soil and tending to vegetables is calming and gratifying.[27]

Of course, farmers who wanted to make enough money to feed their families were looking for more land. They'd rent from the county, state, or private landowners—including in South Mendota Heights at a former cattle farm. Rarely, however, did these farmers, who'd learned and adapted to American farming practices over time, own the land.[28]

And then there are the grocery stores and indoor markets. A lot has changed in more than forty-five years when just a few shops provided tropical fruits, herbs, vegetables, and meat to the growing Hmong community. A number of

Two youth help at the family produce stall at the Saint Paul Farmers' Market in the 1980s. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Today, vendor Sue Lee runs Quality Produce at Hmong Village. She sources tropical fruits such as sweet Thai mangoes, rambutan, lychee, and longan from California and Florida. *Courtesy of Kristina Her.*

Hmong-owned groceries have come and gone, but, today, options are plentiful, with over sixteen Hmong or Hmong/Thai businesses serving Ramsey County—not including restaurants or clothing shops.

A few, such as HmongTown Marketplace and Hmong Village, are large warehouses filled with scores of individual vendor stalls. Some markets look more like traditional mom-and-pop groceries, including Noucheng Xiong's Golden Harvest, currently located at 900 Maryland Avenue E. Xiong came to the US in 1979 and eventually earned a mechanical engineering degree from the University of Minnesota. In the end, though, he was more interested in business and opened his grocery store in 1998. Xiong explained that although Golden Harvest is a great place for the Hmong and Asian community to find comfort foods, it's also an invitation to those who are not familiar with or wish to learn more about the different foods Hmong people eat. He wants his grocery store to be a destination for all people to experience and enjoy.[29]

Landowners at Last

In 2011, siblings Pakou Hang and her brother, Janssen Hang, cofounded the Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA), inspired, in part, by their mother, Phoua Thao Hang, who'd come from Laos after the "Secret War" and worked for decades on area farms to sell produce at local markets. In 2013, the organization incorporated after a West Coast benefactor purchased a 155-acre farm in Dakota County, fifteen miles outside St. Paul. HAFA members rented plots and grew and sold bok choy, tomatoes, and flowers of every hue. HAFA hoped to eventually purchase the land and began raising money. In 2020, the Minnesota Legislature provided $2 million toward that goal. In 2021, HAFA members raised the final $500,000, and in October 2022, HAFA officially owned the land.[30]

Reaching this milestone will help the nonprofit continue to pursue its goal of "communitarianism." Even today, Hmong farmers face specific challenges—language barriers, land access, acquiring new business development skills, and learning about alternative markets, research, and training. Add to that the roadblocks all American farmers face—unpredictable and severe weather and market fluctuations. Possible road construction encroaching on a portion of the farm is yet another threat.[31]

Still, HAFA believes "the best people to support Hmong farmers are Hmong farmers themselves. . . . We are all lifted up when those who are affected by an unfair food system lead the change we seek." HAFA farmers stay focused on their ultimate goal—providing fresh healthy food for Hmong families, customers at farmers' markets, and subscribers who participate in HAFA's community supported agriculture (CSA) weekly produce delivery. Just as importantly, they provide food to in-home childcare centers, schools, and hospitals.[32]

Yia Vang: Sharing Hmong Food and Culture with All

Yia Vang is a young, renowned chef who competed against other top chefs on the Netflix cooking competition, *Iron Chef: Quest for an Iron Legend* in 2022. There's just one problem: Vang doesn't like to be called a chef. He would much rather be called a cook because that's what he does.[33]

Vang was born in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand in 1984. He and other family members arrived in Wisconsin in 1988 with parents, Nhia Lor Vang and Pang Her. After college, Vang moved to Minneapolis and took a job as a dishwasher and then a cook at Spoon and Stable. And he noticed something. A lot of Hmong Americans lived in the Twin Cities. But where were the Hmong restaurants?[34]

Vang got to work and opened a pop-up seven years ago. Since then, he and his thirty-person HillTribe team have created other pop-ups. One of these, Union Hmong Kitchen, is now permanently located inside Graze Provisions + Libations food hall at 520 N. Fourth Street in Minneapolis. His current pop-up is MOV at his HillTribe headquarters, also in Minneapolis. Visitors can try Vang's delicious Hmong food, including *galabaos* (steamed pork buns), at the Minnesota State Fair, as well.[35]

As he began his culinary journey, Vang came to believe that there's more to Hmong food than comfort:

> Food isn't the most important thing. It's about the connecting of the stories. And for me, it was connecting with my parents'

There's More!

To see a listing of Hmong groceries in Ramsey County and three traditional Hmong recipes, go to https://rchs.com/publishing/catalog/https-rchs-com-p%E2%80%A63-hmong-foodways/.

Yia Vang at work at Union Hmong Kitchen in Minneapolis. *Courtesy of The Restaurant Project and photographer Lauren Cutshall.*

> stories through [the Hmong dishes]. . . they served us. Once you hear those stories, you can't unhear [them].[36]

Vang believes that every dish has a narrative, and if we follow that long enough, we get to know the people behind those foods we eat. Vang uses *nqaij tsawg xyaw nrog zaub ntsuab* (simmer pork with mustard greens) as an example. This dish tells "the story of our parents learning how to make something out of nothing."[37]

"Being in the kitchen makes sense to me. The chaos in the kitchen makes sense to me. . . . Cooking a meal is simple because there's a start, a middle, and an end." This is where he escapes to—the comfort of his kitchen and creating food that adds to his parents' story. And when Vang discovered the Hmong markets in Ramsey County, he fell in love with the variety of foods offered. "The smell of the herbs and sauces and the look of the stores were like the language you speak." He describes them as a "safety net, a safe ground" for his family.

Through his work, Vang has built relationships with the people at HAFA, The Good Acre, BIX Produce Company, Golden Harvest, and other local businesses. He even sources some produce from his parents' garden. Every year, they harvest it and send food to the restaurant.

With the support he has from these suppliers (and fans of his pop-ups, local and national television programs, and his gentle and cheery disposition), Vang's new restaurant, Vinai, which is named after the refugee camp he was born in and the place where his parents met, will open in northeast Minneapolis soon. He calls the venture "a love letter to my parents." It's all about their story and how far they've come to find a better life and more opportunities. Vinai also will focus more on Hmong food as a whole by creating the atmosphere, the people, the hospitality, and the heart of the Hmong with their food. He paints us a picture of entering a Hmong home:

> You are given a plate . . . and are invited to the table with all the food in the middle. To sit with each other and have a meal is the best experience we could have. [T]he Hmong culture does not limit how much you eat because that's the hospitality part. Food will come and go but the story with it stays with us. It's like saying, 'I can't give you money but I can give you food.' We get to experience the love and warmth it took to make such delicious food.[38]

Think about it: Yia Vang's story and so many other Hmong histories here in the Twin Cities can be traced back to the late 1970s, with a handful of homesick refugees looking for comfort food to nourish them and remind them of their far-away homes. Today, home is where the heart (and food) is—right here in Minnesota.

Acknowledgments: Special thanks to Shoua Moua, Kristina Her's aunt; Cheng Her, Kristina's mother; and Tou Her, Kristina's father. Also appreciation to Tong Vang, Lee Pao Xiong, Noucheng Xiong, and Yia Vang for sharing their important histories.

Kristina Her *is a recent graduate of Concordia University, St. Paul. She majored in English, with an emphasis in creative writing. Her was born in St. Paul in 1999 and is a first-generation Hmong American along with her four older siblings. She hopes to pursue screenwriting and filmmaking to bring more representation to Hmong people and other communities. She loves all spicy foods and enjoys singing karaoke with her friends. Most of all, Her loves God and gives Him all the praise and glory for how far she and her family have come.*

NOTES

1. Peter Ackerberg, "New roots in St. Paul: Laos nomads find U.S. life confusing," *Minneapolis Star*, January 3, 1979, 1, 12; Tom Hamburger and Eric Black, "Uprooted people in search of a home," *Star Tribune*, April 21, 1985, 30; "Hmong Clans," Hmong American Peace Academy, https://www.myhapa.org/academics-2/general-info/hmong-culture-strengths/#:~:text=Hmong%20Clans&text=They%20include%3A%20Cha%20(Chang),economic%20security%20for%20each%20other. Hmong people are represented by eighteen clans or tribes: Cha (Chang), Cheng, Chue, Fang, Hang, Her (Herr), Khang, Kong, Kue, Lee (Ly), Lor (Lo, Lao), Moua, Pha, Thao (Thor), Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang.

2. Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong in Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), 2-6; Lee Pao Xiong, interview with author, May 16, 2023. The Royal Lao Army divided the country into five military regions. As a former Royal Lao Armed Forces General, Vang Pao was in charge of Military Region 2. Here, the mostly Hmong unit fought against 40,000 North Vietnamese troops on behalf of the United States; General Vang Pao and James W. Lair, *The Special Guerilla Units (SGU) Service History* (St. Paul, MN: Special Guerrilla Units Veterans and Families of USA, Inc., 2010), https://graphics.jsonline.com/jsi_news/documents/sgu_final_2.pdf.

3. Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1982* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010), 47-50; High Commissioner for Refugees, *Brief on Ban Vinai Refugee Camp* (Bangkok, Thailand: United Nations, April 1, 1985), 1; Lee Pao Xiong. Nam Phong, the unofficial refugee camp, received Hmong fleeing Laos until the beginning of 1976. After that, the Hmong were relocated to Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, where people were processed for resettlement to third countries.

4. Lee Pao Xiong.

5. Lee Pao Xiong. "The first wave of people struggled the most with the language, but they had access to food and employment. The churches that sponsored some of the Hmong helped them [learn] English. . . find a job, and learn how to drive. There were also a lot of military leaders in the first wave. . . who were well taken care of by the churches from 1975-1980. The second wave happened between 1980-1992. It's almost as though they were the forgotten middle child of the Hmong people. They were less educated, had [few] transferable skills, and it was difficult for them to find jobs. The third wave was 2000-2010, which made [these arrivals] the longest refugees in the camps. They were very dependent on those who came before them and/or on their sponsors because everyone had already been exposed to the American culture."

6. Shoua Moua, interview with author, April 8, 2023. Dang Her and Shoua Moua are the author's aunt and uncle. Her passed away in 2022; Joe Kimball, "First Hmong family arrived in Minnesota 40 years ago on Nov. 5," *MinnPost*, November 5, 2015; Frederick Melo, "They paved the way: Twin Cities family were Minnesota's first Hmong refugees, 40 years ago," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 6, 2015, https://www.dglobe.com/news/they-paved-the-way-twin-cities-family-were-minnesotas-first-hmong-refugees-40-years-ago. Her had worked with USAID in Laos, thus, he and his family were some of the first to escape Laos via Thailand. Author Kristina Her's father's family also arrived in 1975.

7. Moua.

8. Moua.

9. Moua; Joanne P. Ikeda, *Hmong American Food Practices, Customs, and Holidays* (Chicago: The American Dietetic Association, 1992), 3; Chia Youyee Vang, 18.

10. Moua.

11. Moua; Melo; Ackerberg, 12. Dang Her's first job was filing papers for a Plymouth-based travel company. He later worked at an auto parts store, helped open a grocery, and was a guidance counselor at St. Paul Vocational Technical Institute. Under his leadership, he and other Hmong formed the Hmong Association, which later became Lao Family Community of Minnesota, through the urging of General Vang Pao, to help Hmong learn English and settle into their Twin Cities' communities.

12. Moua; "MA Food Store," *St. Paul City Directory*

(St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co.,1985-86-1993), 81, 78, 71, 65, 44, 38 (no listing in 1990); "MA Food Store," *St. Paul Consumer Telephone Directory* (St. Paul: Northwestern Bell, 1982-1987), 331, 371, 491, 565, 476. A phone book first lists MA Food Store in 1981. The first city directory listings for the business appear in 1985 and continue through 1989. The address was 694 N. Rice Street (1985-1988, Dang Her) and 1133 Rice Street (1989, Dan Hawj). The store is also listed between 1991-1992 at 721 Jackson Street.

13. Cecelia M. Tsu, "'If You Want to Plow Your Field, Don't Kill Your Buffalo to Eat:' Hmong Farm Cooperatives and Refugee Resettlement in 1980s Minnesota," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 41-43; "Articles of Incorporation of Hmong Farming Cooperative," xxxi; "Revised and Amended Training Program for New Americans: Addendum to Minnesota Agricultural Enterprise for New Americans Project Proposal," as quoted in Tsu; Dang Her, letter to Norman A. Brown, January 24, 1983, in MAENA files, as quoted by Tsu.

14. Tsu, 44-45; *Agricultural Extension Service Fact Sheet* AD-FO-0420 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 4.

15. Tsu, 46-48.

16. Tsu, 46-50; Bill McAuliffe, "Hmong farm project failed because it lacked capital," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, May 5, 1984, 1B, 13B; Len LaCara, "State scraps Hmong project," *Winona Daily Times*, May 4, 1984, 1.

17. Richard Sherman, "Hmong assume more leadership in year two of cooperative," *Extenovations* 5, no. 4 (August 1984): 2; See Xang Vang, *New Seeds in a New Land,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAO_7zJyYdE.

18. Tsu, 55-56.

19. Tsu, 64.

20. Lee Pao Xiong. The Vang family still retains ownership of the land today.

21. Tong Vang, interview with author, May 23, 2023; Don Stewart, "What will tomorrow bring?" *Winona Daily News*, May 5, 1984, 1.

22. Tong Vang; Chia Youyee Vang, 17; "L-H. Oriental Grocery Store Inc.," Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, https://mblsportal.sos.state.mn.us/Business/SearchDetails?filingGuid=be37df80-aad4-e011-a886-001ec94ffe7f, January 25, 1988, updated May 31, 2023; "LH Oriental Grocery," *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co.,1982-1993), 64, 83, 69 81, 78, 71, 65, 44, 38 (no listing in 1990); *St. Paul Consumer Telephone Directory* (St. Paul: Northwestern Bell,1983-1993), 371, 401, 565, 431, 604, 634, 664, 659, 650, 698. LH Oriental Grocery is listed in the city directory from 1982-1987 at 191 Western (Vang Xai Kong, owner and Sao Vang, manager (1988)) and 173 N. Western from 1989-1992 (Sao Vang, manager).

23. Tong Vang. Kim's Oriental Market still stands on Snelling Avenue.

24. Tong Vang.

25. Tong Vang.

26. Tong Vang; "SGU Veterans and Families of USA, Inc." Pro-Publica Non-Profit Explorer, https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/721612652. The nonprofit works with Hmong veterans to help with family reunification and "reconnection," funerals, and those who need help with immigration issues. According to the website, "We, truly, like to organize and know all the veterans who served during the Secret War in Laos." Tong Vang is also a veteran.

27. Lee Pao Xiong; Sammy Nelson, Mollie Spillman, and Terry Swanson, emails with editor regarding community gardens at Gibbs Farm in the 1980s, June 29, 2023.

28. Lee Pao Xiong.

29. Noucheng Xiong, interview with author, May 22, 2023.

30. Tom Meersman, "Land partnership provides a golden opportunity," *Pioneer Press*, September 13, 2014, D1-2; Laura Yuen, "Giving thanks for Hmong farmers," *Star Tribune*, November 24, 2021, E1, 3; "Phoua Thao Hang," *Pioneer Press*, https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/twincities/name/phoua-hang-obituary?id=36281687; Isabel Saavedra-Weis, "St. Paul Farmer's Market honors vendor killed in stolen car crash on East Side," July 23, 2022, updated July 26, 2022, https://www.twincities.com/2022/07/23/st-paul-farmers-market-honors-vendor-killed-in-stolen-car-crash-on-east-side/.

31. "About HAFA," Hmong American Farmers Association website, https://www.hmongfarmers.com/about-hafa/; Erin Adler, "Road Needs Worry Hmong Farmers," *Star Tribune*, January 3, 2021, A1, A7.

32. "About HAFA;" Zoë Jackson, "Where Farmers Can Do More Than Farm," *Star Tribune*, May 6, 2023, B1, B7.

33. Yia Vang, interview with author, May 17, 2023; "Episode 6: Battle Chili Peppers," *Iron Chef: Quest for an Iron Legend*, https://www.netflix.com/title/81224668.

34. Yia Vang; "About Chef Yia Vang," Union Hmong Kitchen website, https://unionkitchenmn.com/about.

35. "About Chef Yia Vang;" "Rice is Life: MOV," HillTribe website, https://www.hilltribemn.com/mov; Grace Birnstengall, "Union Hmong Kitchen becomes State Fair's first Hmong restaurant," *MPR*, August 29, 2022; Marielle Mohs, "How Union Hmong Kitchen is prepping for the Minnesota State Fair," *CBS Minnesota*, July 16, 2023.

36. Yia Vang.

37. Yia Vang.

38. Yia Vang.

Notes for Sidebar on page 2

a. Lee Pao Xiong, interview with author, May 16, 2023.

b. Lee Pao Xiong.

Growing Up at Fort Snelling

Honoring the First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteer Infantry for Fifty Years

JOHN H. GUTHMANN

It was July 2, 1988—the 125th anniversary of the First Minnesota's famous charge during the second day of battle at Gettysburg. To celebrate, the National Park Service (NPS) invited the country's foremost reenactment organizations to participate in a Civil War demonstration by creating commemorative Union and Confederate regiments. Although NPS rules prohibited soldiers from firing even blank rounds at one another, the public witnessed an authentic display of regimental camp life, military drill, and battle tactics that were present on the battlefield in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on a substantially larger scale in 1863.[1]

In this modern-day scenario, eighty-eight men, forming two of the ten Union infantry companies were from the First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. Celebrating its own fifteenth anniversary that year, *this* First Minnesota was formed as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 1973 to commemorate and perpetuate the memory of the *first* First Minnesota, accurately portray the original unit, educate the public, and have fun. The captain of one of the two First Minnesota companies—Company A—was, me, your author, a thirty-three-year-old St. Paul lawyer.

Like the uniforms, equipment, and portrayals on the battlefield, the weather that day was historically accurate—dangerously hot and humid. Yet, the moment the reenactors could only dream of when the First Minnesota was formed in 1973 was imminent. Before thousands of spectators, the Union regiment was about to recreate the First Minnesota's charge on the original ground at Plum Run. With numbers approximating the

In 1988, two companies of the First Minnesota Regiment—in Pennsylvania for the reenactment of the brutal Battle of Gettysburg—gathered around the largest of three memorials to the original First Minnesota. The monument commemorates July 2, 1863, the second of three days of intense fighting there. *Courtesy of Arn Kind and John Guthmann.*

262 Minnesotans who rushed toward Wilcox's Brigade while outnumbered at least five to one, a play-by-play of the commemorative charge was narrated for battlefield visitors by none other than NPS historian Ed Bearss—soon to become famous in the 1990 Ken Burns documentary, *The Civil War*. As the command to advance was given, Bearss' voice bristled with excitement. He was almost beside himself.[2]

Reflecting on the Past

The opportunity to recreate such a pivotal moment in both Minnesota and national history on the original ground caused members of the First Minnesota to reflect—How did we get here? Near dusk later that evening, at the exact time the original charge occurred, many of the reenactors gathered at Plum Run—while surrounded by twinkling fireflies—to think about this question further.[3]

The American Civil War defined much of Minnesota's first century as a state. The First Minnesota was literally the first regiment of volunteers offered in answer to President Abraham Lincoln's call for troops following the fall of Fort Sumter in 1861. The unit left a distinguished record of service throughout the war. After four years, about 24,000 men, or 52 percent of the 45,832 male Minnesotans between the ages of fifteen and sixty at the time of the 1860 census, served in one of the state's fourteen infantry, four artillery, and four cavalry units. Thankfully, no other event has come close to the impact of the Civil War on Minnesota society, including World War II.[4]

And so, this article chronicles the origins of the *second* First Minnesota, in part, through my eyes, as the unit celebrates its fiftieth anniversary in 2023 and continues to pay tribute to our Minnesota soldiers from long ago.

The Birth of the *Second* First Minnesota

Our story begins with the centennial of the Civil War and the fifteen-year buildup to the nation's bicentennial. Coinciding with the more public Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, the years 1961 to 1976 were a great time to be a historian or history buff. Many state legislatures, including Minnesota's, made substantial investments in historic preservation, building restoration, and the interpretation of historic sites. The proposal to build a new bridge over the Mississippi River at Fort Snelling created a public flap in 1956 because the planned design would have left the fort's historic Round Tower in the middle of a highway cloverleaf.[5] The hubbub led to preservation of the historic fort property, construction of a highway tunnel under the fort, and funding of the fort's reconstruction and restoration to its 1827 appearance, which was nearly complete by July 4, 1976, and fully completed in 1977. From Fort Snelling's fertile ground, Minnesota's famous First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteer Infantry was born in 1861 and reborn in 1973.

The bicentennial was only four years away when seventeen-year-old John Guthmann took a job as a tour guide at Fort Snelling in 1972. At the time, I had no idea it would lead to a lifelong love of historical reenacting and living history. Not long before, the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) had entrusted Fort Snelling historian John Grossman and new program manager Stephen Osman to implement an innovative and, later, much imitated "first person" living history program at the fort. Costumed guides presented the site as it existed in the 1820s and interacted with visitors in the present tense, making the past come alive.[6]

Grossman and Osman met in 1970 at Northfield's Jessie James Day Reenactment. Grossman portrayed a Confederate colonel and rode in the parade with a Scarlet O'Hara actor while St. Olaf student Osman assumed a starring role, defending the bank with his Colt Navy Model 1851 revolver. Grossman worked at Fort Snelling. Osman was part of a reenactment group called the 114th Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry during the late 1960s in his home state.

The fort's living history program captured the public's attention and brought in hordes of school children, but it also enticed many amateur historians inside the fort's walls. In the fall of 1970, as part of Fort Snelling's 150th anniversary celebration, Osman was on hand in his authentic wool nine-button frock coat, sky blue trousers, and forage cap. Joining him were men portraying the New Ulm Battery, the 7th Cavalry, and a group called the Twin Cities Muzzle Loading Club (mostly "buckskinners" depicting early nineteenth century fur traders). After MNHS hired Osman the following year,

enactments continued. For example, the annual rendezvous on Pike Island focused on the fur trade, which played an important role in Fort Snelling's presence at the confluence of the Mississippi and St. Peter Rivers.[7] To the delight of the public, early nineteenth-century Minnesota life could be experienced through axe-throwing demonstrations, military drill, and a live shooting competition featuring military smoothbore muskets and the rifles used by the buckskinners.

A number of the buckskinners were also Civil War enthusiasts. They included Chuck Fouzie, Otho "Buck" Buxton, Bill Dalin, Gene Henrickson, Vance Leak, Bob Lange, and Bob Snouffer. Moreover, Dalin and Henrickson owned homemade Civil War uniforms, which they sometimes wore when visiting the fort. They often spoke of forming a regiment to accurately portray the lives of Civil War soldiers.[8]

In August 1973, it was learned that one buckskinner had called a meeting to organize a Civil War reenactment group. Having seen the Civil War "impressions" put together by some, Henrickson shared his concern with Osman that the group could be made up of men wearing cotton or polyester costumes rather than wool uniforms and carrying lighter and historically inaccurate two band Zouave rifles rather than proper three band rifle muskets. Henrickson urgently suggested, "Let [us] do it and do it quick before somebody else does it wrong."[9] Consequently, the call went out to those interested in "do[ing] it right." Osman packed the initial organizational meeting with as many of Fort Snelling's staff as he could muster—whether they intended to join the new unit or not, although many later did. I was among the staff who attended that meeting.

Friends John Grossman (*left*) and Stephen Osman (*right*) at the US Grant Cantonment in 1970 with Carla Irenius. Through their early interactions as reenactors, Grossman and Osman helped found the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry in 1973. *Courtesy of Stephen Osman.*

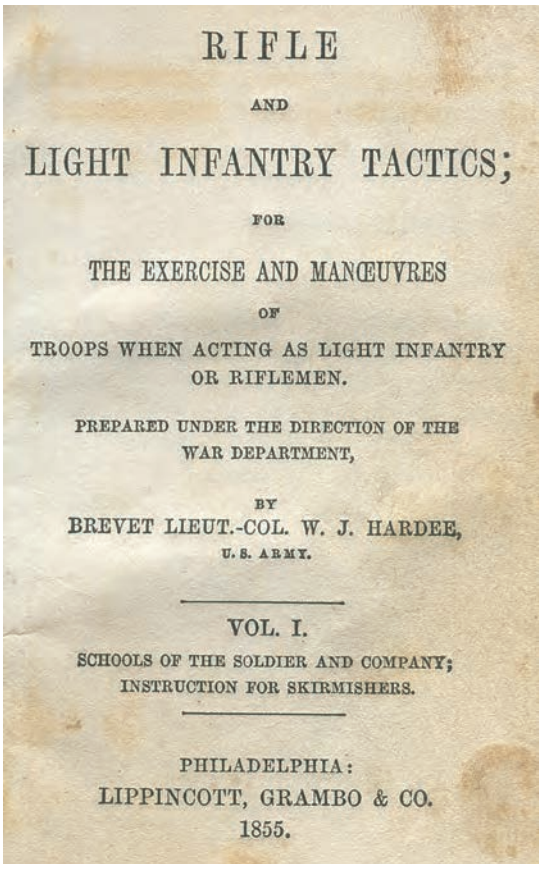
The gathering took place in Fort Snelling's school house by candlelight. In addition to turning out the votes, Osman, Grossman, and Henrickson had prepared in advance to present the framework for a nonprofit corporation that would be named after the original First Minnesota, complete with draft bylaws and regulations.

Fort Snelling living history staff in 1973, the same year many staff members joined the First Minnesota. Early First Minnesota members include: John Guthmann (*back row, fourth from left*); Dean Johnson (*front row, far left*); David Wiggins (*fifth from left*); Bob Gorg (*seventh from right*); John Murdock (*third from right*); and Stephen Osman (*far right*). *Courtesy of Stephen Osman and John Guthmann.*

As a nonprofit, the First Minnesota name would be protected. By assuming the name, the unit would be obligated to accurately represent and venerate both the original First and the 1860s era to the public. They would build an infantry company from the bottom up, requiring authentic field uniforms, three band muskets, the correct proportion of privates to noncommissioned officers, and the discipline and esprit de corps necessary to be worthy of the name. At the meeting, as Grossman later observed, "[W]e had the votes and that was the last we've seen of Zouaves and cotton uniforms."[10] Now, the real work could begin.

A Tradition of Authenticity

The First's inaugural meeting took place October 3. Early meetings were held at Fort Snelling's Building 25—an old cavalry stable and MNHS Historic Sites Department headquarters. Henrickson, Fouzie, Osman, Grossman, and Bob Lange were elected to the board of directors. The following month, the first squad of the first company—Company A—formed, with George Halek as corporal. I formally joined the First Minnesota on November 14. A second squad under Fort Snelling tour guide Bob Gorg assembled in December. George Johnson was elected first sergeant. The regiment was now sixteen men strong. That winter, members poured over an original copy of W. J. Hardee's *Rifle and Light Infantry Drill* manual, sourced or made historically accurate uniforms, and searched area gun shows and shops for canteens, muskets, and bayonets. Most early members were military veterans, and the new recruits soon learned how to portray themselves in public as soldiers—not just hobbyists in costume.[11]


RIFLE

AND

LIGHT INFANTRY TACTICS;

FOR

THE EXERCISE AND MANŒUVRES

OF

TROOPS WHEN ACTING AS LIGHT INFANTRY OR RIFLEMEN.

PREPARED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE WAR DEPARTMENT,

BY

BREVET LIEUT.-COL. W. J. HARDEE,

U. S. ARMY.

VOL. I.

SCHOOLS OF THE SOLDIER AND COMPANY; INSTRUCTION FOR SKIRMISHERS.

PHILADELPHIA:

LIPPINCOTT, GRAMBO & CO.

1855.

First Minnesota reenactor Stephen Osman owns an original 1855 copy of *Rifle and Light Infantry Drill. Courtesy of Stephen Osman.*

By spring, the fledgling regiment needed a field test. The group held a spring muster—a formal military inspection—at Fort Snelling in April 1974. The scene at the fort, which was in the midst of its restoration, was later described by Grossman:

> The stone barracks still smelled of paint [and] the [bed] straw was fresh at the time. Half the fort was incomplete and the parade was a sea of mud. It was snowing at the first reveille roll call formation and many in ranks suddenly remembered what it was really like to be in uniform again. The beans were like bullets and [the] rice was like glue. We decided that each man would be mustered when equipped and trained, and that each would receive a line number when mustered. The first sixteen or so were mustered then, and everyone who mustered after that time was numbered starting with 20.[12]

The First Minnesota was now ready to take the field for its initial campaign. In May, the group traveled to Galena, Illinois, for an enactment in Ulysses S. Grant's hometown—the third annual US Grant Civil War Cantonment. The First's twenty men pitched four wedge tents in a muddy field amongst "olive drab tents, chain saws, aluminum yard furniture, Coleman lanterns and charcoal grills; and this was the authentic camp."[13] As Grossman, who portrayed a private in Company A at the event, recalled:

> We left the impression that we were different. Fouzie blew reveille at 6 AM and five minutes later a row of wet, mud-covered

troops in blankets and ponchos answered 'Here Sergeant' as George [Johnson] ran through the roll—by memory—loud enough for the whole camp to hear. When we moved it was in formation and when we drilled the whole camp stood and watched. We were the only unit to fight under a 6 by 6 regimental flag. . . . Years later we heard that someone at Galena had said 'Where they came from nobody knows, who they are nobody knows, and where they went to nobody knows.' For us, it was as if a handful of the old First had somehow marched out of the rain, bivouacked for a couple of nights, watched the proceedings, did a little light camp duty, broke camp and disappeared back into the mists of time.[14]

A *Star Tribune* reporter followed the regiment to Galena. Grossman let her know the First Minnesota was serious about authenticity: "We're the most authentic ones here. But we draw the line at scurvy. And diarrhea. My great-grandfather came home (from the Civil War) with a bad case of diarrhea and died of it."[15]

The Galena event was followed by a full schedule of summer activities. On Memorial Day, the First Minnesota participated in a program at Cannon Falls Cemetery, where William Colvill, colonel of the First Minnesota at the Battle of Gettysburg, is buried. Those present gained firsthand experience in the hazards of wearing wool uniforms in hot weather—one of the men fainted.[16] Many citizens saw the First Minnesota for the first time when the unit marched in the Aquatennial Torchlight Parade in Minneapolis that July—also a hot day (high of 89°F), although it had cooled slightly by evening.[17]

To gain more field experience, the unit camped at Fairfax and Fort Ridgley, where the men learned the arts of foraging (in a corn field) and skirmish drill. The season ended in September with the unit's second reenactment in Knoxville, Illinois. By that time, I was fully equipped and marching as a private in Company A. With Osman's help, I purchased an original 1862 Enfield three band rifle musket at a Hopkins gun shop for $175. My canteen was a converted original Spanish American War canteen I bought for $5. My uniform included pants sewn by the

The First Minnesota is often part of local Memorial Day ceremonies like this one in 1975 in St. Charles, Minnesota, hometown of bugler and World War II veteran Chuck Fouzie.

When not reenacting for a crowd of visitors, members of the First Minnesota spent weekends embedding themselves at historic sites and living, learning, and surviving mostly as the original soldiers did. Here they are at Fort Ridgley. *Both images courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

mother of First Minnesota member and fellow Fort Snelling tour guide Chris Brovald.[18] Many commented that authenticity standards by the participants had improved. The First Minnesota's strong first impression continued as it won the event's drill and authentic camp competitions. The First Minnesota was on its way.

Return to the Original First's Charge at Gettysburg

Our humble beginnings were on the minds of many as the eighty-eight men with the commemorative First Minnesota prepared to charge at Gettysburg on July 2, 1988. To duplicate the original First's 82 percent-casualty rate, anyone

Safety First

Folks unfamiliar with living history events depicting military engagements often ask, "Is it safe?" Noncommissioned officers of the First Minnesota work hard to instill safety into the minds of new recruits. The loading and firing of blank rounds in our original and reproduction rifle muskets is practiced extensively by privates under the watchful eyes of their NCOs, right down to their foot positions.[a] In fifty years, no First Minnesota member has experienced a serious injury in the field, although we can only do so much about the heat and its impact on wool-clad troops. For example, in 1986, the 125th commemorative Battle of Bull Run ended early when the field hospital was too full to accept any more heat victims. The heat index that day was about 120°F.

However, life has its risks, and poorly trained and equipped men can be careless. At a reenactment at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, I observed a Confederate soldier fall and impale himself through the calf with his own bayonet. Having attended the event with substandard equipment—a bayonet scabbard missing its brass tip—the man was his own worst enemy. In another example, while serving as extras for the miniseries *North and South: Book II, Love and War* (1986) in Natchez, Mississippi, we heard a bang in the distance during a break and witnessed a hat flying into the air. A man had shot himself in the face.[b] He broke two cardinal rules—make sure your musket isn't loaded when dismissed from duty, and keep the muzzle away from your body.

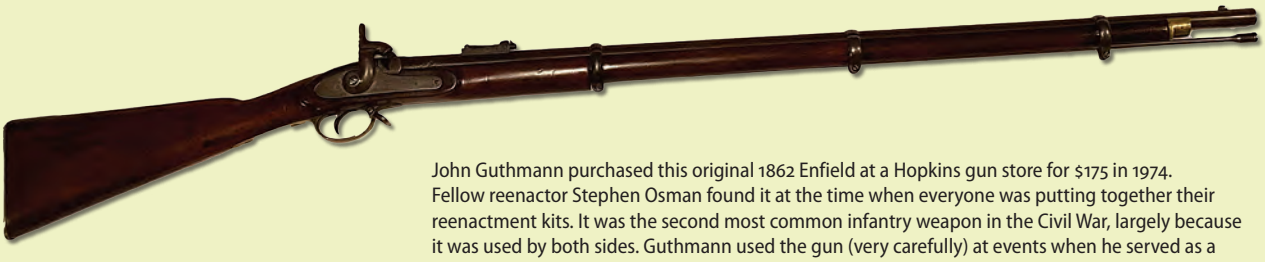
Safety is always top of mind. During one First Minnesota safety session, we once demonstrated that the flame from a blank round can propel through three inches of pine from five feet. Safety is also an act of faith and a reciprocal obligation. Following a reenactment during the 125th anniversary of the Battle of Saylor's Creek, which was held on the original Virginia battlefield, I ran into a Confederate officer. He was carrying an original Colt Army Model 1860 .44 caliber revolver. When I asked if I could see it, the officer eagerly handed it over. The revolver was capped and fully loaded with live rounds!

First Minnesota members (*L-R)* Arn Kind, Wayne Jorgenson, Bob Gilbert, Moe Olson, Don LaPitz, and Gene Henrickson overheated at the reenactment of the Battle of Bull Run in 1986. *Courtesy of Arn Kind.*

When I expressed my shock and anger, he casually replied, "I wasn't ever going to use it."

With marching infantry, artillery, and cavalry all running around the same ground, scenarios can get dicey. Stay away from cannon muzzles and horses, if you can. In Natchez, one of our men got caught under a cavalry horse. The animal did everything it could to get out of the way. Our man was uninjured, although he ended up with couple of hoof marks on the back of his sack coat.

One can still have fun in these situations. At the 140th Bull Run reenactment filmed for the movie *Gods and Generals* (2003), the cavalry charged toward us. I ordered my company to stand with bayonets fixed and pointed high in the position of "guard against cavalry." We held firm. Not wanting to ride through our closed ranks or face our bayonets, the cavalry screeched to a halt. A private on horseback looked back and yelled in frustration, "Captain, what do we do now?" The captain simply responded, "Ride around them!" Off they went—without a casualty on either side.[c]



John Guthmann purchased this original 1862 Enfield at a Hopkins gun store for $175 in 1974. Fellow reenactor Stephen Osman found it at the time when everyone was putting together their reenactment kits. It was the second most common infantry weapon in the Civil War, largely because it was used by both sides. Guthmann used the gun (very carefully) at events when he served as a private. However, for the last twenty-four years, he usually assumes the role of musician or officer, so the gun has stayed safely in storage. *Courtesy of John Guthmann.*

born before October 1 was designated to fall during the thrust toward Plum Run.

With my October birthday, I would portray Capt. Nathan Messick, the highest-ranking officer who survived that fateful day. The field littered with "bodies," I, Messick, gathered the survivors and marched them back to the line in formation as the public cheered and the announcer gushed.

The Tradition Continues

Over the years, the First Minnesota has participated in numerous local and national living history events. To broaden its impression of the original unit, it added field music, and some members later formed an artillery unit. Because of its reputation as a premier authentic unit, the First Minnesota has been invited to participate in Hollywood portrayals of the Civil War on film and television. These include: *The Ordeal of Dr. Mudd* (1980); *The Blue and the Gray* (1982); *North and South: Book II, Love and War* (1986); *Glory* (1989); *Dances with Wolves* (1990); *Gettysburg* (1993); and *Gods and Generals* (2003). To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 2013, the unit participated in a reenactment near the original battlefield on the farm where the movie *Gettysburg* was filmed.[19]

Here, at Gettysburg, the author John Guthmann (*third from left*) addresses a question from the regimental adjutant, who has his back to the camera. That weekend, Guthmann also portrayed Capt. Nathan Messick for the July 2 charge. Messick's luck and his command only lasted a day. He was killed in action on July 3, 1863, during Pickett's Charge—an illustration of which is seen here. Messick is buried at Gettysburg National Cemetery. *Courtesy of Arn Kind and Minnesota Historical Society.*

Musicians were important members of military units in the Civil War. Music and cadences accompanied troops as they marched; helped convey orders; inspired soldiers as they moved toward battle; and when not on the battlefield, signaled roll call, drills, and the morning wake up alert (reveille). The First Minnesota field musicians seen here in 1997 in Maryland at the 130th anniversary reenactment of the Battle of Antietam include (*L-R*): John Guthmann, Jim Moffet, Craig Grab, an unknown musician who joined the group from another unit, and Mike Kotch.

Arn Kind (*left*) was one of twenty-two First Minnesota reenactors to serve as extras in the movie *Dances with Wolves* starring Kevin Costner, seen here with Kind. Note the busyness on the set behind the two. *Both images courtesy of Arn Kind.*

For decades, the public enjoyed the MNHS-sponsored "Civil War Weekend" at Historic Fort Snelling each June. During the event, the clock moved forward from 1827 to the 1860s as the First Minnesota joined fort staff and returned the post to its former role as a Civil War recruiting and training center. The last two Civil War Weekends were invitational events that attracted reenactors nationwide. "The Sheep Farm" commemorated the 150th anniversary of the raising of the First Minnesota. In 2015, our "Home Sweet Home" invitational celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Second Minnesota mustering at Fort Snelling after the Civil War ended.[20]

Thanks to a still vibrant living history hobby, unique opportunities for First Minnesota members to relive real events continue. For example, in August 2021, the First Minnesota traveled to Fort Wadsworth (later Fort Sisseton) in South Dakota. For this event, unit members became Galvanized Yankees—Confederate prisoners of war who accepted an offer to pledge allegiance to the United States and join the Union Army to get out of prison. The soldiers we portrayed served at this remote fort during and after the Civil War, not long after the US-Dakota War of 1862. To ensure accurate impressions, each reenactor was given a copy of the National Archives' file on the soldier whose identity they assumed.

At living history events, reenactors must be true to their roles and do not generally break character—even if approached by curious visitors or if something happens by mistake. For example, during our four days at Fort Wadsworth, I became Enoch Latham, a twenty-six-year-old farmer from North Carolina. He galvanized in 1863 while held in a Maryland prisoner-of-war camp. As Latham, I inadvertently walked across the parade ground with another private—in violation of a standing post order. I assumed

there was no risk of arrest because we were also accompanied by an officer. No such luck. The other private and I were arrested and thrown in the guard house, accused of violating the post order and, for good measure, "drunkenness and disorderly conduct." As you might expect, the officer walked away unmolested. At trial, I, as Latham, argued my own defense and escaped with a disorderly conduct conviction with time served—which wasn't long, as the officers realized it was time for supper call, and the post's only fifer and drummer were jailed.

Since its inception, the First Minnesota has attracted historians and history buffs interested in portraying the lives of real soldiers—a common interest and common love. And yet, these men came from wildly different professions: an accountant, stockbroker, minister, exterminator, several engineers, law enforcement officers, two doctors, an entomologist, and, of course, history teachers. Oh, and we can't forget member David Arneson, the coinventor of the game Dungeons & Dragons. This diverse membership met on the grounds of the former Fort Snelling Military Reservation. Eventually, meetings moved from Building 25 to the auditorium at Historic Fort Snelling's interpretive center. Today, the First Minnesota remains sixty members strong and meets monthly. Military drill begins at 7:00 p.m. followed by a business meeting at the Northern Star Council's Team Building Center (the old cavalry drill hall) on Fort Snelling's Upper Post. The group publishes a monthly newsletter. Its masthead is a facsimile of the masthead created by the original First Minnesota when it briefly published a newspaper in March 1862 after taking over the office of the *Berryville Conservator* following the union's capture of Berryville, Virginia.[21]

In 2023, the First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteer Infantry has been busy in its fiftieth anniversary year with a spring muster at Sunny Hill Farm in Cologne, Minnesota; a Memorial Day service at Union Cemetery and Manitou Days Grand Parade, both in White Bear Lake; the 160th anniversary reenactment of the Battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, sponsored by the Patriots of the Civil War Association (PCWA); and a Pan-O-Prog Parade in Lakeville on July 15. For those interested in seeing the regiment in action, LeDuc Historic Estate in Hastings hosts a Civil War weekend September 9-10, 2023. For more information on the First Minnesota, go to www.firstminnesota.org. For more information on Civil War Weekend at LeDuc Historic Estate, visit https://www.dakotahistory.org/leduc-events.

John Guthmann (*right*) sits with Nathan Willar in jail at Fort Wadsworth, awaiting "trial" for violating a post order—a big no-no! *Courtesy of Jim Moffet.*

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Stephen E. Osman, Arn Kind, and W. James (Jim) Moffet for reviewing early drafts and providing photographs and primary research material. I would also like to acknowledge all members of the First Minnesota over the last fifty years. Thank you for helping preserve the memory of the original First Minnesota and for giving me countless memories of my own.

***John H. Guthmann** is a Ramsey County district court judge, its former chief judge, a past member of the Ramsey County Historical Society Board of Directors, and a current RCHS editorial board member. He graduated from Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, with a double major in history and political science in 1976 and received his JD from William Mitchell College of Law in 1980. He was editor-in-chief of the* William Mitchell Law Review*, 6. After clerking for Minnesota Supreme Court Chief Justice Robert Sheran, he spent twenty-seven years in private practice until his appointment to the bench in 2008.*

There's More!

To see more photos of the First Minnesota, go to https://rchs.com/publishing/catalog/ramsey-county-history-summer-2023-honoring-minnesota-first-regiment.

NOTES

1. Christian J. Heidorf, *Gettysburg: The 125th Anniversary, What They Did Here 1863-1988* (Gansevoort, NY: Harlow & Taylor Associates, 1988), 12, Appendix A. "Approximately 1,100 accurately uniformed living history veterans, both Union and Confederate, from all over the United States converged on Gettysburg National Military Park at the invitation of the National Park Service." The Union forces included 120 artillery, twenty-nine cavalry, and 354 infantry. The Confederate army included thirty-nine artillery, thirty-two cavalry, and 424 infantry; "The Past in the Present," National Geographic Society, https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/past-present/. The society offers an accurate and colorful definition and description of historic reenactments and reenactors: "Reenactors are people who recreate historical events. Reenactments are typically done for the public, to entertain and educate. Reenactments of battles and communities during the Civil War are among the most popular. . . . Reenacting is an American tradition. Before the Civil War, Americans reenacted scenes from the Revolutionary War. . . . After the Civil War, veterans from both the Union and the Confederacy recreated daily camp life in order to share their experience with friends and family. One of the last Civil War reenactments by Civil War veterans was the Great Reunion of 1913, on the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. . . .The highlight of the Great Reunion was the reenactment of Pickett's Charge, the last assault of the Battle of Gettysburg;" "Minnesota Recipients," Medal of Honor Convention, https://www.mohtwincities.com/2016-convention/minnesota-recipients/. The First Minnesota's defense of the Union line during Pickett's Charge on July 3, 1863, produced two Medal of Honor recipients: Marshall Sherman and Henry O'Brien. Only a day earlier, the unit suffered 82-percent casualties during its own charge on Southern lines. The charge was ordered by Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock to buy the fifteen minutes necessary to shore up a hole in the Union center; Chris Army, "Charge of the 1st Minnesota," *Hallowed Ground Magazine*, October 4, 2022. The First Minnesota's charge is widely credited as one of the key actions that made a Union victory at Gettysburg possible. As Hancock later stated, "No soldiers on any field, in this or any other country, ever displayed grander heroism."

2. Steve Zimmerman, "An Historic Weather Report," Celebrate Gettysburg, August 23, 2017, https://celebrategettysburg.com/curb-appeal-copy/#:~:text=Jacobs'%20notes%2C%20individuals%20studying%20the,81%20degrees%2C%20and%20at%202p; Randy Mann, "On This Day in Weather History," *The Weather Channel*, podcast, July 1, 2021, https://www.theweathernetwork.com/en/news/weather/severe/this-day-in-weather-history-july-1-1863-the-battle-of-gettysburg; "July 2, 1988 – Hagerstown, MD," Weather Underground, https://www.wunderground.com/history/daily/us/pa/gettysburg/KHGR/date/1988-7-2. On July 2, 1988, the high temperature was 84°F. Records indicate that 125 years earlier, it was 81°F. These temperatures don't seem that bad until one calculates the heat index, which, in that region, can run between 95 and 105°F or higher. And, remember, the soldiers were outfitted in wool uniforms.

3. The fireflies impacted the mood at Plum Run. Many of the reenactors were aware that, in some cultures, fireflies are believed to be the souls of soldiers who died in war.

4. Gov. Alexander Ramsey, letter to Secretary of War Simon Cameron, April 14, 1861, in Minnesota Board of Commissioners, *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865* (St. Paul, MN: Pioneer Press Co., 1890), 2. Governor Ramsey offered a regiment of infantry the day following the attack on Fort Sumter. The Board of Commissioners, *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865* (St. Paul, MN: Pioneer Press Co., 1890), 1; The last surviving Union soldier was also a Minnesotan. Albert Woolson died in Duluth in 1956 at age 106; "Population of the United States in 1860: Minnesota," US Census, 250-251, 254, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1860/population/1860a-21.pdf. In 1860, the total population of Minnesota was 172,023. The male population between the ages of fifteen and sixty was 45,832; "Population of the United States in 1940: Minnesota," US Census, 17, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1940/population-volume-2/33973538v2p4ch2.pdf. In 1940, Minnesota's total population was 2,792,300. The male population between the ages of fifteen and sixty was 907,410. Of that population, about 304,500 served in the armed forces; Jack K. Johnson, "At Home and Abroad: Minnesota at War," *MNopedia,* https://www.mnopedia.org/home-and-abroad-minnesota-war#:~:text=Over%20304%2C500%20Minnesotans%20served%20in,in%20the%20line%20of%20duty. The number represents 32.5 percent of the male population between fifteen and sixty.

5. Sarah Shirey, "Round Tower, Fort Snelling," *MNopedia*, https://www.mnopedia.org/structure/round-tower-fort-snelling. In 1956, only four of the original buildings at Fort Snelling remained. Three of the four had been substantially modified, and the fort's wall was gone.

6. To learn more about Fort Snelling's innovative first-person living history program, watch the *WCCO*/Darrell Brand production of *Within the Walls of Old Fort Snelling*. The film includes the arrest and court martial of an eighteen-year-old Pvt. John Guthmann. The officers conducting the court martial included Stephen Osman and John Grossman. The program broadcast in 1973, the same year the First Minnesota formed. It may be viewed at https://youtu.be/3mXT5zO-vnU.

7. An enactment is to do something such as depicting the life and times of a soldier. Because there was no

Civil War battle at Knoxville or Galena, Illinois, those battle and camp life demonstrations were enactments. A reenactment brings an event to life—again—usually on or near the location of the actual event. Therefore, what the First Minnesota did at Gettysburg in 1988 was a reenactment. In the hobby, the group does both; The St. Peter River is known as the Minnesota River today.

8. John Grossman, "The Old Soldier's Yarn . . . Unravelled," *The First Minnesota*, no. 365 (December 2003) in the thirtieth anniversary edition of the First Minnesota's monthly newsletter.

9. Grossman.

10. Grossman.

11. Grossman; From 1973 to the spring of 1976, John Guthmann attended college out-of-state and was unable to participate in regimental meetings; W. J. Hardee, *Rifle and Light Infantry Drill* (Philadelphia: Lippencott, Grambo, & Co.), 1855.

12. Grossman. At that time, the regiment established a requirement for mustered members that included passing three tests: authentic uniform and equipment, mastery of military drill, and a quiz on the history of the original First. The original mustering-in standard remains in place; "Charles Fouzie, once of area, dies at 80," *Post Bulletin*, April 30, 1994. The man who mustered in as no. 1, was Chuck Fouzie. Fouzie was sixty years old in 1973. He served in the US Army during World War II, was a German POW, and lost a finger in service. For years, he played taps on the bugle during military funerals at Fort Snelling National Cemetery, where he is now buried. The missing finger did not prevent him from learning the fife and playing Civil War duty tunes as a First Minnesota member. Fortified with a nip of whiskey, Fouzie could sing period military and folk tunes by the campfire for much of the night without repetition. He marched with the First Minnesota for most of his remaining years until his death in 1994.

13. Grossman; Catherine Watson, "With the boys of the 1st Minnesota at Galena," *Star Tribune*, June 23, 1974, 166.

14. Grossman.

15. Watson, 200.

16. After two physicians later joined the regiment, their official medical advice was "drink water until you pee clear."

17. "July 24, 1974 – Minneapolis, MN," Weather Underground, https://www.wunderground.com/history/weekly/us/mn/minneapolis/KMSP/date/1974-7-24.

18. John Guthmann officially passed muster on January 23, 1975. With the First Minnesota, he has served as a private, corporal, sergeant, first sergeant, officer, and musician. He sewed most of his current uniform using authentically sourced materials and patterns. One of the benefits of First Minnesota membership is access to the unit's approved vendor list and its in-house quartermaster store of authentic uniforms and equipment.

19. A performance of the First Minnesota Field Music may be viewed on YouTube at https://youtu.be/J8kukK1US78; John Price, "Acting Civil," *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, July 10, 1982, 71, 74. First Minnesota reenactors on movie sets were typically paid something for their time. For example, each man received $75 a day for his work on the set of *The Blue and the Gray*. Most reenactors donated the money to the regiment's treasury; "Minnesota and Alabama meet again 150 years after Gettysburg," Minnesota National Guard, https://ngmnpublic.azurewebsites .us/minnesota-and-alabama-meet-again-150-years -after-gettysburg/.

20. When Fort Snelling closed and was sold to Franklin Steele in 1857, the former military post functioned briefly as a sheep farm—thus, "The Sheep Farm" event is a nod to the farm. With the outbreak of hostilities in April 1861, the War Department commandeered the fort and enlistees replaced the sheep that formerly occupied the barracks. In an amazing act of gumption, Steele billed the US Department of War for rent following the Civil War—even though he never paid the full purchase price and title had never passed to him. *See* Rodney C. Loehr, "Franklin Steele, Frontier Businessman," *Minnesota History* (December 1946): 314-18; A highlight video of the "Home Sweet Home" event may be found on YouTube at https://youtu.be/ELgj8ITnp9I.

21. *See* Perry Thomas Tholl, "The Typographical Fraternity of the First Minnesota Volunteers," *Minnesota History* (Fall 2011): 260.

Notes for Sidebar on page 16

a. Foot positions are included in the original drill manuals published during the Civil War. If used, the men and their weapons are positioned to perform their function with the least likelihood of injury to the soldier on either side. Although the manuals do not expressly state that safety is the reason for establishing foot positions when loading and firing, the safety benefits are apparent to anyone experienced in the type of close-order drill used during the nineteenth century and before.

b. The injured man was in a different unit. John Guthmann never learned if there was any permanent eye damage or other issues.

c. John Guthmann still remembers this event, held in 2001, a month before 9/11. First, he traveled by plane with his sword—something that would never happen today. Second, the regimental commander was from North Carolina. Guthmann said it was jarring reporting every morning to the officers' meeting and being greeted by, "Mornin,' y'all." Finally, the Minnesotans slept on the ground under the stars, without tents or canvas, just like the original First Minnesota did in July 1861. But even with improved authenticity, there were anachronisms. A nearby company had its uniforms dry-cleaned each night and delivered to camp in boxes the next morning.

Rolling through the Decades

Roller Skating in Ramsey County

HEIDI HELLER

On January 18, 1882, the *St. Paul Daily Globe* published the happenings of a St. Paul City Council meeting. On the agenda—J. H. Fenton. The Chicago-based roller skate manufacturer proposed to introduce his skating business to St. Paul. He sought to pay $500 ($14,796 today) to rent space for two months in Market Hall at Seventh and Wabasha Streets. He hoped to construct a new maple floor and use the space as a roller rink. The council rejected Fenton's proposal a few weeks later. These small news blurbs appear to be the first notices of an attempt to bring the growing worldwide roller skating craze to the city.[1]

Fenton tried again a year later. This time, his proposal passed. With some fits and starts, skating rolled into Ramsey County, becoming a popular recreational activity for generations to come.[2]

Early Rollers

Skating can be traced to the twelfth century. Innovators in Northern European countries developed ice skating into a popular mode of recreation and transportation—skating on frozen waterways was more convenient when the "roads were blocked by snow." It's believed that, sometime in the 1700s, an unknown Dutch ice skating enthusiast invented the first pair of roller skates—wooden spools attached to strips of wood and nailed to a skater's shoes. These primitive roller skates made it possible to skate through the spring, summer, and fall, although they likely did not provide the smoothest ride.[3]

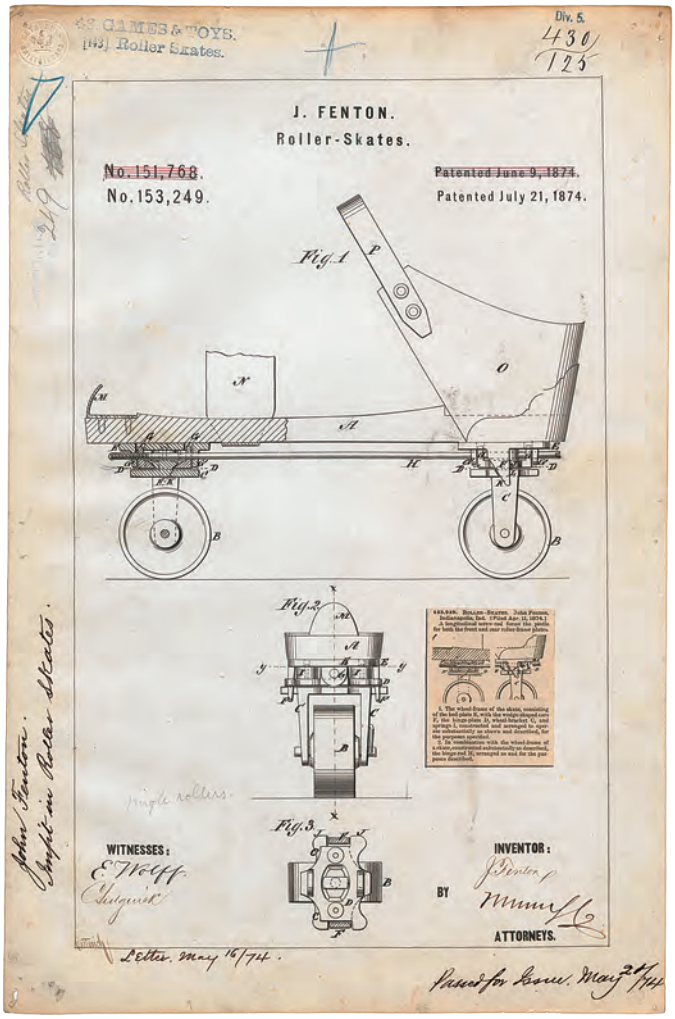
In 1760, Belgian inventor John Joseph Merlin was the first recorded person credited with inventing roller skates. Unfortunately, his invention proved disastrous, as the metal-wheeled skates were unsteerable. It is said that at a party, he was showing off his skating prowess while playing the violin. He crashed into a large, expensive mirror, destroying the mirror, injuring himself, ruining his violin, and hampering the development of roller skates for the next thirty years.[4]

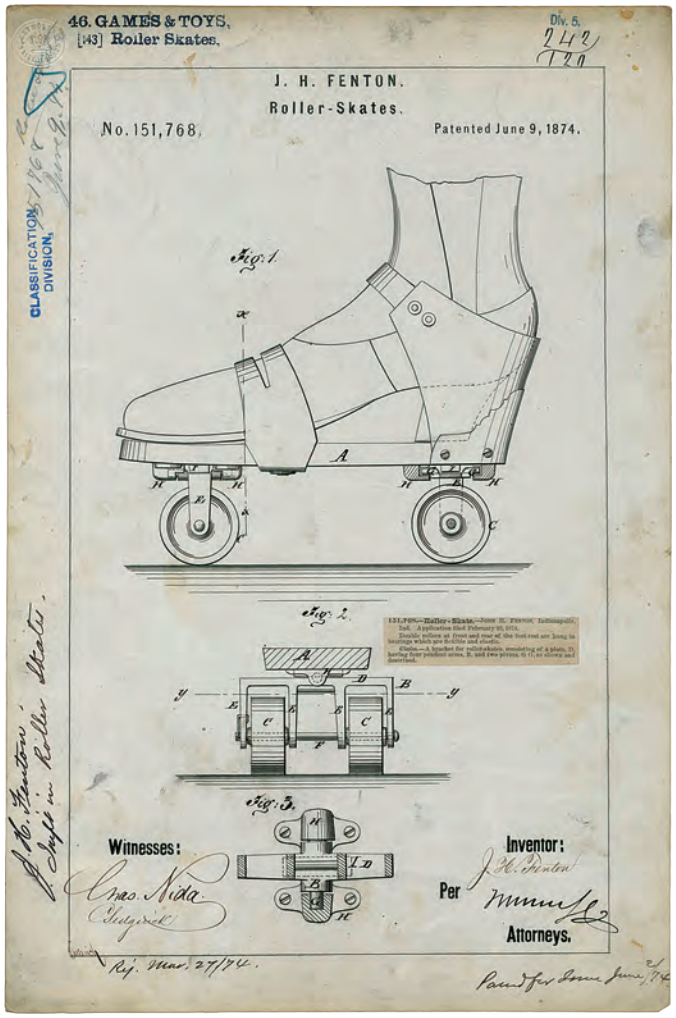
Most early roller skates resembled ice skates or today's roller blades and, as mentioned above, were difficult to steer or brake. The game changer came in 1863 when New Yorker James Plimpton invented the four-wheel roller skate, giving skaters the ability to better control their direction. Plimpton's skate revolutionized the activity. Over the next twenty years, skates continued to evolve. By the 1880s, people were strapping and clamping Plimpton-style skates onto the front and back of shoes to take a spin around the block. Having created the supply, Plimpton needed to increase the demand for his product. In summer 1866, he opened the first public roller rink in the United States at the Atlantic House in Newport, Rhode Island. He converted the hotel's dining room into a rink, rented skates, and provided lessons. The rink drew wealthy individuals summering in Newport from around the world.[5]

Just Roll with It

The United States' first big roller skating boom occurred in the 1880s. Around 400 manufacturers were producing almost 300,000 pairs of roller skates a month. Massachusetts and Connecticut were the two largest skate producers, followed by Richmond and Muncie, Indiana. Richmond was home to eighteen different manufacturers and produced about one-third of the country's skates. *The New York Times* reported that some manufacturers claimed to be making $1,000 a day from skate sales. Mass production made skates more accessible and less expensive—about $6 a pair. With more roller skates came more roller rinks. By 1885, an estimated 40,000 rinks operated around the country.[6]

It seems Fenton's rink at Market Hall opened in late April or May under a one-month contract





with the city. The rink promoted a "Grand Reception for the Young Men's Roller Skating Association" on May 3 along with a general advertisement published May 6 announcing daily skate sessions. No additional press appears after that date. The rink's success was short lived. It should be noted that Fenton's rink was ultimately *not* the first in St. Paul. A rink called the Wigwam debuted at Sixth and Fort Road on February 25 that year. Management advertised heavily before a partial roof collapse shut the rink down briefly. However, they were back to advertising when Fenton's rink debuted, promoting the Wigwam as the city's "original" rink. After that, the facility announced new managers in May. By mid-June, all mention of the Wigwam had disappeared from the papers, as well.[7]

Not to worry. By 1885, the *St. Paul City Directory* listed five new rinks— St. Paul Roller Rink (Tenth and Jackson – opened 1884); Exposition Rink (Fourth between Wabasha and St. Peter); Parker, Cook & Gowan Roller Rink (Summit between Third and Rice); Post Siding Roller Rink (1030 E. Seventh); and West Side Roller Rink (Dakota Avenue, near Susan).[8]

New rinks catered to roller skaters during this initial boom. The St. Paul Roller Rink touted its "immense building," complete with a 7,500-square-foot "floor devoted exclusively to skating" with "ten feet on each side for spectators." Wooden rink floors came in maple, birch, or oak and claimed to be smooth as glass. Electric lights were promoted as a modern improvement. Live bands played a variety of polkas, marches, and waltzes for the eager skaters, who paid between $.20 and $.25 admission and rented skates for about $.15. It was a cheap date. Rink owners often hired local professionals advertised as "professors" to perform exhibitions and encourage captivated wannabe-skaters

With his revolutionary four-wheel skate, James Plimpton inspired others to create their own designs, including J. H. Fenton in 1874. Years before Fenton opened his short-lived St. Paul rink in 1883, he, too, designed and patented roller skates, including single- and double-wheel models. *Records of the Patent and Trademark Office (1849-1925), courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.*


LITTLE DANNIE SPRAGUE,
Only Five Years of Age,
Champion Child Skater of the World,
AT THE
West Side Roller Rink
SATURDAY.
MATINEE, May 2, 1885, and EVENING.
Little Dannie will also appear as the Pert Little Miss.

Skating dynamo "Little Dannie Sprague" drew audiences to local rinks with the hope that intrigued viewers would try the new sport themselves and purchase tickets for an evening skate. *In* St. Paul Daily Globe, *May 1, 1885, 8.*

to sign up for lessons. Professor F. L. Crocker, employed by St. Paul Roller Rink, was one who shared "his skill on skates."[9]

Fierce competition for skaters quickly developed between the local rinks. Special promotions and events attracted skaters. St. Paul Roller Rink advertised a train from St. Paul back to Minneapolis at 11:15 p.m. following its grand opening on April 1, 1884. The business hoped to draw skaters from St. Paul *and* Minneapolis. The promotion worked—with an audience of about 900 people. West Roller Rink advertised unspecified prizes for a Hat Carnival—first place to the lady with the most elegant hat, second to the gentleman with the highest hat, third to the lady or gentleman with the "widest rimmed" hat, and fourth place to the person wearing the smallest hat. The rink also featured an exhibition by "Little Dannie Sprague," billed as the five-year-old world skating champion. Sprague, from Minneapolis, wowed crowds throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin with his tricks and skating expertise.[10]

Speed skating also drew huge crowds. Some rinks enticed audiences of over 14,000 with big prizes of up to $2,000 for top skaters. Before it closed, the Wigwam, advertised medals for the winners of a two-mile-race, which were to be awarded by the "most graceful lady skater." The St. Paul Roller Rink presented a gold medal to the winner of a ten-hour skating race. Thirteen-year-old Harry Toomey skated ninety-three miles and impressed spectators so much that they collected an extra $25 cash prize, equal to about $763.19 today, to complement his medal.[11]

Beware the Evils of Roller Skating

Despite enthusiasm for the new entertainment, the early skating craze was met with mixed opinions by medical professionals and religious leaders. Many physicians believed roller skating—like ice skating, bicycling, and horseback riding—was "a stimulating and beneficial form of exercise." Others viewed the activity as physically and morally damaging. An 1885 article in the *Minneapolis Daily Tribune* questioned the safety of roller skating for young women:

> [The] fascination of rhythmic motion, the witchery of music, and the social absorption of the rink, frequently beguiled weak-nerved and light-headed young women into an amount and kind of violent exercise which is permanently injurious to them.[12]

Although concerns appeared to be for the well-being of delicate young ladies, there also was worry that roller skating was a psychological virus overtaking young people. Adversaries warned that "those who cannot indulge" in "the amusement rationally and decently, should be kept away" from the activity. A few physicians blamed an increase of pneumonia deaths on roller skating. They viewed it as violent exercise in heated rooms that led to "fatal inflammation of the lungs" when exhausted skaters then ventured into the cold night air. Most doctors, however, concluded that roller skating—with some limitations—did no long-term damage to skaters and saw it as a good form of exercise.[13]

Health concerns paled in comparison to the growing worry about the moral damage caused by skating. Those who worked to uphold social and moral standards frowned upon casual acquaintances and unsupervised meetings. Many religious leaders argued that the popular entertainment produced too many opportunities for youth of the opposite sex to socialize without appropriate chaperones. Such acquaintances could be avoided in acceptable places, such as

concert salons or the opera house, where individuals sat in separate seats without contact. But rinks provided inappropriate venues for the much feared meetups and close interaction between young men and women.[14]

After *The New York Times* ran a story in early 1885 about Methodist and Presbyterian ministers denouncing the evils of roller skating, the *St. Paul Globe* interviewed Twin Cities' pastors to gauge their views. Results were mixed. Rev. R. Forbes of St. Paul's Jackson Street Methodist Episcopal Church expressed concern that roller skating, or any other craze, was demoralizing and believed the rinks to be damaging to the community. He added that if it kept people from saloons, it was a good thing, but if it was keeping them from church and tithing to worthy causes, it was bad. Rev. Robert MacLaren of St. Paul's First Presbyterian Church expressed no direct opposition to the exercise that roller skating provided. Yet, he refused to allow his son or daughter to step foot in any rink. The venues were open to anyone willing to pay the $.25 admission fee, which made it impossible for "a proper distinction of class or character," even if the owners enforced certain rules. The reverend assumed that rinks provided an opportunity for the moral and respectable to be in contact with the "immoral and vicious."[15]

Methodist minister C. A. Van Anda saw it as "a pathway to ruin, a device of the devil, [and a] frivolous amusement" that called youth away from church and prayer, loosened their morals, and destroyed "the stamina of character." Rev. J. F. Wagner pontificated that skating rinks were "pernicious to the morals" and a complete waste of time. He planned to preach on their evils. Yet, a few ministers wished to participate themselves. Universalist Rev. J. H. Tuttle had little concern for the activity, stating, "that if I were younger and less portly, I should be tempted to indulge in the sport myself."[16]

Skate, Stumble, and Fall

Fortunately, the concerned had little to fear because the 1880s' roller skating craze ended as quickly as it started. Of the five rinks listed in the 1885 city directory, only a couple appeared the following year. Although a few of the rinks remained open, they were now being used for skating and other activities. The West Side and St. Paul Roller Rinks held dances in addition to skating, and the Post Siding Rink hosted meetings for groups like the Taxpayers' Association of the Fifth Ward. By June 1888, the once highly touted St. Paul Roller Rink was auctioned off as a potential livery and boarding stable. Like many crazes, roller skating had been replaced by the next big fad—tobogganing, which took off around the time St. Paul launched its inaugural Winter Carnival in 1886. Mayor Edmund Rice promoted tobogganing, ice skating, and snowshoeing as "innocent and invigorating amusements" in his comments at the laying of the Ice Palace corner block.[17]

In 1909, an unidentified young woman skates near what is believed to be 741 Case Avenue—not far from Cleveland High School, which can be seen in the background. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*

As the first roller skating frenzy wound down and early rinks closed their doors, new rinks took their place while the sport slowly evolved. From the early 1900s through the 1940s, Down Town Rink (Twelfth and Robert); Lafayette Skating Rink (Lafayette and Partridge); Selby Roller Rink (596 Selby); Arcadia Roller Rink (Eighth and Cedar); the Hollow Skating Rink (549 St. Anthony); the Coliseum (Lexington and University); and Oxford Skating Rink (1053 Grand) appeared on the scene. Even Harriet Island boasted a rink for a period. Some rinks had staying power. Others did not.[18]

In 1915, Raymond 'King' Kelley (25) and Harley Davidson (33) competed against one another at the Arcadia Roller Rink in downtown St. Paul. Davidson, having recently returned from a tour in Australia, was working there at the time. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Roller rink owners and skate manufacturers explored new ways to draw enthusiasts to the rinks. Skating associations popped up around the county to promote and organize competitive skating and draw attention to the sport. The Roller Skating Rink Operators Association (RSROA) formed in 1937 in Detroit, Michigan, promoted roller skating, and "establish[ed] good business practices for skating rinks." The Western Skating Association organized in the early 1900s to oversee the growing sport of competitive speed skating in Midwestern states, including Minnesota.[19]

St. Paul crowed about some of its early champions in this new competitive skating era, including Raymond 'King' Kelly. Born here in 1889, Kelly was an athlete. He played professional football for the St. Paul Laurels and amateur baseball for the Boston Grays. He played golf and tennis, boxed, wrestled, and ran track and field. He eventually added amateur speed ice skating to the mix and branched out to speed roller skating. From 1912 through 1914, he was voted greatest all-around athlete in the skating world by the Western Skating Association. Over time, Kelly was named the Northwestern Amateur Champion Speed Skating and Amateur Champion of Minnesota and won over 100 races, including a six-day roller race. In 1914, he beat the previously undefeated English champion, Bert Randall, at a race in Detroit. As Kelly described it, Randall "set the pace virtually all the way and I couldn't get past him. But on the last turn coming into the stretch I zoomed way out on one leg and then cut down in front of him to hand Bert his first defeat by inches."[20]

A year later, Kelly beat the professional speed skater, Harley Davidson (no relation to the motorcycle company). Davidson was also a St. Paul legend. He was born in 1881, and skating was in his blood. His father, John X. Davidson, was a champion skater from Ohio in the 1870s. Davidson and his siblings learned to ice skate on Lake Como. As a child, he and his family toured throughout Europe giving exhibitions on ice and roller skates.[21]

The competition between the two appeared intense. According to *The Minneapolis Morning Tribune* on January 29, 1915, Kelly had thrown out a challenge to Davidson. Davidson agreed to three races. The men met for the first race on February 3, 1915. Davidson won the first one-mile challenge by twenty-five feet. The following night, he claimed the second half-mile race, this time by five feet. Kelly, however, won the final, drama-filled one mile closer.[22]

Kelly hung up his amateur speed skates in 1916. He served in World War I and then worked for the US Postal Service until his retirement. Kelly was long remembered for his sporting accomplishments, as was Davidson.[23]

The Golden Era

Eventually, roller skating made a massive comeback. Some credit likely goes to the rink owners and skate manufacturers who worked to keep roller skating relevant in the decades after the initial craze. Other recognition goes to Americans seeking ways to escape the realities of living through the Great Depression and World War II. Whatever the reasons, from the 1940s through the 1960s, various rinks popped up around Ramsey County, drawing competitive amateurs and anyone looking for a safe, wholesome, and entertaining activity. Oxford Skating Rink, the Hollow Skating Rink, and the Coliseum were joined by two new venues in the growing Ramsey County suburbs—Shoreview Roller Rink (Highway 96 and Hodgson Road) and Silver Skate in North St. Paul (2492 Seventh).[24]

Roller rinks became the go-to hangout for teenagers. Thanks to evolving social norms, roller skating was now viewed by most as an innocent activity. Rinks were considered a safe place for youth to congregate. Rink owners welcomed teens, while rink guards supervised on the skate floor. Janice (Jan) Sinna, who grew up in Shoreview, said roller skating provided an activity for the kids living in the country. It kept her and her brother, Terrance (Terry), out of trouble. Sandy McClure, also from Shoreview, recalled the skating rink as "a safe place for parents to drop their kids off on a Friday or Saturday night." Rink regulars were known as "rink rats." Shoreview "rink rats" became so numerous that they formed a skating club called the Shoreview Rollers, with nearly eighty members. The skaters participated in parades, held formals, and crowned their own royalty to represent their hometown rink in competitions against other rink royalty.[25]

Interestingly, now, instead of speaking out against the once-dreaded activity, churches jumped on the roller skating bandwagon by opening their own rinks. The Church of St. Bernard (1150 Albemarle), which boasted a bowling alley and roller rink, was supervised by Father Romuald Bloms, and the wooden-planked gym floor was a big draw for skaters at Sacred Heart Church (840 E. Sixth) in the 1960s. St. Michael's (43 E. Colorado) also had a skating club. Numerous individuals share their memories of skating on Friday nights and weekend afternoons at these rinks on the Old St. Paul History Facebook page. They recall meeting future spouses, forming friendships with kids from other schools, and skating on jam-packed floors.[26]

Speak to any adult who grew up in Ramsey County during this golden era, and they likely have a skating story to share. Gloria Massey from St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood remembered that friends gathered at the Coliseum on Saturday nights. During the week, they skated at club-sponsored parties and ventured to the Dairy Queen on Lexington and Fuller afterward. For Floyd Smaller Jr., also from Rondo, the Coliseum was a melting pot of teenagers from across the Twin Cities. Shoreview native Jacci Krebsbach recalled taking a bus that picked kids up at designated spots before dropping them off at the Spring Lake Park Rink (1625 Highway 10).

Joyce Smith Spector (*left)* met her future husband, Sam, here at the Coliseum in the early 1940s. They married in 1944. The couple managed the Coliseum and then Skatedium. Their children Mike, Steve, and Sue spent their formative years skating, working, or just hanging out at the rinks with their parents and friends. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society and Sue Nelson.*

Members of the St. Michael's Skating Club circle around a rink under the watchful eyes of the parish priest. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

And for Nancy Boulay, who skated at Saints North, there was nothing better than hanging out with friends Amy, Tammy, Dawn, and Joan. They'd listen to Debby Boone's "You Light Up My Life" and "Endless Love" by Lionel Richie and Diana Ross, while rolling along in their quad skates with pom poms.[27]

Let the Competition Begin

Amateur Competitive Skating at Shoreview Roller Rink

> Ladies and gentlemen, next up in the 1962 Tri-State Competition on the Silver Skate floor we have sister and brother partners—fifteen-year-old Jan Sinna and thirteen-year-old Terry Sinna performing the 'Continental Waltz.'[a]

Competitive roller skating debuted in the 1920s. With the formation of the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association (RSROA) in 1937, the sport took off. Minnesota belonged to the North Central RSROA region. In the 1960s, Skatedium was among the first Ramsey County rinks to host amateur competitive skaters. The Shoreview Roller Rink joined the competition when rink owners Bruce and Anna Mae Peet "were approached by a professional instructor" interested in teaching competitive roller skating. Over the years, the rink had three different pros—Tom Powers, Rollie Matson, and Bill Konen.[b]

After watching local competitive skaters practice, Janice (Jan) and Terrance (Terry) Sinna, long-time "rink rats" and members of the Shoreview Rollers, wanted to give the sport a try. Jan earned money to pay for their lessons and travel by ironing, babysitting, and doing other odd chores. Training was intense. They practiced after school, taking a break for dinner, and returning each evening to practice again. They rehearsed up to seven hours a day, seven days a week, refining and memorizing their dance routines and their spins and jumps for the freestyle routine. All that work came with one goal for the Sinnas and other skaters—"winning gold."[c]

But, all that work also came with bumps and bruises. Broken wrists and arms were common—especially if skaters put their hands out to stop themselves in a tumble. Jan never broke a bone, but she remembers there was nothing worse than getting floor burns after falling and sliding across the skate floor in short skirts.[d]

Competitive roller skating was similar to ice skating. The RSROA determined the classes (beginner, novice, intermediate), and classifications for competition (figure skating; dance skating; freestyle; speed skating; pairs freestyle; and fours freestyle skating, where two couples made a competitive team). Figure skating featured skaters tracing a series of three circles on the rink floor. Dance skating showcased a pair of skaters dancing to three chosen competition pieces including waltzes, tangos, foxtrot, blues, polkas, and marches. In freestyle, the coaches and skaters could choose their music and routine based on RSROA guidelines. Competitive skating was open to all ages beginning with the Diaper Division (under five) to the Senior Division (where the couples' combined age had to be seventy-five or higher). Tristate events took place every six weeks, with regional and national competitions during the summer. Jan traveled to Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, and Texas to compete.[e]

Janice and Terrance Sinna practiced endlessly at their local Shoreview Roller Rink in the hope of placing in competition. The pair had a slight advantage as siblings. They seemed to move in similar ways, making the performance more precise. *Courtesy of Janice Sinna.*

Jan enjoyed dance skating with her brother. Some of her favorite memories are taking the winners' stand with him in competition. She loved to watch Terry skate freestyle. As for personal awards, Jan was named Miss Minnesota RSROA, Shoreview Roller Rink Queen, and Queen of Hearts. Limited funds prevented her from competing at nationals.[f]

Like competitive ice skaters, competitive roller skaters donned elaborate costumes. Girls and women "wore short skating skirts with blouses or fitted dresses and dyed-to-match gloves, boot covers, and tights." Male skaters dressed in "smooth fitted pants, dress shirts, and short tuxedo-style jackets." It was not unusual to change costumes multiple times at each competition. Jan knew how to sew and made all of her costumes and her brother's, too, adding sparkly sequins that might give an edge up. She also made costumes for other club members and family.[g]

At some point in the 1960s, the pros moved to Skatedium, ending competitive skating in Shoreview. The Sinnas and most other competitive skaters followed the pros. By 1966, the Shoreview Roller Rink closed, but the memories live on, as does the sport. Today, skating continues through USA Roller Sports, with Minnesota's only competitive skate club at Skateville in Burnsville.[h]

Many roller rink operators still live on in skaters' memories. Sam Spector managed the Coliseum Rink. In 1961, he opened Skatedium (1251 Arundel). It was sometimes called the RC Rink for the RC Cola sign on the building. Leetta Douglas took the St. Peter Claver bus with friends to Skatedium. She fondly remembers "doing the whip with friends," including Russel Balenger, who today is a Saint Paul City Council member. "You did *not* want to be on the end of that whip line," she recalls, with a chuckle. Spector, of course, kept a watchful eye on the floor activities to make sure no one got hurt. It seems the rink also had a memorable smell, thanks to Spector's El Producto Escepcionales cigars. One former skater on the Old St. Paul History Facebook page shared that, even today, when he smells cigar smoke, he's reminded of Skatedium. Of course, there would be NO smoking at St. Bernard's rink. There, Father Romuald was even a stickler when it came to the length of the girls' skirts. The young Catholic girls often made a stop in the church's bathroom before hitting the skate floor to ensure their skirts were the "right" length. Otherwise, Father would not let them skate. And Shoreview Rink rollers remember owners Bruce and Anna Mae Peet as generous people. Bruce sometimes chauffeured "Miss Shoreview Roller Rink" in his red convertible in local parades. He'd also deejay on occasion. Another favorite Shoreview activity happened at night's end. The Peets lined up quarters on one end of the floor, and kids raced across the rink to grab them. The skater who retrieved the one red-painted quarter was awarded free admission at their next visit.[28]

Each new era of roller skating brought in new music. Organists had replaced live bands in the 1900s. They were cheaper to employ. Wurlitzer and Hammond Electric were two preferred organ brands. The Hammond, used at the Coliseum, could play "with a solid beat for roller skating, took up little space, and required little more maintenance than a radio." When the rink and its next door neighbor—Lexington Park (former home of the St. Paul Saints)—were demolished in 1958 to make way for a Red Owl grocery, the organ was saved. Spector, the Coliseum's manager at the time, moved the Hammond to Skatedium, where it remained a nostalgic draw for older skaters. What fun to skate to the "Beer Barrel Polka" and other favorites. Over time, though, the popularity of organ music faded. In the 1960s and '70s, more rinks looked to deejays to spin the latest hit music—Dion's "Runaround Sue," Tony Orlando and Dawn's "Knock Three Times," and Paul Simon's "Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard."[29]

Ah, Ah, Ah, Ah, Stayin' Alive!

By the 1960s, the golden era of skating had begun a slow sunset. The once popular Shoreview Roller Rink closed by 1966 as interest in skating waned. It followed in the footsteps of Oxford, which shut its rink down in 1945. The Hollow closed its doors around 1958. But roller skating and rinks soon found new life thanks to 1970s' disco music, which introduced a popular "new tempo and style." Rinks jumped on the disco-era band wagon, ditching the organ completely. New sound systems played thumping, upbeat music, drawing a new generation of fans who dance skated to "Y.M.C.A" by the Village People, "Le Freak" by Chic, "Get Down Tonight" by KC & the Sunshine Band, "Stayin' Alive" by the Bee Gees, and "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor.[30]

With the new trend came two more rinks to Ramsey County: Saints North in Maplewood (1818 Gervais) and Saints Rosedale in Roseville (2555 Fairview)—both with price tags of about $500,000 and funded by local businessman Peter Boo and his investment group. These newcomers opened with welcome upgrades—air conditioning, high-fidelity sound systems, plastic skating floors, brightly carpeted lounge areas, and "acoustically designed interiors to reduce skating noise."[31]

Roller skating seemed to be everywhere. Skaters even brought their moves to the Minnesota State Fair in 1974. The *Pioneer Press* noted that at least a dozen roller skaters were seen in the fair crowds, with one skater putting on an impromptu show "by performing whirls, dance steps and other eye-catching feats." The popular entertainment was featured in movies such as *Roller Boogie* (1979), *Skatetown U.S.A.* (1979), and *Xanadu* (1980). And Linda Ronstadt's *Living in the USA* (1978) album cover highlighted the singer on skates.[32]

Skating enthusiasts loved the Saints roller rinks' "Disco on Wheels,' complete with multicolored lights and disco music; New Year's Eve

There's More!

Check out three additional online sidebars: "Ramsey County Roller Skating Rinks," "Racism at the Roller Rink," and "When Dad Runs the Rink." Go to: https://rchs.com/publishing/catalog/ramsey-county-history-summer-2023-roller-skating.

Children return their skates after a Saturday All-Skate session at Saints North in 2017. *Courtesy of Pete Boulay.*

bashes with balloon drops; and school skate nights. All drew big crowds. Roller rinks put on birthday parties and other celebrations, and many religious organizations hosted "Christian roller skating part[ies]."[33]

Pete Boulay, a.k.a. "PJ the DJ," who worked at Saints North, remembers a packed rink. Saturdays was especially popular, with as many as six birthday parties at one time. Kids loved the hula hoop contest and seeing who could twirl the most hoops at once. Other favorites included the hokey pokey and the limbo, which challenged skaters to see just "how low they could go." Boulay even joined in the fun. During the "Girls Only" skate, he'd don a large, foam, blonde wig and circle the floor with the girls as they yelled, "You're not a girl," clearly unimpressed by his "pretty" locks.[34]

Last Dance?

By the 1990s, the hype of the disco era was long gone, and the number of roller rinks continued to decline. Teenagers were watching movies with friends or hanging out at the mall and no longer needed a place like the roller rink to congregate on weekend nights. Silver Skate closed in 1974. In 1986, Saints Rosedale shuttered, followed a decade later by Skatedium. In 1996, only Saints North in Maplewood remained in Ramsey County.[35]

Kenny and Wendy Pearson purchased Saints North in 2005, bringing new life to the rink through outreach to Scouting organizations and schools. New Year's Eve celebrations included drawings for big prizes like a flat screen TV and special family packages. The Saint Paul Winter Carnival sponsored an official "Royal Skating Party" at the rink, complete with a visit from the Jr. Royal Family. Engagement with the skaters and ensuring they kept coming back was always the focus. And the Pearsons' efforts worked. But, as with many other places, COVID-19 dealt the final blow. When the pandemic forced nonessential businesses to shut down in March 2020, Saints North closed its doors, reopened on a reduced schedule briefly that fall, and then, ultimately, called it quits. For the first time in 137 years, Ramsey County had no active indoor roller rink. Skating fans were forced to hit the parks or find other outdoor locations to skate. Despite the loss of the indoor rinks, countless memories of the glory days in Ramsey County remain. And, who knows—maybe, one day, another roller rink will open, inviting the next generation of skaters to create their own memories for the ages.[36]

Acknowledgments: A huge thank you to Pete Boulay, Jacci Krebsbach, Sue Nelson, Jan Sinna, and Steve Spector for providing invaluable and heartwarming information on the Shoreview Roller Rink, Saints North, the Coliseum, and Skatedium. Although I never roller skated, I know many people who did and still cherish memories of their time at local rinks. Thanks to all who shared their stories on local Facebook history pages and helped me realize what fun I missed.

***Heidi Heller** is the archivist for the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. She also runs her own historical research business—Lamplight Research. She has written various blog posts as an archivist and for the Minneapolis-based, Historyapolis Project. Heller is a lifelong resident of Minnesota and lives in Ramsey County.*

NOTES

1. "The City Council: Miscellaneous," *St. Paul Globe,* January 18, 1882, 4; "City Council," *The Minneapolis Journal*, January 18, 1882, 4; "The Common Council," *St. Paul Globe,* February 8, 1882, 2; CPI Inflation Calculator, https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1882?amount=500; Paul R. Gold, "Rats, Politicians, Librarians: Untold Stories of the Old St. Francis Hotel," *Ramsey County History* 31, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 4-5. Market Hall dates to 1853 when the land at Seventh and Wabasha was used for the first public market in St. Paul but later housed city hall on the second floor. A "larger and more ornate" Market Hall was built in 1881 on the same site. A week after the improved facility opened, the Minnesota Capitol burned. The hall served as the interim capitol until 1883. It housed the Saint Paul Public Library in 1892 on the upper floor until a massive fire destroyed it in 1915. Carole Zellie and Garneth O. Peterson, *Historic Context Studies: Downtown St. Paul, 1849-1975* (St. Paul, MN: St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission, May 2001), 10.

2. "City Council: Miscellaneous," *St. Paul Globe,* February 21, 1883, 2; "City Council: Miscellaneous," *St. Paul Globe,* April 11 and 13, 1883, 2 and 2, 3.

3. James Turner with Michael Zaidman, *The History of Roller Skating* (Lincoln, NE: National Museum of Roller Skating, 1997), 7. Ice skating was popular in many Scandinavian countries, as well as the Netherlands. Becky Honeycombe, "Wonderful Things: Roller Skates, 1880," *Science Museum* (blog), August 25, 2015, https://blog.sciencemuseum.org.uk/wonderful-things-roller-skates-1880/#:~:text=The%20first%20prototypes%20of%20the,nailing%20them%20to%20his%20shoes.

4. Honeycombe; Turner with Zaidman, 7-8. From 1790 until 1863, various roller skate designs were developed, with some gaining use by the public or on stage to simulate ice skating; Ruth Terry, "The History Behind the Roller Skating Trend," *JSTOR Daily,* September 7, 2020, https://daily.jstor.org/the-history-behind-the-roller-skating-trend/.

5. Turner with Zaidman, 13-14, 25; Terry.

6. "The Roller Skate Industry," *The New York Times,* March 18, 1885, 3.

7. "The First Grand Reception," *St. Paul Globe*, May 3, 1883, 1; "Amusements: Market Hall," *St. Paul Globe*, May 6, 1883, 1; *See* multiple articles, *St. Paul Globe*, February to June 1883.

8. "Wigwam" and "Roller Skating," *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul, R. L. Polk & Co., 1883, 1885), 77, 611 and 949-950.

9. "The Roller Skating Rink," *St. Paul Globe,* March 16, 1884, 4; "The Roller Skating Rink," *St. Paul Globe,* March 4, 1883, 2; "The Roller Skating Rink," *St. Paul Globe,* March 30, 1884, 4.

10. "The Roller Skating Rink," *St. Paul Globe,* March 30, 1884, 4; "Fun on Wheels," *St. Paul Globe,* September 28, 1884, 3; "Grand Prize Hat Carnival," *St. Paul Globe,* March 25, 1885, 8; "Little Dannie Sprague," *St. Paul Globe,* May 1, 1885, 8; "At the Armory," *Green Bay Press-Gazette,* January 22, 1885, 3.

11. "Speed Skating," *National Museum of Roller Skating,* https://www.rollerskatingmuseum.org/speed-skating; "Wigwam Roller Skating Rink," *St. Paul Globe,* May 28, 1883, 8; "At the Roller Rink," *St. Paul Globe,* June 7, 1884, 2; CPI Inflation Calculator, https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1884?amount=25.

12. "The Question of Roller Skating," *Minneapolis Daily Tribune,* February 23, 1885, 4.

13. "The Question of Roller Skating;" "The Medical View of Roller Skating," *Scientific American* 52, no. 16 (April 18, 1885): 248; "Pneumonia and the Rink," *St. Paul Globe,* March 26, 1885, 6.

14. "Religion and Rinks."

15. "A New Crusade," *The New York Times,* February 11, 1885, 4; "Religion and Rinks," 10; "Roller Skating," *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1885), 571.

16. "Religion and Rinks."

17. "Roller Skating," *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co, 1885, 1886), 949-951 and 793, 844; "Eagerly Anticipated," *St. Paul Globe,* April 24, 1887, 9; "St. Paul Matters," *St. Paul Globe,* March 5, 1886, 2; "Personals," *St. Paul Globe,* July 18, 1886, 2; "St. Paul Roller Skating Rink," *St. Paul Globe*, June 3, 1888, 15; "Pierre Tobogganers," *St. Paul Globe,* January 9, 1887, 12; "Away We Go with a Rush," *St. Paul Globe,* January 10, 1886, 14; "Mayor Rice's Address," *St. Paul Globe,* January 15, 1886, 1.

18. "Roller Skating," *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul, R. L. Polk & Co, 1905, 1908, 1915, 1920), 1001, 2055, 1567, 679. Rinks listed by approximate order of opening dates; "Down Town Rink," *St. Paul Globe,* January 14, 1905, 5; "Truax Prompt in Ending Race Bar at Park," *St. Paul Recorder,* August 6, 1943, 1; "St. Peter Claver Society," *Twin-City Herald,* November 25, 1939, 1; "Twin City Community Workers Spring Frolic," *St. Paul Echo,* February 26, 1927, 2.

19. Turner with Zaidman, 33-34, 38; "About Us," *Roller Skating Association International,* https://www.rollerskating.com/pages/about/2.

20. "Speed King Kelly Wowed 'Em 50 Years Ago," *St. Paul Dispatch,* February 9, 1959, 2 in "Volume 1, 1910-1916, Scrapbook" and "Volume 2, 1915-1960, Scrapbook," *Raymond F. Kelly Papers, 1910-1960,* Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter MNHS); Turner with Zaidman, 58; "Volume 1, 1910-1916, Scrapbook" and "Volume 2, 1915-1960, Scrapbook."

21. Turner with Zaidman, 58.

22. "Davidson Willing to Race," *The Minneapolis Morning Tribune,* January 29, 1915, 13; "Davidson Wins Mile Race," *The Minneapolis Morning Tribune,* February 4, 1915, 15; "Davidson Again Beats Kelly," *The Minneapolis Journal,* February 6, 1915, 8.

23. "Volume 1, 1910-1916, Scrapbook" and "Volume 2, 1915-1960, Scrapbook."

24. "The Newest Craze," *Your Audio Tour*, National

Museum of Roller Skating, https://youraudiotour.com/tours/2302/stops/986.

25. Jan Sinna, interview with author, January 13, 2023; John Koblas, *Shoreview Reflections* (Shoreview, MN: Shoreview Historical Society, 2007), 115-117.

26. *St. Bernard's High School–Memorare Yearbook* (St. Paul, MN: St. Bernard's High School, 1966) 9, http://www.e-yearbook.com/yearbooks/St_Bernards_High_School_Memorare_Yearbook/1966/Page_9.html; Tom Anderson, post on "Old Saint Paul History-Private Facebook Page," *Facebook,* February 6, 1921, accessed April 30, 2023.

27. Gloria Yvonne Presley Massey and Floyd George Smaller, Jr., interviews by Kate Cavett, *Rondo Oral History Project,* Hand in Hand Productions, MNHS, February 27 and March 6, 2003 and April 2, 2002; Jacci Krebsbach, interview with author, January 19, 2023; Pete Boulay, *History of Roller Skating Rinks in Maplewood,* unpublished article shared with author.

28. Sue Tad Nelson, post on "Old Saint Paul History Page-Private Facebook Page," *Facebook,* January 8, 2021, accessed May 5, 2023; Leetta Douglas, interview with editor, May 31, 2023; Tom Anderson, post on "Old Saint Paul History-Private Facebook Page," *Facebook,* February 6, 2021, accessed April 30, 2023; Jacci Krebsbach, post on "Friends of Shoreview History," *Facebook,* January 27, 2023, accessed May 5, 2023.

29. Turner with Zaidman, 89; "Last Skate?," *St. Paul Pioneer Press,* August 28, 1996, 1B; Koblas, 115; Turner with Zaidman, 90, 92; Stew Thornley, "Lexington Park (St. Paul, MN)," *Society for American Baseball Research,* https://sabr.org/bioproj/park/lexington-park-st-paul/.

30. "The 1970s: Disco Fever," *Your Audio Tour*, National Museum of Roller Skating, https://youraudiotour.com/tours/2302/stops/9860; "Pop Culture! Orchestras, Organs & Disco: Music in the Rink," *Your Audio Tour*, National Museum of Roller Skating, https://youraudiotour.com/tours/2302/stops/9850.

31. "Roller Skating Here Becoming Big Business," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 21, 1973, 10; Peter Boo ran an advertising agency—Peter Boo & Associates. He became interested in roller skating rinks after visiting Lincoln, Nebraska, where the National Museum of Roller Skating is located. He eventually built seventeen Saints Roller Rinks in the Twin Cities, St. Louis, and Canada. He died February 19, 2023, at ninety-one. Saints West opened in West St. Paul (1675 S. Robert) in 1974.

32. "An easy way to get to the Minnesota State Fair," *St. Paul Pioneer Press,* August 26, 1974, 21; *Roller Boogie,* IMDb, 1979, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079822/; *Skatetown U.S.A.,* IMDb, 1979, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079912/?ref_=nv_sr_srsg_0; *Xanadu,* IMDb, 1980, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0081777/?ref_=nv_sr_srsg_0; *Living in the USA,* Asylum Records, Linda Ronstadt, 1978.

33. "Disco on Wheels," *Minneapolis Star*, October 18, 1978, 42; Pete Boulay, email interview with author, December 2, 2022; "A Christian roller skating party . . ." *Minneapolis Star Tribune,* September 30, 1982, 8.

34. Boulay, interview; Boulay, *History of Roller Skating Rinks in Maplewood.*

35. "Last Skate?," *St. Paul Pioneer Press,* August 28, 1996, 1B.

36. Boulay, *History of Roller Skating Rinks in Maplewood;* Pete Boulay, email interview with the author, April 30, 2023.

Notes for Sidebar on page 28

a. Janice Sinna, email correspondence with the author, April 29, 2023. Introduction as remembered by Jan Sinna sixty years ago; "Roller Skating," *The Minneapolis Star,* February 1, 1962, 36. Tri-State competitions took place in Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska. Skaters who placed in the top three in specific classes and categories continued to regionals, followed by nationals for the lucky few. In February 1962, Silver Skate in North St. Paul hosted that year's Tri-State event in Minnesota. It drew about 150 skaters. Coaches, parents, family members, and friends made up the cheering section.

b. James Turner with Michael Zaidman, *The History of Roller Skating* (Lincoln, NE: National Museum of Roller Skating, 1997), 34; Jacci Krebsbach, "Hanging out at the Shoreview Roller Rink," *Shoreview Press,* June 16, 2009, 1; Sinna, email correspondence.

c. Janice Sinna, phone interview with the author, January 13, 2023; Sinna, email correspondence.

d. Sinna, email correspondence; Janice Sinna, phone conversation with editor, June 22, 2023. Jan Sinna remembers the wooden floors could get slippery. The competitive skaters often sprinkled resin powder on the floors, which helped alleviate the problem.

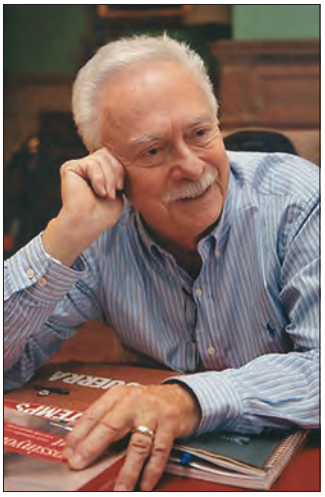
e. Krebsbach, 1; Sinna, phone interview.

f. Sinna, email correspondence.

g. Krebsbach, 1; Sinna, phone interview; Janice Sinna, email correspondence with the author, January 9, 2023.

h. "Skateville Dance & Figure," USA Roller Sports Clubs, https://usarollersports.sport80.com/public/widget/2.

A Tribute to John Watson Milton (1935-2023)



John Watson Milton at a book signing in Barcelona around 2005. *Courtesy of Maureen Acosta.*

JOHN M. LINDLEY, RCHS EDITOR EMERITUS

I didn't know John Watson Milton as a politician; I only knew him as a man who was passionate about politics.

Dick Nicholson of St. Paul introduced me to John, probably in 2008. Dick was a member of the editorial board of the Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS), a volunteer group of which I was also a member. At one of those board meetings that always began at 8 a.m. in a drafty, fourth-floor courtroom of the Landmark Center, Dick welcomed John as a guest and told us a little about his work as a writer and historian. It was the beginning of a fruitful collaboration between John and RCHS. Shortly afterward, the society published an article in its quarterly history magazine that John had written. Soon, he joined the editorial board, writing additional articles for *Ramsey County History.*

A graduate of Princeton University and the Harvard Business School Executive Program, John worked for several businesses, including Fortune 100 and healthcare companies. He was elected to the Minnesota Senate in 1972 and 1976. There, he chaired the health subcommittee and authored major bills to improve healthcare, especially for seniors.

John was also writing, publishing, and speaking about issues that interested him. In 2005, he published *The Fallen Nightengale,* a biography of Enrique Granados (1867–1916), a Spanish composer of classical music. This award-winning book was published in Spanish and Catalan, as well—languages in which John was fluent.

In 2011, John approached RCHS about publishing his biographical manuscript of the late Minnesota senator from St. Paul, Nicholas D. Coleman (1925–1981). John had served in the senate with Coleman and was an admirer of the late senator's politics and accomplishments. John spent years researching, interviewing, and writing this book. Published in 2012, *For the Good of the Order: Nick Coleman and the High Tide of Liberal Politics in Minnesota, 1971–1981* was well received and has become a standard account of Minnesota politics in the 1970s.

Writing about state politics wasn't new for John. In 2008, he published *Time to Choose,* a novel that addressed the complex issues related to abortion. In 2010, he wrote the afterword to the late Senator Allan H. Spear's memoir, *Crossing the Barriers. S*pear (1937–2008) was one of the first openly gay Americans to serve in elected office. In the senate, the two had worked together to bring what John identified as "fairness, opportunity, shared sacrifice, justice, and peace" to Minnesotans. They became close friends.

John Milton was never at a loss for words. When I worked with him on *For the Good of the Order,* my biggest challenge was determining how to trim some of his words and sharpen his prose so that the verbal volume didn't put off readers or cause them to miss his point. John had a keen eye for detail and nuance. Those strengths in his writing rose out of the vast research he'd done as he immersed himself in his subject. He also knew how to construct a scene, whether in historical writing or in fiction. When appropriate, he might introduce a musical reference, such as a piece or segment by a particular composer that helped set the tone. As someone who spent eight years casting a vote on a host of bills in the Minnesota Senate, John didn't shy away from telling you where he stood on a question. He knew how to make a choice. He did the same in his writing.

The Ramsey County Historical Society is grateful for all John Milton contributed to the board and the society through his writing, reviews, advice, and humor. He is missed.

Honoring WWII Codebreakers and the Founding of Engineering Research Associates

DAVE BEAL, LOWELL BENSON, DON HALL, JAY PFAENDER, AND CHAD ROBERTS

In a salute to a remarkably powerful era of entrepreneurism, the Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) celebrated the enduring economic and technological activity unleashed in the Twin Cities by Engineering Research Associates (ERA) more than seventy-five years ago. Before a crowd of 200 computer and technology industry leaders, historians, business people, and curious neighbors, a commemorative plaque was installed at the company's original site, 1902 Minnehaha Avenue West, on Thursday, June 15, 2023.

ERA was formed in 1946 by a group of US Navy codebreakers who had been brought together to help the country and its allies win World War II. They were mathematicians, physicists, engineers, and other specialists who interpreted German and Japanese electronic communications at a top-secret location near Washington, DC. When the war ended, the Secretary of the Navy hoped to keep them together because he saw the group as an important national resource. Securing funding proved difficult until John Parker, a US Naval Academy graduate working in corporate finance, raised $220,000.

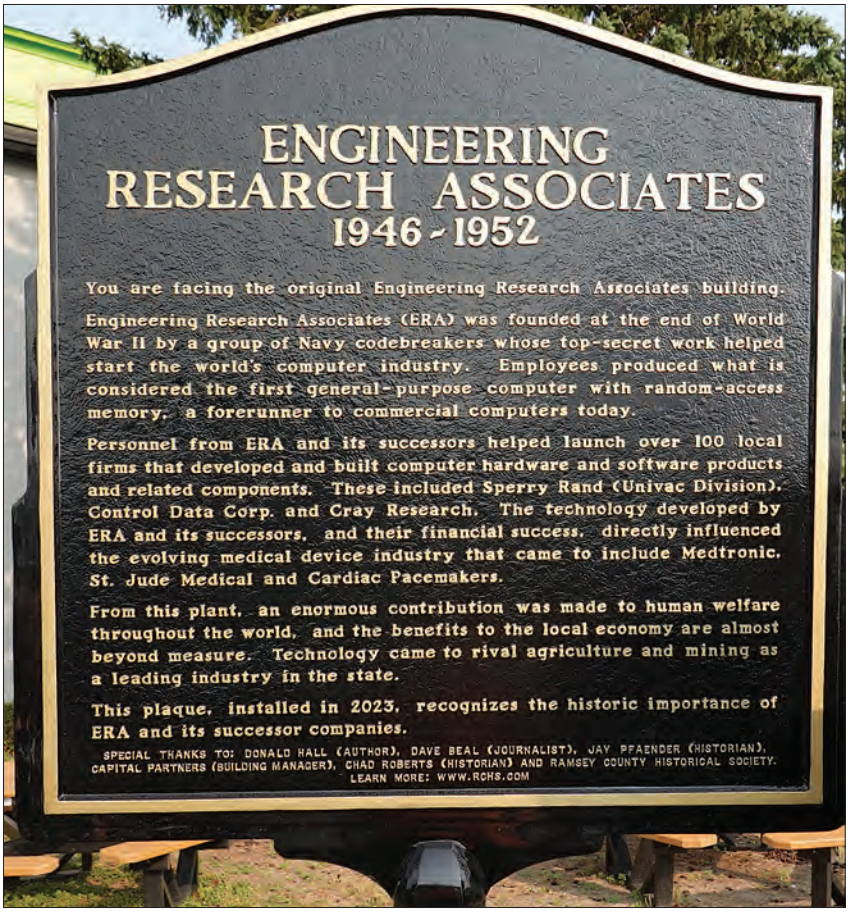
Although a Washington resident, Parker also owned a St. Paul-based glider business at 1902 Minnehaha that was deactivated after the war. He moved key employees from DC to his empty factory. In doing so, he established the Twin Cities as one of the cradles of the computer industry, eventually making it the home for many thousands of jobs in more than 100 technology companies.

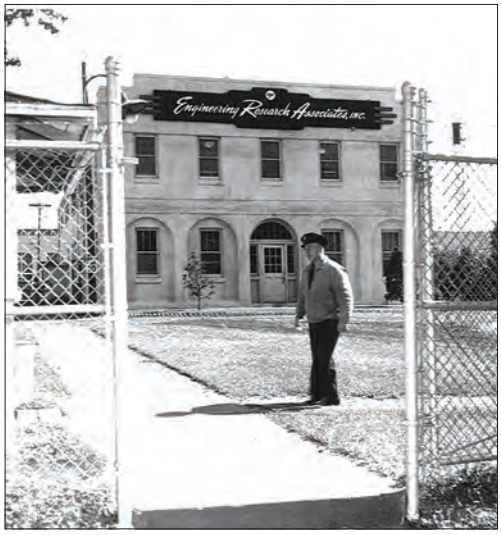
A lineage of corporate growth emerged in 1952, when Remington Rand bought and combined ERA and Eckert-Mauchly Computer Corporation in Philadelphia to form Remington Rand UNIVAC (RRU). Four years later, Sperry Corporation acquired Remington Rand and renamed the company Sperry Rand. Its various computer activities were consolidated into the Univac Division. In 1986, Sperry and Burroughs Corporation merged to form Unisys, which then operated at twenty-eight sites around the Twin Cities.

William Norris was an early member of the codebreakers group and of ERA. In 1957, he left RRU to found Control Data Corporation, which became one of the world's leading computer manufacturers and spawned dozens of spinoff companies. Seymour Cray, an employee of ERA and later Control Data, left the latter in 1972 to form Cray Research, a company that dominated the supercomputer market well into the 1980s. The successes of these companies inspired local engineers to apply their technical expertise to medical products and create dozens of medical device companies.

By the 1980s, Control Data and Unisys each had more than 20,000 employees in Minnesota. But, with the invention of the microchip, the country's computer technology center moved, in large part, to Silicon Valley, California. Still, at least four Control Data descendants, all in Bloomington, remain in the region: Ceridian, SkyWater Technology, Polar Semiconductor, and Seagate Technology Holdings. Unisys retains a service center in Eagan.

"The plaque memorializes the ERA story, serving as reminder of Minnesota's place as an early founder of the region's high-tech economy while also underscoring the importance of entrepreneurs to our community," said Chad Roberts, president and CEO of RCHS.





The original Engineering Research Associates (ERA) building from the 1950s still stands on Minnehaha Avenue in St. Paul's Midway area. In June, guests and visitors witnessed the unveiling of a new historical marker at the site. *Courtesy of Keith Myhre, Lowell Benson, and Jay Pfaender.*

Among the speakers at the event were John Rollwagen, who was CEO at Cray Research, and Manny Villafaña, who left Medtronic to found Cardiac Pacemakers, St. Jude Medical, and other medical technology firms. "It's true that individuals start companies from scratch and build them into big companies," Rollwagen said. "I still believe it can happen." Villafaña has founded and taken public seven medical technology companies and is now on his eighth startup. "We're still the mecca of the med-tech industry," he said.

This is not the first time the Minnehaha Avenue site has earned a commemorative plaque. Lowell Benson has consistently kept the ERA story alive as the historian of the VIP Club, which has represented retirees from ERA and its successor companies since 1980. Benson said Sperry placed a plaque on the site in 1986, but it disappeared in the 1990s.

The Ramsey County Historical Society acknowledges the work of Benson and of the University of Minnesota's Charles Babbage Institute, which has assembled an extensive collection of documents about the computer industry in Minnesota. Erwin Tomash, an engineer at ERA, founded the institute, and Dr. Arthur Norberg, who held the university's ERA Land Grant Chair for the History of Technology, was the institute's first chair.

RCHS appreciates the generosity of Don Hall in making this event possible. Hall is the author of *Generation of Wealth: The rise of Control Data and how it inspired an era of innovation and growth in the Upper Midwest* (2014). RCHS also thanks the project team of Hall, Dave Beal, Lowell Benson, Jay Pfaender, and Chad Roberts, as well as the current owners of the building, Capital Partners, for their assistance with this project.

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

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 Ȟeyáta Othúŋwe (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 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.

Acknowledging This Sacred Dakota Land

Mnisóta Makhóčhe, 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 Makhóčhe. 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. This includes actionable ways in which RCHS pledges to honor the Dakota and other Indigenous peoples of Mnisóta Makhóčhe.

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

GIBBS FARM
Pathways to Dakota & Pioneer Life
Experience | Understand | Grow

www.rchs.com info@rchs.com (651) 222-0701

GIBBS FARM

Pathways GALA

Benefiting children's hands-on educational programming

Photo credit: Jen Strom

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

Pathways Gala

Tuesday, September 12, 2023
Wabasha Street Caves

Join RCHS for a night of food, fun, and philanthropy at the Wabasha Street Caves, Saint Paul's famed prohibition-era hideaway for the most notorious gangsters of the '30s.

Enhance the evening with a unique Pathways Gala VIP Experience.

For event details and registration
rchs.com/event/pathways-gala
or call 651-222-0701

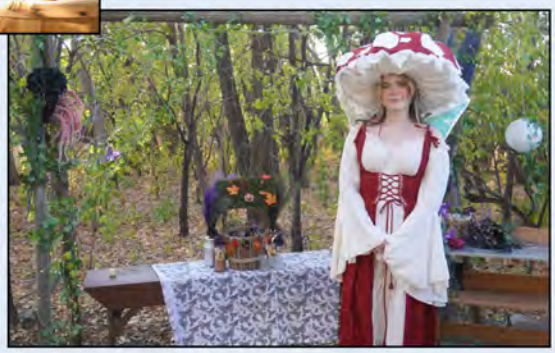
Gibbs Farm Fall Public Hours:

Saturdays through October, 10am-4pm

Festivals:

Apple Festival
Saturday, September 30
10am-2pm
Enjoy music, tours of the apple orchard and historic buildings, fun apple crafts, and much more!

Halloween Trick-or-Treat Trail
Saturday, October 28
12-6pm
Our all-ages Steampunk Trick-or-Treat Trail is back! Pre-registration opens in September.



Adult Evening Events:

- **Early Harvest Grounds & Gardens Tour**
  Tuesday, August 29, 5:30-7:30pm
- **Behind-the Scenes Farmhouse Tour**
  Wednesday, September 6, 5:30-7:30pm
- **Late Summer Grounds & Gardens Tour**
  Wednesday, September 20, 5:30-7:30pm

GIBBS FARM
Pathways to Dakota & Pioneer Life
Experience | Understand | Grow

Details and tickets can be found on our website:

www.rchs.com

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

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

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. Postage
PAID
Twin Cities, MN
Permit No. 3989

These young teens were members of St. Michael's Skating Club. Such clubs for devoted "rink rats" were popular in the 1950s and '60s. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Rolling through the Decades

Roller Skating in Ramsey County

HEIDI HELLER, PAGE 22