

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

*Setting the Record Straight*

**The Scoop that Helped Save  
a St. Paul Landmark**

LINDA KOHL, PAGE 10



*Architect of St. Paul's West Side*

# H. Emil Strassburger

NICOLE FOSS, PAGE 1





## By the Numbers . . .

When researching the built environment, building permits and related materials are invaluable. These documents provide addresses; building specifications; filing dates; names of owners, contractors, and builders; project costs; and other details. In this issue, all three authors focused on the built environment. Two writers—Nicole Foss and Krista Finstad Hanson—spent hours reviewing permits at the Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center—the only location where early city permits are housed.

Thanks to support from the Dietz Family Foundation of the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation and a Legacy Grant, RCHS is now creating a web-based portal providing online access to our nearly 2 million pages of permits and other documents by year's end. This project has been financed, in part, with funds provided by the State of Minnesota from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the Minnesota Historical Society. Check out the stats below to learn more:

Year the City of St. Paul's License, Inspection, and Environmental Protection Office donated its building permits from 1883 to 1975 to RCHS:  
**2003**

Year our Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center opened:  
**2010**

Number of St. Paul building permits housed at RCHS:  
**385,000**

Number of pages of permits that will be available online by end of 2024:  
**Nearly 2 million**

Number of research requests received at RCHS in 2023:  
**1,429**

Please visit our Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center for building permits or other research needs in the lower level of Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street.

SOURCE: RCHS Director of Collections and Exhibitions Mollie Spillman.

### ON THE COVER



Architect H. Emil Strassburger spent about fifteen years making his mark on St. Paul's West Side. Photo and name plate courtesy of John Riley; Architectural tools courtesy of Dmitry Makeev (compass) and the Collection of Auckland Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira (ruler) via Wikipedia Commons.

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## Message from the Editorial Board

A city boasting a variety of architecture, St. Paul is a testament to both change and preservation. Economies boom and bust, peace follows war, buildings stand or fall. An architect's work endures or gets scraped by a bulldozer. Most often, the prevailing styles and civic leaders of the time dictate what stays and what goes. Architect Emil Strassburger is a perfect example of this, as Nicole Foss reveals to us. His work is much admired and played a big role in developing St. Paul's West Side, but most of it is gone today. Linda Kohl tells us that sometimes there is only a serendipitous series of events that spares landmarks, like our own Landmark Center. And sometimes, modest well-built homes endure far longer than their bigger, flashier counterparts, as Krista Finstad Hanson details for us in her piece on the Hamline Midway neighborhood.

Whether your home, your office, or your favorite cultural landmark looks like the ornate layers of a wedding cake or a sleek functional design of steel and glass, the common denominator is people. Regardless of the architectural styles of the day, the buildings of our city belong to the citizens who make up our businesses and neighborhoods. As immigration ebbed and flowed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so did the prevailing styles of architecture across the city. To follow the threads of these structures is to discover the tapestry of St. Paul.

*Anne Field*  
Chair, Editorial Board

*Publication of Ramsey County History is supported, in part, by a gift from Clara M. Clausen and Frieda H. Clausen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr., and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon.*

*Ramsey County History has revised its numbering system. At the start of each calendar year, the first issue will be labeled No. 1. This issue is Winter 2024, Vol. 59, No. 1. Note that with this change, Vol. 58 includes only three issues for 2023.*

# Book Reviews

## **Prairie Imperialists: The Indian Country Origins of American Empire**

Katharine Bjork

Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019

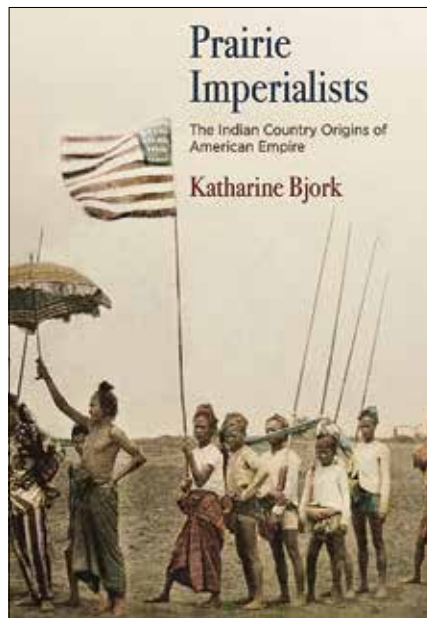
352 pages; hard cover, 13 b&w photos, 5 maps, \$64.95

REVIEWED BY RENOIR GAITHER

Hamline University professor Katharine Bjork's book, *Prairie Imperialists: The Indian Country Origins of American Empire*, examines an important, albeit often overlooked, period of American imperialism—from America's "Indian Wars" of the late nineteenth century to the nation's emergence as an imperial power in its occupation of the Philippines, Cuba, and other former Spanish colonies. Bjork argues that the logic of US empire and rights of sovereignty established during American territorial expansion and Indian dispossession in the late 1800s was carried into America's later imperial designs abroad. The latest examples include wars involving counterinsurgency in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Bjork highlights the importance of the commonly held, popular tropes of racial superiority among American whites that marked differences between them and "racial others," punitive pacification strategies, and use and valorization of Native auxiliaries and scouts. While these features of imperial encounters are well documented in scholarly literature, Bjork's narrative choices skillfully bring out the motives, values, and internal conflicts of her central characters.

Bjork introduces readers to memorable US military leaders and settings and some suspenseful moments highlighted through the lives and actions of US Army officers Hugh Lenox Scott, Robert Lee Bullard, and John J. Pershing. All served in "Indian War" campaigns following the US Civil War. They later held a succession of colonial offices in Cuba and the Philippines. Concluding



chapters focus on Pershing's punitive expedition in Mexico in response to Francisco "Pancho" Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico, in March 1916.

Discussion of the role of Indigenous scouts in these campaigns against Native peoples is laudable and may be surprising to some readers, as it is the through line to use of such auxiliaries today. According to Bjork, ". . . the logic of empire rendered all colonized people scouts." She adds, "The expected role for the Natives in this scenario [referring to the Spanish-American War] was to provide local knowledge and act in a supporting role."<sup>1</sup> Recent examples of supportive auxiliaries in American military campaigns include Iraqi Army scouts and translators, as well as ethnic minorities who formed the Northern Alliance in US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Despite some skepticism among military leadership, use of whites and non-whites as scouts proved advantageous to empire building. Skepticism derived primarily from a deeply-held belief among some that whites engaged in military scouting might lose their own racial identity and superiority. White scouts ran the risk of "going Native" or perhaps compromising their investment

in cultural white supremacy. At stake was a kind of "tainting" of white civilization with cultural and racial primitivism.

Bjork writes about Robert Lee Bullard's conflicted relationship between scouting and white civilization: "Bullard thought that white civilization was antithetical to the values of scouting, which he extolled in his writings. He remained equally insistent on the redemptive power of such a connection with the primitive precisely for "super-civilized" (presumptively Anglo-Saxon) men."<sup>2</sup>

However, a belief prevailed that accorded an unwavering valor to Indigenous and African American scouts, due to genetic or racial/ethnic advantages. Bjork notes that such valorization of scouting units was part of America's historic symbolic construction of racial hierarchy, subordination, and traits of inheritance. For example, her discussion of the so-called "immune regiments" of African American troops during the Spanish-American War in Cuba follows this theme.

Critical to Bjork's argument is the persistent friction between romanticized notions of racial "otherness" inherent in the colonized and guarded acceptance of cultural and racial superiority among American military leadership engaged in imperialist warfare.

Bjork notes that imperialism not only attempts to circumscribe new geographic boundaries of sovereignty but cultural ones, as well. The character of American imperialism was—and in many respects, continues to be—shaped by debate over these two margins. American military leaders of this period developed strategies of containment and punitive measures to maintain cultural and physical boundaries between new American sovereigns and racial others in occupied territories following the 1898 war. This book describes these strategies of governance built around a core threat of punitive military violence and "the racial dimensions of political and social life at home."<sup>3</sup>

*Prairie Imperialists* provides excellent background on the cultural and political mores and conduct of senior military

### **You Know History: Send Your Ideas**

Ramsey County Historical Society welcomes article proposals for our quarterly history magazine *Ramsey County History*, as well as for books, podcasts, and other media—because who knows history better than members of our community at the county, city, or even neighborhood level? Visit <https://rchs.com/publishing/got-history/> to learn more.



leaders and those whose profiles Bjork provides. This book is aimed at readers interested in military history, American studies scholars, and historians. Included are archival black and white photographs and maps that highlight relevant content. At times, it would have been helpful to have the maps placed closer to pertinent discussions. Still, this scholarly, well-researched book includes generous notes, accurate index references and cross-references, and a solid bibliography.

*Renoir Gaither is a poet and former academic librarian. He has held positions at the Shapiro Undergraduate Library at the University of Michigan and Magrath Library at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul. He is a member of the Ramsey County Historical Society Editorial Board.*

## NOTES

1. Katharine Bjork, *Prairie Imperialists: The Indian Country Origins of American Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2019), 16.
2. Bjork, 77.
3. Bjork, 17.

## The Heart of the Heartland: Norwegian American Community in the Twin Cities

David C. Mauk

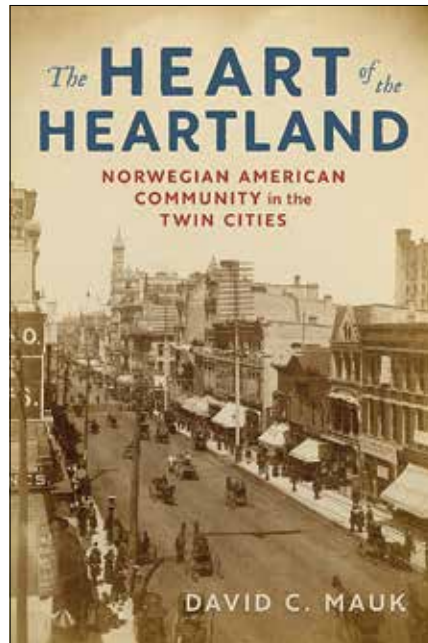
St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2022

472 pages; paperback, b&w illustrations, 7 maps, \$29.95

REVIEWED BY MARY LETHERT WINGERD

As the title of this volume suggests, the Twin Cities, especially Minneapolis, have long claimed the title as the heart of Norwegian settlement in America. Even today, generations beyond the peak exodus from Norway, Minnesota is renowned as an ethnic Scandinavian stronghold, though in reality that distinction is increasingly difficult to detect in its present-day multiethnic population.

Still, as David C. Mauk compellingly demonstrates in this densely researched tome, Norwegian immigrants and generations of their descendants played essential roles in the settlement and development of the Twin Cities and the social/cultural ethos that came to distinguish them. The author offers a tour de force of research, mining



every available source to find evidence of Norwegian influence from the outset of white settlement to the present.

Scholars of immigration and ethnicity will find much to appreciate in the level of detail presented here. Such a fine-grained examination of a particular community is invaluable in bringing to light larger patterns of immigrant settlement and acculturation. For example, Mauk traces a little-studied phenomenon of rural-to-urban ethnic chain migration that greatly influenced community development in the Twin Cities. In fact, the greatest growth in the Norwegian community there came well after direct immigration from Norway had slowed. Minneapolis and Saint Paul acted as magnets that drew Norwegians who had first settled in rural Minnesota. They came to the cities with a store of American experience, which enhanced their ability to navigate the urban environment and advance the success of the ethnic group as a whole. This insight and others to be gleaned from this study have broad implications for immigration studies.

One could wish, though, for more information about conditions in Norway that prompted, and then ended, such a significant exodus. Who were these people? What were the political and economic conditions that caused them to pull up stakes in the first place and undertake such a life-changing journey?

Experiences in the home country clearly factored into the way the community grew and developed in Minnesota, as well as its complicated relationship with Swedish and Danish fellow ethnic Americans, and continued attachment to Norway itself. Though we learn here that generations of Norwegian Americans maintained a strong connection to their historic homeland, somewhat more attention to the initial push factors would have enriched an understanding of the evolving social and cultural landscape.

Nonetheless, historians will value the breadth and depth of information in this volume. The general, interested reader, however, may find the level of detail daunting. The fascinating story of the Norwegian-American community often gets lost in a plethora of facts that do little to advance the narrative. It seems unnecessary to know the hour-by-hour schedule of events for every Norwegian celebration or to know the name of every person who headed one of the Norwegian congregations or organizations. And it is impossible to follow the intricate descriptions of neighborhood and ward configurations without a map to function as a guide.

None of this, however, should deter those with a serious interest in the Norwegian-American experience in America. Nor should it detract from the contributions to immigration scholarship made by this volume, which represents a prodigious accomplishment, clearly the result of years of dedicated research by an expert on this subject. There is much to be learned from this authoritative history of the “heart of the heartland,” a welcome addition to Minnesota history and to the broad canvas of immigration history as well.

*Mary Lethert Wingerd is professor emerita of history at St. Cloud State University. She is the author of Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul and North Country: The Making of Minnesota.*

*This review originally published in the journal Norwegian-American Studies 41. Copyright 2023 Norwegian-American Historical Association. It is reprinted here with permission from the Norwegian-American Historical Association and the University of Minnesota Press.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





## In Memoriam

In recent months, Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) said goodbye to two admired members of the RCHS Board of Directors—Carl Kuhrmeyer (1928-2023) and Roxanne Sands (1940-2023)—and to David Riehle (1946-2024) a member of our editorial board.

**Carl Kuhrmeyer** grew up on St. Paul's East Side and loved the city of his childhood. He enjoyed a forty-two-year career at 3M, first in the role of mechanical engineer and later as executive vice president. Kuhrmeyer was an experienced board member in the East Metro, collaborating on many boards, always with the goal of improving people's lives. He brought humor and tremendous talent to the RCHS board from 2012-2022, serving as second vice chair and member of the Gibbs Farm Transformation Task Force. He and his wife, Janet, were generous contributors to RCHS, providing leadership in the renovation of the Red Barn.

**Roxanne Sands** brought positive energy to the work of RCHS and made the projects she was involved in more fun for everyone. In her professional life, she was a graphic designer and editor. Civically, she was a member of the Junior League of Saint Paul and City of Lilydale Planning Commission. She joined the RCHS board in 2016 and served as secretary from 2018-2021.

**David Riehle** was a beloved member of the RCHS editorial board. Over twenty years, he shared his expertise and love of birding, labor, politics, social justice, and railroading in the many fascinating articles he wrote for *Ramsey County History* magazine. Committee members were always eager to learn history through Riehle's unique perspectives.

*RCHS is grateful for the diligent work and thoughtful collaboration that Kuhrmeyer, Sands, and Riehle brought to RCHS and the community. They are missed.*



The poster features a large yellow sun in the top left corner and a purple butterfly on the right. The title "GIBBS FARM SUMMER CAMPS" is prominently displayed in the center, with "GIBBS FARM" in green, "SUMMER" in white with a red outline, and "CAMPS" in large white letters with a red outline. Below the title, it says "CAMPS FOR KIDS AGES 4 TO 13" in green. A blue button with white text reads "REGISTER AT RCHS.COM". On the right, there is a logo for Gibbs Farm, which includes a red barn and a black teepee, with the text "GIBBS FARM" below it. At the bottom, there are two circular images: one on the left shows a child in a blue hat looking at a horse in a field, and one on the right shows a child in a baseball cap holding a bunch of carrots. A green circular area at the bottom center contains a list of camp activities.

**GIBBS FARM**  
**SUMMER CAMPS**  
CAMPS FOR KIDS AGES 4 TO 13  
REGISTER AT [RCHS.COM](http://RCHS.COM)

**GIBBS FARM**

**PeeWee Mini Camps**  
**Kids on the Farm**  
**Dakota Camp**  
**Life of a Gibbs Girl**  
**Nature Detectives**  
**Victorian Ladies**  
**Minnesota Time Travel Camp**  
**Farm Survivor**





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*It Takes a Village*

## Building Community in the Hamline Midway Neighborhood

KRISTA FINSTAD HANSON, PAGE 19

INSPECTOR'S COPY

CITY OF SAINT PAUL  
 DIVISION OF BUILDING INSPECTION  
 ROOM 219, CITY HALL, SECOND FLOOR

PERMIT No. 33514

TOTAL FEE COLLECTED \$ 2 25

DOUBLE FEE COLLECTED

TO: BUILD  ERECT  INSTALL  ADD  ALTER  REPAIR  MOVE  WRECK

ACCOUNT ORDINANCE VIOLATION  MARK SQUARES WITH

9-7 1928  
 owl

PERMISSION IS HEREBY GRANTED:

OWNER Theo. H. Mertens ADDRESS 762 W. Mannesha

CONTRACTOR \_\_\_\_\_ ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

To carry out the work indicated above on the following described property, upon the express condition that said persons and their agents, employees and workmen, in such work done, shall conform in all respects to the ordinances of the City of Saint Paul, Minnesota. THIS PERMIT DOES NOT AUTHORIZE ELECTRICAL, PLUMBING, INTERIOR, OR EXTERIOR PLASTERING, HEATING, or any work not fully described herein. Permits for the use of public property, such as streets, sidewalks, alleys, etc., must be secured from the Department of Public Works.

NUMBER	STREET	SIDE	BETWEEN WHAT STREETS
1199	Capitol	N	Guggis & Dunlap
WARD	LOT	BLOCK	ADDITION OR TRACT
10	21	6	Gilberts

FRONT OR WIDTH Feet	SIDE OR LENGTH Feet	HEIGHT Feet	NUMBER OF STORES	CONSTRUCTED OF	CONTENTS Cubical or Square Feet	COST OF WORK Covered by this Permit
34	41		1	Frame		\$ 4000

DETAILS OR REMARKS

COMMISSIONER OF PARKS,  
 PLAYGROUNDS, AND PUBLIC BUILDINGS  
 Ex-Officio Building Inspector

BY [Signature]

PENALTY: FOR VIOLATION OF ANY OF THE PROVISIONS OF BUILDING CODE, ORDINANCE NO. 5580: FINE OF FROM FIVE (\$5.00) TO ONE HUNDRED (\$100.00) DOLLARS OR IMPRISONMENT FOR FROM FIVE (5) TO NINETY (90) DAYS.

FORM C80-16 19M 11-26

On September 6, 1928, Theodore Mertens applied for a permit to construct a modest home at 1199 Capitol Avenue (Englewood Avenue today). Mertens signed the application "Theo. H. Mertens for H. Schaeffgen," also a local contractor and Merten's father-in-law. The pair worked together to build most of the houses along the 1162-1218 section of this street. The next day, this permit was issued. As Krista Finstad Hanson conducted research for her Hamline Midway article, she relied heavily on St. Paul Building Permits to understand how and when the twenty-nine homes built here came to be. Author Nicole Foss also made use of these permits for her cover story. The permits are archived at Ramsey County Historical Society and will be available online by the end of 2024. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*