

Little Women, Little Houses, Lots of Work, (and a Little Play)

WENDY ROSSI

Travel back in time with me to the 1940s. These were the war years, although the US didn't enter the conflict until December 1941. I was a little girl—born in 1938—oblivious to world events. I lived with my parents—June and Clarence Ham—in a St. Paul neighborhood known as Frogtown. Ours was a little house at 435 Charles Avenue. My maternal grandparents—Violet and Guy Metzger—lived just around the corner at 554 Arundel Street.¹

I was the first child and the first granddaughter. As such, I was indulged and remained “the only” in the family for several years. Gumpa Guy especially adored me. He built a dollhouse and presented it to me on my third birthday, April 9, 1941.

No Ordinary Dollhouse

There were no marble-topped tables, long mirrors, or lace curtains . . . , but simple furniture, plenty of books, a fine picture or two. . . .²

This wasn't just any dollhouse. Gumpa Guy decided it should be a close replica of my family's six-room home and set out to use his considerable skills to build a 36 x 20 x 28-inch structure that included lights *and* “plumbing.”³ He enlisted the talents of other family members, too. Grandma Violet and my Grandma (Mae) Ham crocheted little potholders and sewed curtains in red and white—the same colors that brightened our actual kitchen. They even found



Wendy Ham (Rossi) lived a hop, skip, and jump away from her grandparents. Here, Wendy poses with her parents and grandmother in 1944 in the Metzgers' backyard—with the Ham house in the background. The photo of Gumpa Guy was taken in 1942. He was quite pleased—both with his car and his catch. *Courtesy of Wendy Rossi.*

a wooden table with four red chairs like we had. They sewed flowered drapes by hand for the dining room and duplicated the pretty blue colors of my room and the peach of the master bedroom. Grandma Violet created a couch and

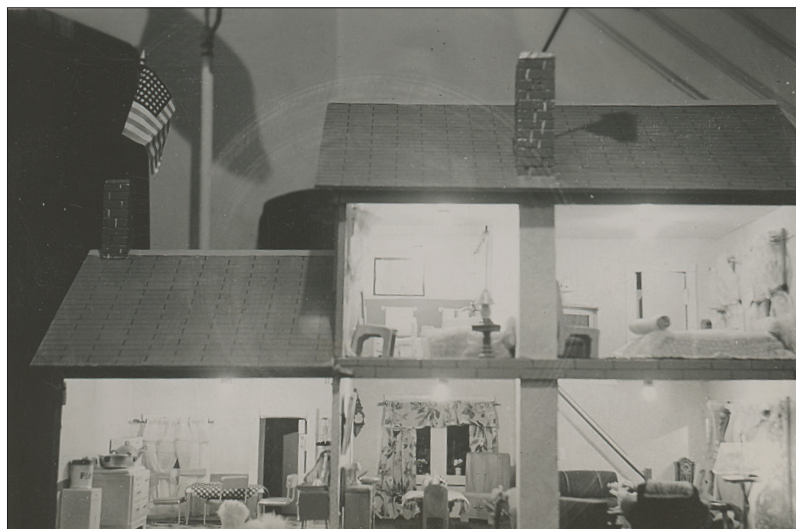
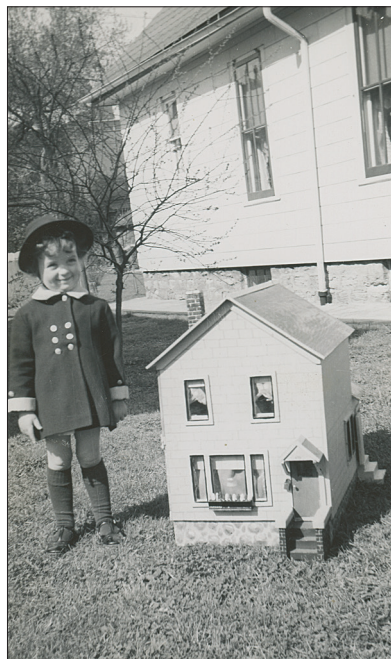
upholstered chair in burgundy—just like ours. The only room that could not be duplicated was the bathroom with its high, pull-chain tank above the toilet and a porcelain clawfoot tub. Instead, they found plastic fixtures and sewed tiny towels.

My father drew the lines of the grey siding and the red shingles on the roof. He painted the foundation stones and basement windows. Everyone gathered additional furnishings, including a rack for miniature books and magazines to replicate the real thing. Family members also added a grandfather clock, a dog, and a piano which, regrettably, we did not have.

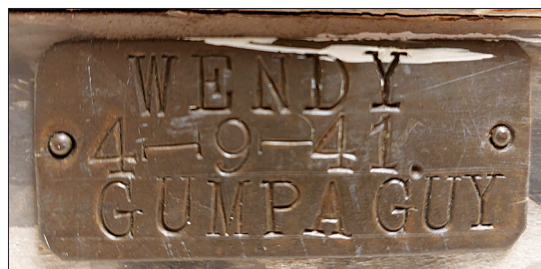
And so it was that on my third birthday, I was escorted outdoors to see for the first time this remarkable collaboration standing “two stories” high in the early spring grass. I don’t recall my reaction, but strangely enough, I vividly remember playing in the snow a few months earlier and hearing a rap on Gumpa’s window. I looked up to see him grinning from ear to ear. That dollhouse was completed in just a few months. Everyone must have been very busy.

Mother, who had very little to do with the creation of the dollhouse, nominated herself “Official Guardian.” For life. The miniature structure was carefully carried upstairs and placed on a low table inside the walk-in closet off my bedroom. I was allowed to play with it occasionally and only by myself. I have no memory of any occupants in the dollhouse, so I don’t know exactly how I played with it. I might have just stared at the illuminated interior from within the dark closet, afraid to touch or move anything.

When I grew up, I bought a family complete with grandparents for the dollhouse and carelessly let my two children and others play with it. At one point, our dog, Roulette, chewed “father” to bits, so then the family became a single mother raising two children with her parents’ help. You can understand my mother’s concern.



Young Wendy Ham’s Gumpa Guy surprised her with a dollhouse on her third birthday. It was designed to replicate the family home at 435 Charles Avenue. *Courtesy of Wendy Rossi.*



And Then There Were Books

I’d have . . . rooms piled with books.⁴

While access to the dollhouse was somewhat restricted under Mother’s watchful eyes, that was not the case with books. I learned to read in the usual way—in first grade with “Alice and Jerry.”⁵

I remember my excitement when it was time to read aloud, sitting at the front of the class on little chairs around the teacher. Reading gave me wings to fly. I read anything I could find, which was not a lot. Jackson Elementary had a library the size of a large closet. I devoured those books quickly enough. The nearest public library was the big central one downtown. Thankfully, our teachers borrowed boxes of books from there to augment their meager collections. My family kept a set of junior encyclopedias at home. Each volume included a story that I reread often, along with the many alphabetized entries. Relatives knew to give me books for my birthday, as well.

The book *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott was a gift from Grandma Violet when I was eight. I adored the story of the March sisters who grew up together in the previous century. I only had a baby sister at the time, so I especially enjoyed getting to know the girls' distinct personalities and learning about the sisterly things they did together.

I also was given Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* to read, but I knew I could never be a Pollyanna. The fictional siblings Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March were more adventurous and had actual character flaws I could relate to. I secretly wanted to be Beth—pale, sweet, and tragic. Unfortunately, I was too robust.

The Family Factory

... [F]ather ... never loses patience, — never doubts or complains, — but always hopes, and works and waits so cheerfully, that one is ashamed to do otherwise before him.⁶

By today's standards, life was pretty dull at 435 Charles, but as I reflect back, I realize that a little factory was humming away inside our home, day after day, 365 days a year. Mother had her duties, which included cooking and cleaning, laundry, and childcare. Still, she was always ready to greet Daddy when he came home from work.

Daddy had housework, too. He mowed the grass and shoveled snow in winter. He clipped the long hedge that rimmed the empty lot on the corner of Charles and Arundel and took care of small repairs around the house. His primary

job was to earn a wage and support his family as a graphic artist. He drove the car—a Hudson Terraplane—when we finally could afford one.

Many daddies also doled out discipline but not at 435 Charles. Any infraction on my part was addressed by Mother on the spot, so I never had to spend my day dreading Daddy's return. On the contrary, this quiet and gentle man with a witty sense of humor was my hero, letting me draw pictures on the Sunday bulletin during church and taking the family on jaunts to Como Park for picnics in the summer and ice skating in the winter.

Go and make yourself useful, since you are too big to be ornamental.⁷

Mean Old Mother, on the other hand, was no Marmee.⁸ She introduced me to chores at an impossibly young age, disregarding child labor laws entirely. I disliked every chore I was taught to perform and failed to see the necessity of them. What would happen to the bed if I did not make it every single day? Who would notice dust on the heavy, carved legs of the dining room table, which was only used on holidays and birthdays?

Housework was an intrusion on my true calling, which was to find a comfy corner and immerse myself in a good book. Of course, *Little Women* was my No. 1 go-to read. I was so obsessed with it, I even memorized the first eight pages—although I have no idea how I found the time!

We can't do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly.⁹

I was an unwilling apprentice in the factory on Charles. Most chores were repetitive: washing and drying the dishes (I did the drying); taking out the trash, which meant setting it on fire in a "burn barrel" in the backyard; and endless preparations for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Almost everything was prepared at home. We seldom had enough money to eat at a restaurant. An exception to this was the Quality Cafeteria on Snelling and Van Buren. Located around the corner from Knox Presbyterian Church, we would sometimes stop there on Sundays after the service. The chicken potpie was heaven, and

Wendy Ham became a big sister to baby Joyce in 1945. Note the addition of the crib in the dollhouse. *Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*



if Daddy turned on a little red light at our table, someone would bring us ice cream!

In 1945, when I was seven, my little sister, Joyce, entered the world. Thus ended my reign as “the one and only,” and I was assigned a new chore: babysitter. This I enjoyed immensely, as the baby was more entertaining than housework or my dolls. Still, a plastic crib was added to my dollhouse, which continued to sit, mostly untouched, inside my closet.

Kitchen Work Between Houses

Hope and keep busy.¹⁰

Mother believed in hot meals—even on warm summer evenings—and proudly served meat with two vegetables. Chicken, beef roast, or ham on the table was a sign your family was doing okay despite the war, although we had to use ration stamps to obtain the meat. Sometimes, I would put leftovers through a meat grinder, one of the few agreeable chores. The heavy grinder was attached to the kitchen table with a bowl underneath, and I would push the cold meat and potatoes in, turn the crank, and watch granules ooze out—soon-to-be transformed into a tasty hash. I was expected to eat everything on my plate or sit at the table until I did. As encouragement, I was told to think of starving children in Armenia. Sometimes after frying up meat on the stove, Mother would soak up the drippings with Wonder Bread (“Builds

Strong Bodies 8 Ways”) and give it to me for a tasty snack, ignorant about the heart disease she and I would experience later in life.¹¹

Mother had few appliances to work with besides a gas stove with an oven, similar to the one in the dollhouse. The dollhouse refrigerator also looked like ours—electric with a freezer compartment on the top shelf that, in real life, was the size of a loaf of bread. At one point, she acquired a pressure cooker, but something went wrong the first time she used it. The top blew off and sailed across the kitchen. I still remember her laugh. There was no pressure cooker in the dollhouse, but the house did have tiny dishes, a tray with a baked ham, a birthday cake, and cookie sheets. A tiny red teakettle decorated with black flowers sat on the stovetop, and a birdcage hung from the ceiling. In actuality, I never had a bird, only goldfish and snails.

Once in a while, Mother put her own spin on international foods, like “American” spaghetti and a delicious chow mein she concocted with leftovers and topped with “genuine” chow mein noodles. Then there was the authentic sauerkraut Gumpa Guy made in his cellar. It fermented there in Red Wing crocks and filled the house with an unpleasant odor for days.

Grandma Violet kept a large garden. I felt like a field worker, sent out to harvest tomatoes and green beans in between chapters of *Little Women*. Neither Meg, Jo, Beth, nor Amy worked as hard as I did. I was sure of it.

Summer was canning season, but I was not entrusted with that task *except* for peach canning day—always held on the hottest day of July. A large kettle of water boiled on the stove, and then the peaches would be gently submerged. No one wanted a bruised peach. It was my job to pluck each peach from the pot with my delicate little fingers and peel off the skin. I was convinced *my* flesh was coming off, as well. I quickly cut the hot fruit in half, removed the pit, and placed the two halves in the prepared canning jars, rounded side out. This was hard and sweaty work, but, of course, I forgot about that when I enjoyed a peach cobbler or pie in January.

A few years after Gumpa Guy passed, we moved around the corner to Grandma Violet’s house on Arundel Street. I was ten. It was wonderful to have another little woman to share the

daily work and, much to my delight, Grandma loved to bake. She produced culinary wonders that led to sweet memories my sister and I relish to this day. Her baking powder biscuits were so light and flaky it was hard to keep them on the plate. Her corn or apple fritters and doughnuts never tasted greasy even though that is exactly what they were fried in. Her cloverleaf dinner rolls were perfection—each round ball exactly the same size as the other two. Her pies (my favorite was mincemeat) were exquisite, with a leaf design cut into the top crust that made it feel criminal to remove a slice. Grandma made floating island—an egg pudding with “islands” of meringue—and hot milk sponge cake that melted in our mouths. But all this goodness was portioned out; we could never have more than one of anything at a sitting. Sometimes, we would have a single Snickers bar for dessert. Mother would cut it in equal pieces! When I grow up, I thought, I am going to eat an entire candy bar. Or two cookies. By myself. No sharing.

I sometimes got other sweets at Marshalls, the store on Arundel and Edmund. We could buy wax lips to chew and pretend to smoke candy cigarettes. There was cold Orange Crush, root beer in brown bottles, and ice cream in pints that could fit in our freezer. In the summer, we sat on Grandma’s porch and sipped root beer floats or “Black Cows,” as Grandma called them. We were living the high life—when not busy with chores, of course.

Once Grandma Violet gave me a scare I remember to this day. Our canned food, potatoes, and onions were stored in her dark and chilly basement. One day, I was sent down to the “fruit cellar” to fetch potatoes for dinner. I opened the squeaky door to behold Granny sitting on a stool under a single light bulb. Her arms were stretched over her head, and she was clutching a bag of some sort. Dark red liquid streamed down her arms. I screamed and dashed upstairs for help only to be told that Grandma was just making jelly. “Child! Get ahold of yourself!”¹²

I laugh remembering this and think of a similar scene in *Little Women*:

In the kitchen reigned confusion and despair; one edition of jelly was trickled from pot to pot, another lay upon the floor, and a third was burning gayly on the stove.¹³



This is the Way We Wash Our Clothes

And sturdily wash, and rinse, and wring,
and fasten the clothes to dry; Then out in
the free fresh air they swing, under the
sunny sky.¹⁴

There is no basement in the dollhouse, but it was a vitally important place on Charles Avenue. Our house was heated in winter by the coal-burning furnace in the basement—where the fiery maw was fed and stoked regularly by Mother or Daddy. The coal was stored in the “coal bin,” a little room next to the furnace. The fire was often out by morning, so I would grab my school clothes and dash downstairs to the kitchen to dress in front of the gas stove with the oven door propped open as I shivered and tried to warm up.

I never had to keep the furnace going or make jelly in the basement, but I was put on laundry duty. You have no idea how hard we little women toiled on wash day every week. We washed our clothes in an electric machine full of hot water. At some point, my delicate hands, barely healed from peeling peaches, were plunged into the water to grab a sheet or an item of clothing and feed it through the wringer, so called because two rollers would wring the water out. The item would emerge flat as a pancake and drop into the laundry basket. I then hauled the basket up the stairs and outside, remembering that the March sisters had Hannah Mullet, the family maid and cook, to handle many of these loathsome chores.¹⁵

In the yard, I shook each item and hung it on the clothesline with little wooden pins that

Wendy Ham’s dollhouse kitchen was a replica of the Ham kitchen where Wendy kept busy with chores. Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.

To hear author Wendy Rossi read her delightful story aloud, scan the QR code:



could have been made into dolls, if I'd had any spare time! The lines were ropes, strung from the house to a pole anchored in cement. They sagged with the weight of the wet clothes, so poles were used—long sticks with a hook on one end to hoist the rope and a spike on the other to anchor the pole in the ground.

When you feel discontented, think over your blessings, and be grateful.¹⁶

Mother was particular about hanging laundry. I was expected to sort it by item and color. If I found a pink washcloth at the bottom of the pile, I had to re-pin everything else to fit it in. Some items, such as shirts with collars and cuffs, were hauled upstairs and dipped in starch in the sink before I carried them out to dry. Clothes were hung in the basement during the winter, but sometimes, on summer days, Mother would drape a long, flannel blanket over the outdoor clothesline to fashion a play tent. I would crawl inside to read or draw pictures. It was heaven!

Washing typically took the better part of a day, so I felt I deserved the next day off to reread *Little Women*, of course. After all, Amy was falling through the ice, and Jo and Laurie were racing to save her, but alas, ironing day followed laundry day with no rest for the weary! "Put down the book, Wendy, and put up the ironing board!"

The clean clothes, smelling of fresh air and soap, were sprinkled with a bottle of water to wet the wrinkles. I gazed with quiet desperation at the stack of rolled, damp items waiting for me and my electric iron in the kitchen. Even the imaginary family in my dollhouse managed to avoid this task, as there was no ironing board or iron in their little abode.

As an apprentice, I started with pillowcases and worked my way up to Daddy's shirts, which, eventually, I could whip out in eight minutes flat. Unfortunately, he wore a fresh one every work day and another on Sunday, making for an entire hour of labor. None of these clothes were "perma press," believe me. While some were purchased ready-made, my grandmas and Mother sewed almost all my clothes and a few for themselves, as well. I spent hours standing on a table while Grandma Violet pinned skirt hems. She made my majorette

costumes, too, on her trusty Singer sewing machine. One time, she wanted to make epaulettes with fringe on the shoulders, but because of the war, fringe was hard to come by. So, Granny just sliced off the ends of the piano scarf! Make do or go without was pretty much what we did.

A Little Leisure Time

I think by Saturday night you will find that all play and no work is as bad as all work and no play.¹⁷

I'm not sure I agreed with that sentiment back then. The chores I describe took place over fourteen years—twice the length of time an indentured servant usually served. But even servants were granted occasional free time.

There were some recreational opportunities. The living room was often where we listened to records or radio programs like *The Baby Snooks Show*, *Amos 'n' Andy*, and the *Charlie McCarthy Show*. There, we played checkers or jacks. I also loved paper dolls and drawing pictures. There was a small back entry off the kitchen in our house (and included in the dollhouse). In warm weather, it served as a playroom for me.

I took baton lessons, and, when we moved to the Arundel house, I learned piano. Mother played and sang, and we were both in church choirs. We owned a record player and radio in a single cabinet like the one in the dollhouse. Mother also loved movies. We hiked up to the Faust Theater often.¹⁸ However, I did not care for every Disney movie; I sobbed loudly when Geppetto was searching for Pinocchio in the rain and when Bambi lost his mother. When that happened, I was quickly removed from the theater so others could enjoy the films. When I grew older, I had a crush on movie star Mario Lanza and was intrigued by the celebrity gossip in the *Photoplay* magazines my mother bought.¹⁹

I roller skated on a patch of nice smooth sidewalk on Charles near Western. I loved to do cartwheels, but my thighs were too weak to climb the street sign pole on the corner of Charles and Arundel. Nearby Jackson Elementary had almost no playground equipment. They did have monkey bars, but I wasn't strong enough to play on them, and teeter-tottering by myself was impossible.

Ironing was one of Wendy Ham's least favorite chores. Iron courtesy of Meredith Cummings.



So, I had to content myself with the swings or walk to Faith Lutheran and hang upside down on the railings in front of the church.

Reflections

I do think that families are the most beautiful things in all the world!²⁰

Most of us still live in little houses. Over the years, I've looked for my own private spaces to write—as Jo March did in her garret. My writing now fills boxes and computer files. Our kitchens are still places to gather and enjoy good meals, and our bedrooms invite us to close the door and find peace and refuge, often with a good book.

Little Women, church, and family formed my values. I fell in love, married, and, yes, the domestic chores continued. I tried to complete my tasks efficiently and cheerfully, but with two children and a full-time teaching job, I was often challenged to think that chores were bringing me “health, and strength, and hope,”²¹ although ultimately that proved to be the case.

Several years ago, my patient, loving husband, Terry, accompanied me to Concord, Massachusetts. We stayed at a bed-and-breakfast across from the actual Alcott home. I immersed myself in the house and grounds, which are remarkably preserved. The costumes the Alcott girls wore in their plays, the desk where Louisa May wrote in front of the upstairs window, and sister Abigail May's painted artwork—I reveled in it all. I felt like I was inside my very own, real-life dollhouse.

Later, I climbed the hill in Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery to Authors Ridge, where Alcott is buried.²² Someone had laid a long-stemmed red rose on her gravestone. Perfect. Even now that I am widowed, I have an Alcott quote next to my bed: “. . . I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.”²³

It was a long time ago when I grew up at the two homes on Charles Avenue and Arundel Street in St. Paul. I have precious memories of my time there with family. I think often of my *Little Women* book along with my one-of-a-kind dollhouse built by the hands of many and overseen by my watchful mother, and I know that I was truly loved—despite those dreaded chores.



Music—from the radio or Grandma Violet's piano—made completing chores a little easier in the Ham/Metzger households. Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.



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Wendy Ham Rossi's family has a long history in St. Paul. Rossi attended public schools in the city and then taught elementary school here for thirty-seven years. She recently donated her dollhouse to Ramsey County Historical Society. RCHS is grateful for this addition to its collections.



In 2023, Wendy Rossi donated her childhood dollhouse to the Ramsey County Historical Society. In retirement, Rossi spends a lot of time reading—new books and her longtime favorites. Courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.

NOTES

1. St. Paul Building Permits 8666 and 50932 on file at the Ramsey County Historical Society Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center. The building permit request for 435 Charles Street was submitted September 21, 1886. The two-story house—18 feet wide x 24 feet deep with a cellar—was built by Henry Kroening for an estimated \$1,000. The permit application for 554 Arundel was completed on October 31, 1908, by owner and builder J. E. Kjellberg, who estimated costs at \$1,500. The house was 24 feet wide x 28 feet deep x 22 feet in height and included a cellar.

2. Louisa M. Alcott, *Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1922), 194.

3. Gumpa Guy's ingenious plumbing system started with a small hole drilled in the house roof. His granddaughter could pour a little water through the hole, and it would flow through a "pipe" into the bathroom and kitchen sinks below.

4. Alcott, 115.

5. "Educator, Textbook Author Mabel O'Donnell," *Chicago Tribune*, December 17, 1985. *Alice and Jerry* books were part of an early reader educational series. Most were written by Mabel O'Donnell and published between the late 1930s and early 1960s by Row, Peterson and Company.

6. Alcott, 64.

7. Alcott, 265.

8. In Louisa M. Alcott's book, *Little Women*, the March daughters called their mother, whom they adored, "Marmee."

9. Alcott, 1.

10. Alcott, 134.

11. Merrill D. Peterson, *Starving Armenians: America and the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1930 and After* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2004). The "starving Armenians" reference the author heard as a child refers to the 1.5 million Armenians who were victims of starvation, persecution, and execution by the Turks between 1915 and 1925; Allison Miller, "Reliving the Wonder Years of Wonder Bread," *JSTOR Daily*, <https://daily.jstor.org/history-of-wonder-bread/>. Presliced, white Wonder Bread in its red, yellow, and blue polka-dot packaging debuted in 1921. After World War II, the manufacturer added vitamins and minerals to ingredient lists. A 1950s ad campaign boasted that Wonder Bread "builds strong bodies 8 ways." The number of enriching nutrients rose to twelve in the

next decade. The company did not highlight its sugar content.

12. Grandma Violet Metzger likely used a tight-mesh jelly bag, holding it up high while the juice dripped from the fruit mixture. According to various online sources, straining can take a few hours or longer. It is best not to squeeze the bag but rather attach it to a hook and let it strain overnight to avoid cloudy jelly.

13. Alcott, 222.

14. Alcott, excerpt from "A Song from the Suds," 138.

15. Alcott, 140.

16. Alcott, 35.

17. Alcott, 87.

18. Jane McClure, "Faust Theater," Saint Paul Historical, <https://saintpaulhistorical.com/items/show/188>. The Faust Theater was built in 1911 at University Avenue and Dale Street. It was the go-to venue for children's matinees and popular movies, especially for residents of the Rondo and Frogtown neighborhoods, until the early 1960s when it closed. In the 1970s, the Faust featured porn movies, created city discord, and closed again in 1985. The building was demolished in 1995.

19. "Biography," Mario Lanza Institute and Museum, <https://www.mariolanzainstitute.org/biography>. Mario Lanza was born Alfredo Arnold Cocozza to Italian immigrant parents in Philadelphia in 1921. He loved singing as a child and was discovered and encouraged to sing opera. He served in World War II, after which he married, continued singing, and became a popular film star. Lanza died suddenly at thirty-eight in 1959; Pamela Hutchinson, "Photoplay magazine: the birth of celebrity culture," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2016/jan/26/photoplay-magazine-hollywood-film-studios-stars-celebrity-culture>. *Photoplay* premiered as one of the earliest movie fan magazines in 1911. By 1918, the magazine had 200,000 subscribers reading about the private lives of celebrities. The publication was especially popular in the 1920s and '30s. Its final issue published in April 1980.

20. Alcott, 391.

21. Alcott, 138.

22. Louisa May Alcott, her author/educator father, Bronson (and additional family members), and other local authors, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau are buried here.

23. Alcott, 369.