

The Fraud of the Century



PAUL NELSON, PAGE 1

By the Numbers . . .

Author Drew M. Ross introduces readers to two colorful characters in *Decisions, Destiny, and Dreams*: Plympton's Reserve, St. Paul's Founding, and Desnoyer's New Bridge Square." In the late 1830s, Maj. Joseph Plympton expanded the boundaries of the Fort Snelling Reserve. His decisions played a role in determining the future location of St. Paul. A few years later, Stephen Desnoyer claimed and then purchased land just outside the reserve—land he imagined could become the center of a growing united metropolis. Enjoy the following stats about these men who added to the historical record of our city, and then check out the article on page 13 to learn more.

Number of months Maj. Joseph Plympton served as commander of Fort Snelling:
41

Number of times Plympton expanded the Fort Snelling Reserve:
2

Number of reasons Plympton gave the War Department for his proposed expansions:
3

Number of years Stephen Desnoyer ran his Halfway House tavern:
34

Number of spellings of the Desnoyer name:
Countless

Number of lawsuits involving Stephen Desnoyer:
Countless

SOURCES: See endnotes following the Drew M. Ross article.

ON THE COVER



St. Paulite Clarence Cochran was convicted of fraud and reported to Leavenworth in 1930. Mugshot courtesy of National Archives at Kansas City, Record Group 129, Records of the Bureau of Prisons, Leavenworth Penitentiary, Inmate Case Files (1895-1952), National Archives Identifier 571125. Gold seal image courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

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Message from the Editorial Board

Growing up in a large family, I often escaped from the hubbub into a corner of the hall closet with a flashlight and a book. From a too-young age, I leaned toward tales of shocking crimes and shady characters, which is why our cover story is right up my alley. Paul Nelson breaks down the 1920s scandal that robbed many German immigrants—new citizens already besieged by devastating anti-German sentiment—of their meager life savings. The trial was sensational, and the scheme and its aftermath ruined many lives. However, if you scan today's headlines, you'll see few lessons were learned.

While I was secretly reading age-inappropriate books, my next youngest sister was playing with her beloved dolls. Wendy Rossi's childhood dollhouse would make her giddy with delight, even today. Rossi's careful mother limited her playtime with this custom-built replica of the family home, so it still exists for us to view in person at Ramsey County Historical Society, eighty-three years later.

We would be remiss as a history organization if now and again we did not feature figures from the largely lawless days of pre-statehood Minnesota. This month, Drew M. Ross brings us Maj. Joseph Plympton, whose self-interest predetermined the location of St. Paul, and the infamous Stephen Desnoyer, a rough and tumble fellow who gambled on the development of land between Fort Snelling and St. Anthony Falls. Spoiler alert: fortune did not favor Desnoyer's bold ideas.

Whether you're into true crime, dolls, or the early days of St. Paul, we've got you covered, right here between these pages.

Anne Field
Chair, Editorial Board

Publication of Ramsey County History is 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 Ruel D. Harmon.

Corrections: RCHS notes two corrections to our Winter 2024 issue: On page 10, Alvin Karpis was not tried and convicted at the Old Federal Building, as he pled guilty ahead of trial. On page 23, Leo E. Peyer was listed as a plasterer. He was a plumber.

The Fraud of the Century

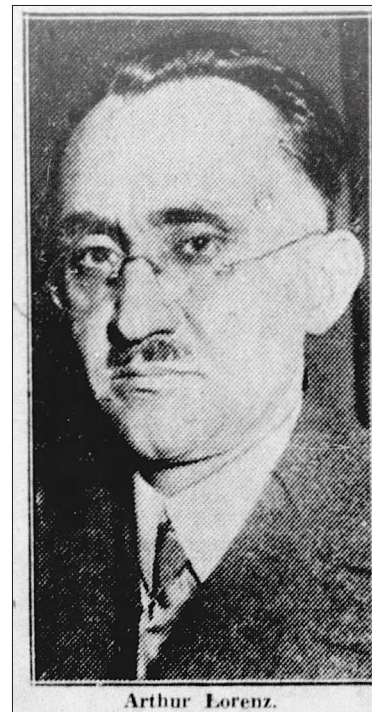
PAUL NELSON

A chance meeting in the Ramsey County jail in early 1923 led to one of the longest criminal trials in St. Paul history. The story that unfolded there—slowly, very slowly—had the elements of a nineteenth-century novel, or maybe a farce, or even an opera: a hapless (or conniving) widow; a venal (or impossibly clueless) public official; a cynical con man (or a big dreamer in over his head); ethnic pride exploited; life savings ravaged; backs stabbed; and (probably) justice finally served. It's no wonder that, on some days of trial, spectators would not leave their seats for fear of losing them. The *Daily News* called it “perhaps the most spectacular case in the history of the courts of the northwest.”¹

When Criminals Connive

It all began in jail, and, in due time, ended behind bars—again. Clarence Cochran and Ed Ritter were salesmen (or crooks), there on bad check charges. Arthur Lorenz, managing editor of St. Paul's German-language newspaper, *Die Volkszeitung*, was held there on arrest warrants for criminal libel in Illinois. In the pages of the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung*, he had written in December 1921 that the American Legion consisted of “the refuse of the nation” and a bunch of “. . . tramps, vagabonds, and bums . . .” It might have been Lorenz's first turn behind bars, but Ritter and Cochran were veterans of the calaboose. Both had been arrested twice in 1922—once for possession of bonds stolen in a New York City mail robbery and again for cashing a worthless \$3,618.50 check. In jail, Cochran and Lorenz got to talking.²

Clara Bergmeier of St. Paul had inherited the *Volkszeitung* Publishing Company from her husband, Frederick William, when he died in 1905. The newspaper had once thrived, but World War I hit it hard. In 1917, the United States, on orders of Pres. Woodrow Wilson, had interned its editor (Bergmeier's brother-in-law, Fritz) as an enemy alien. Then, the state



Clarence Cochran (left) and Arthur Lorenz made the news frequently in the 1920s, especially between 1928 and 1930, when they were tried and sentenced for their roles in a fraud that bilked countless dollars from mostly poor German immigrants living in and around Minnesota. In *St. Paul Daily News*, March 16, 1928, 1 and *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 29, 1928, 5.

canceled its printing business with the company. And, of course, German immigration to the United States was suspended by the war.³

By 1923, *Die Volkszeitung's* circulation was fading, debt was mounting, and Mrs. Bergmeier, at sixty-one, was looking for a way out. She had tried to sell the paper to German American buyers, but her asking price—\$100,000—was not met. To raise cash, she resorted to selling stock in the corporation. On advice from Lorenz, she also hired Lorenz's former cellmate Cochran, first as circulation manager, then to help sell stock.⁴

Takeover Troubles

Within weeks, Cochran had taken over the sales operation; within months, he owned the company. Bergmeier had found no buyers for it

Clara Bergmeier took over *Die Volkszeitung* following her husband's death. When she looked to sell the paper, a number of opportunists stepped in, including Arthur Lorenz. He served as the publication's editor in 1924. *In Who's Who Among Minnesota Women (1924)*, 26 and *Die Volkszeitung*, July 8, 1924, 2.



at \$100,000, but Cochran contracted to acquire it for \$150,000. He procured an inflated appraisal of its real estate (*Volkszeitung* Publishing owned the building at Third and Jackson) then used that appraisal to justify issuing corporate notes and bonds (supposedly secured by the real estate), which he peddled to investors. For Cochran, *Volkszeitung's* greatest asset was not its publishing business or its building; it was its subscriber list—16,000 names of mostly aging and thrifty German Americans. That's where he had gone to find the money he promised Bergmeier (he had none of his own) until stopped by state regulators.⁵

The resourceful Cochran then made a pivot. Bergmeier had been treated at, and later invested in, the Minneapolis Sanitarium Hotel. This outfit claimed to use an effective treatment for diabetes (one of its local innovations was implanting sheep glands in humans) and needed more space. However, it had run out of money to enlarge its facility on Harmon Place. Cochran created the Loring Holding Company, bought the hospital, secured a fanciful appraisal showing an inflated value, and set about raising cash by selling notes and bonds. Loring Holding Company authorized selling up to \$2,000,000

Volkszeitung

Dienstag, den 8. Juli 1924.

Entered at the Post Office of St. Paul, Minn., as second-class mail matter.

Abonnementspreis.

Für die Stadt St. Paul:

| | | |
|---|--|-------|
| Tägliche Volkszeitung und Sonntagsblatt ins Haus geliefert durch den Träger pro Woche | | \$.15 |
| durch die Post geliefert, pro Woche | | .15 |
| für 1 Monat | | .65 |
| für 3 Monate | | 1.75 |
| für 6 Monate | | 3.50 |
| für 1 Jahr | | 7.00 |

Außerhalb St. Paul:

| | | |
|---|--|--------|
| Tägliche Volkszeitung, Sonntagsblatt und "Der Deutsche Farmer", nach auswärts per Post verlanbt, für 1 Jahr | | \$5.00 |
| für 6 Monate | | 2.75 |
| für 3 Monate | | 1.50 |
| für 1 Monat | | .50 |
| Nach Canada, pro Jahr | | 7.00 |
| Nach Europa, pro Jahr | | 8.50 |

(Zm voraus zahlbar.)

VOLKSZEITUNG PRtg. & PUBL. CO.,
Cor. Third and Jackson Sts.,
St. Paul, Minn.
Telephone: Garfield 5384.

Chefredakteur: Arthur Lorenz.

in bonds based on assets generously valued at about \$275,000. Cochran's sales team neglected to tell people that a Minneapolis city ordinance forbade locating a hospital within 1,000 feet of a park. Loring Park stood across the street.⁶

All of Cochran's securities promised to earn 7 percent annual interest, with payment in gold coin. Thus, they were "gold notes" and "gold bonds," supposedly secured by mortgages on the various real estate holdings. Gold, with its ancient allure of mysterious intrinsic value, has always been attractive to hucksters and their marks. Cochran employed a small army of salesmen across Minnesota and into Wisconsin, the Dakotas, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and as far as Montana.⁷

There were in those days no national securities laws. Minnesota had had a state securities registration statute since 1917—a weak one (violations were only gross misdemeanors) with holes that Cochran mostly tried to exploit. The



Were You Ever Before Offered Anything as Good as This?

A CHANCE to get in on the ground floor of a big, safe, profitable enterprise which offers UNUSUAL returns RIGHT FROM THE START.

Our booklet tells the whole story. Write or phone for it. In the meantime consider these facts:—

Why Is It Safe?

1. Because it represents an investment in a building and equipment sorely needed in Minneapolis — HEALTHAVEN — the largest, most modern, most completely equipped sanatorium of its kind in the Northwest; wonderfully located facing Loring Park. We have been offered \$40,000.00 cash for our 99 year lease.

2. Every possible safeguard has been provided to protect the interests of investors in Healthaven. Your investment will have tangible property assets back of it.

For instance—our charter permits us to operate either a sanatorium or hotel. HEALTHAVEN building is so designed that for a trifling cost it can be changed into a highly profitable hotel should HEALTHAVEN outgrow this building and have to move to larger quarters.

3. The officers and directors of Healthaven are prominent business and professional men of Minneapolis whose reputation and success in their respective businesses and professions, including

sanatorium management, assure success for HEALTHAVEN.

4. All stockholders in HEALTHAVEN are on an equal basis. No promotion or special stock of any kind has been or will be issued.

5. Not more than fifty shares will be sold to any one person. The interests of the small stockholders will be protected.

Why Is Its Success Assured?

1. Similar institutions in Minneapolis are remarkably successful and profitable—they cannot begin to take care of all who seek their services.

2. The present hospital and sanatorium facilities of Minneapolis are utterly inadequate to the needs of the city. An article in the Minneapolis Journal of February 20th, states:

“Minneapolis hospitals are short 1,500 beds. Fifty persons are turned away each day.”

3. Each investor in HEALTHAVEN will have two sources of income—one through general dividends, and the other through co-operative service fee, which is fully explained in our booklet.

Why This Stock Is Offered?

The reason why \$150,000.00 of the \$500,000.00 common stock of this institution is made available for public subscription is found in the unique stockholders' co-operative service plan which was worked out as an additional assurance of the success of HEALTHAVEN.

Write or phone now for the booklet which tells all about this unusual investment and about the construction, equipment, service and sources of income of HEALTHAVEN.

Healthaven Executive Offices

Carl Beyer, Managing Director
LORING PARK SANATORIUM
1508 Harmon Place—Telephone Atlantic 6344
MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.



statute did not apply to short-term notes (less than eighteen months at first, then fourteen months, then twelve), nor to bonds secured by mortgages where the debt did not exceed 70 percent of the value of the mortgaged property. So, Volkszeitung and Loring Holding Company sold short-term notes and made use of their inflated appraisals for selling bonds.⁸

This only partially worked. On August 6, 1924, a Hennepin County grand jury indicted Cochran, Ritter, and six others—who would be their future codefendants in the federal trial—for violating state securities laws in selling Loring Park Holding Company securities. That charge was dismissed on a technicality, but, in 1925, Cochran pled guilty and paid a \$900 fine in Washington County for peddling the same securities there. Four months later on December 6, the state securities commission ruled that Loring's application to sell some preferred stock would likely “work a fraud upon the purchasers thereof.” The commission restricted stock sales to current Loring note and bond holders and demanded a complete financial statement. But nothing slowed Cochran down.⁹

Ponzi Schemes

The disadvantage of bonds and notes, from the seller's point of view, is that they promise payment; they are IOUs. Stocks, on the other hand, promise nothing. Between November 1923 and July 1926, Cochran incorporated (though he kept his non-German name out of all of them) four brick companies bearing the name Hardstone—makers, he claimed, of a superior brick. When Volkszeitung and Loring gold notes and bonds came due, Cochran's salesforce induced many investors to take Hardstone stock instead of cash in payment. When investors did get cash (none of it gold coin), it came not from profits but from money cadged from later investors. There was plenty of Ponzi in Clarence Cochran. The head of Cochran's sales team was the German-born and German-speaking Lorenz.¹⁰

Minnesota's 1917 securities law also required that people in the business of selling stock to the public first get a license from the state securities commission. The law required salesmen to be bonded and gave the commission the discretion to reject a license application “. . . for such cause as may to the commission appear sufficient.”

The commission had denied licenses to Cochran and his brother in 1922; they were known.¹¹

In 1925, Gov. Theodore Christianson appointed Minneapolis banker Andrew E. Nelson state Securities Commissioner for an eighteen-month term effective July 1. In 1926, Nelson presided over the application of Hardstone Brick Company of Little Falls and Hardstone Brick Company of Duluth. Commission staff knew Cochran was the organizer, knew he had been denied a securities license, knew of his various arrests, and knew, of course, of the commission's recent actions against him in the Loring Holding Company

Promoters behind this Healthhaven ad carefully penned a convincing list of reasons one should invest in Healthhaven stock. *In Minneapolis Star Tribune, March 20, 1927, 23.*

case. At the Hardstone Little Falls hearing, Commission Investigator Ingolf A. Grindeland told Nelson that Cochran was “one of the most crooked promoters ever.” Some investors in Loring Holding Company, Grindeland said, were now “reduced to a literal diet of bread and water.” No Cochran enterprise should ever be

approved, he warned. Commissioner Nelson approved Hardstone Little Falls just the same.¹²

But other commissioners smelled a rat. Nelson immediately went on a long vacation. He had, after all, been in office a year. Four weeks later, on August 24, the insurance and banking commissioners ordered suspension of all

Countless victims bought into the Volkszeitung scheme. Most received this “official” certificate but little or no money in return. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



trading in Hardstone stocks until the companies provided more financial information. They never did. In October, they denied registration for Hardstone Appleton (with Nelson, wisely, not voting.) In January 1927, the commission ordered an investigation into Hardstone Duluth and Little Falls.¹³

It's one thing for an obscure commission to issue an order; compliance is something different. By the end of 1926, Cochran's men had brought in nearly \$2 million from the sales of notes, bonds, and stocks in *Volkszeitung*, Loring, the Hardstone Companies, and another Cochran entity—First Investment Company—overwhelmingly from people with German surnames. None of the companies made money. Most made nothing at all.

Cochran and Lorenz had found an angle. World War I xenophobia, more virulent in Minnesota than elsewhere, had denigrated German culture and put German Americans on the defensive.¹⁴ The two and their salesmen played on the lingering resentment, hurt, and pride felt by many German immigrants to the Upper Midwest. In the state Securities Commission's investigation file on Loring Holding Company, there is a small stack of typewritten notes that appear to be talking points for Cochran's salesforce. One of them reads:

Are You German? Than [sic] invest your money in German-American Undertakings, not in British corporation [sic] who with your money pay the propaganda of those who call you Huns and Barbars. . . .¹⁵

Some salesmen, it was said, asked *Die Volkszeitung* subscribers if they owned Liberty bonds. If the answer was yes, they were trained to reply, "What kind of German are you? That's blood money!" Then, people would be urged to exchange the bonds for *Volkszeitung* securities. Agents hawking Loring Holding Company securities told investors that the hospital employed German doctors, German nurses, and German methods. Investors in Hardstone Brick stocks were told that the company used German machinery and German recipes. They most definitely had an angle.¹⁶

The Unraveling

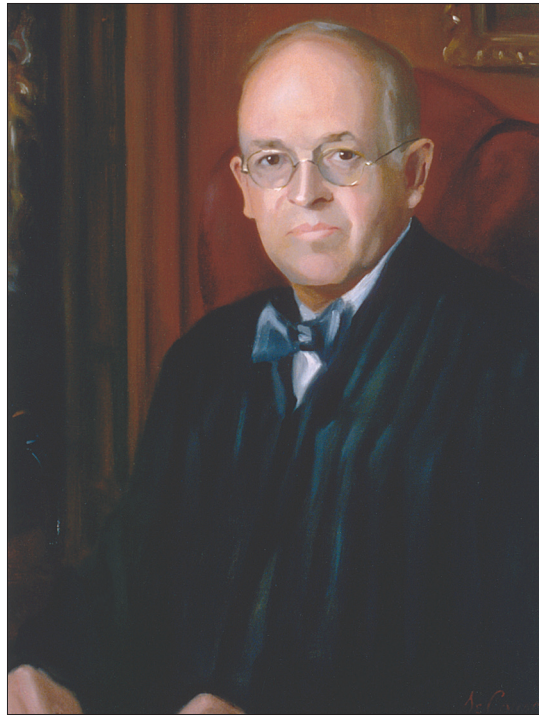
The unraveling began in January 1927. On January 15, Commissioner Nelson rescinded registration of Hardstone of Little Falls. But, for Nelson, it was too late. Gov. Christianson had already decided not to reappoint him because of complaints about the Cochran enterprises and let Nelson's term expire at month's end. On January 16, the *Pioneer Press* reported—front page—a lawsuit against the *Volkszeitung* Publishing Company by unhappy investors. Later in the winter, the state senate had directed the Ramsey County attorney to investigate dealings between Cochran and Nelson. In April, the Senate Rules Committee reported that it had found "irregularities" in Nelson's dealings with Cochran and urged Ramsey County to investigate. When, on May 13, 1927, Ramsey County Judge R. D. O'Brien ordered seizure of *Volkszeitung's* financial records, both Cochran and Lorenz had disappeared. On September 24, a federal grand jury in St. Paul indicted Cochran, Lorenz, Nelson, and nineteen others on federal mail fraud charges. Cochran was found in Chicago; Lorenz and three others remained at large.¹⁷

A word here about the difference between state and federal courts. There are two parallel American court systems. Every state has its own courts, and that is where the majority of crimes are prosecuted. The US Congress created the federal courts in 1789 but gave them limited scope. On the criminal side, they may handle only offenses against federal law, such as federal tax violations and crimes that crossed state lines like wire and mail fraud. By the mid-1920s, federal agents and prosecutors knew how to use these laws—in this case, against mail fraud—to great effect. And, as Minnesota Attorney General Gustav Youngquist later explained, the federal mail fraud statute was much better in this instance than Minnesota's tepid securities law—much harsher penalties and a better fit. Cochran's essential crime was not the selling of securities but, rather, that the securities were



Securities Commissioner Andrew E. Nelson would not hold his governor-appointed position for long when it became clear he was not operating above board. *In Minneapolis Morning Tribune, June 27, 1925, 4.*

Judge John Sanborn presided over what some considered at the time, the "trial of the century." Painting of Judge John Sanborn by artist Merry DeCourcy, dedicated to Landmark Center, Sanborn Room, 1999, copy courtesy of the US Courts Library—Eighth Circuit Court Archives.



worthless, that is, fraudulent. Any use of the mail in the scam—inevitable—brought the mail fraud law into play.¹⁸

When trial began on January 16, 1928, in the St. Paul Federal Courts Building (now the Landmark Center), the defendants found Judge John B. Sanborn, Jr. presiding. They could not have been happy about that. Sanborn had been state insurance commissioner when Minnesota's first securities laws were passed, which made him a member of the Securities Commission. Cochran, Ritter, and company faced a judge who knew the territory. What's more, he knew Cochran and Ritter. They had appeared before him on check fraud charges in 1923 when Sanborn was a Ramsey County district court judge.¹⁹

Sanborn, for his part, encountered an extraordinary scene: eighteen defendants (four others were on the lam, and one had pled guilty), two prosecutors, thirteen defense attorneys (Cochran conducted his own defense), twelve



Newspaper reporters and cartoonists, including one artist employed by the Pioneer Dispatch, had a field day. In Pioneer Dispatch, January 19, 1928, 2.

jurors probably not pleased to be sequestered in a nearby hotel, and a packed house every day in a smallish courtroom. Stamina would be tested and patience required. The trial went on for fifty days, including several evenings and Saturdays, the longest trial to date in the Minnesota federal court. The proceedings made the front pages almost every day.²⁰

The prosecutors—US Attorney Lafayette French, Jr. and his assistant, William Anderson—faced a host of challenges, not least of which was keeping the jury interested and engaged. Whole days at the beginning were taken up with wrangling about business documents and then reading them into the record—mind-numbing stuff.²¹

But there were also compelling characters (including Cochran himself), moments of drama, and tales of pathos and betrayal. The prosecutors, who had the power to set the tone, went for pathos early. Starting January 31 after all the record-wrangling had been worked out, they brought on a host of aggrieved investors with life stories to tell.

Gustav Massow, age seventy, had sailed twenty-two years in the Kaiser's navy then settled down and worked as a janitor in the courthouse at Redwood Falls. His life savings of \$6,000 had gone into *Volkszeitung*. "Now I have only my home, no money, and my wife is sick." He had met cannibals in the Papuan Islands, he said, but unlike Cochran's salesmen, Louis Tobias and Alfred Meyer, "... they were kind and didn't take anything from me when I was in need."²²

Hugo Geese of Waseca limped to the witness stand. When he received \$5,000 in compensation for losing a leg in a railroad accident, Cochran salesmen appeared and signed personal guarantees "insuring" his investment for the full amount in gold notes and bonds. Now the money, like his leg, was gone forever.²³

Carl Peters, a seventy-year-old farmer from Janesville, told of being persuaded to trade \$2,400 in Northern States Power stock—worthless, he was told—for *Volkszeitung* securities. "They hypnotized me and I turned over Liberty bonds, too." On and on it went—effective courtroom pathos.²⁴

Testimony at the trial revealed still more about Cochran and Lorenz's methods. German-language circulars for the *Volkszeitung* Publishing Company promised:

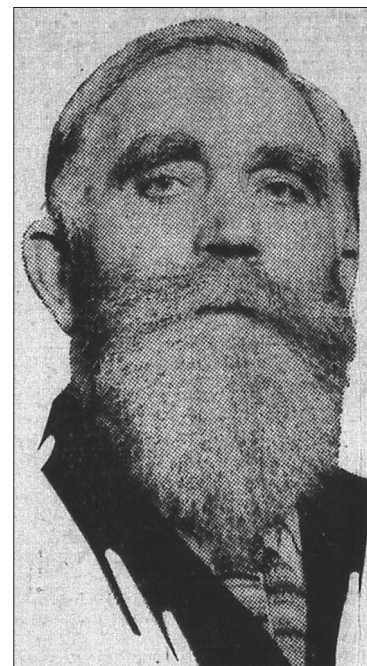
You and your wife may depend on it that we will not recommend an investment to you through which our German readers would lose their money. Every one of our readers is in a similar position. . . , having saved a few thousand dollars through a lifetime of hard work and we do not wish to burden our German conscience and be responsible for the loss of the few cents they have saved up for their old age.²⁵

The cynicism is breathtaking. Separating their German readers from their life savings was exactly what Cochran and company so energetically set out to do.

Other circulars celebrated "the German spirit of invention [that] brings to shame all calumny directed against the Germans during the days of the war. . . . The American architects are very much enthused over the German hard brick and are ordering it [Hardstone] by the millions. . . ." ²⁶ If they were, they weren't getting it from Cochran—he had no factories at all.

When *Volkszeitung* IOUs came due, the salesmen often appeared with Loring and then Hardstone stock certificates to exchange for the notes instead of paying with money. In private, Cochran told his team, "Use a lot of sob stuff. The more sob stuff you use, the quicker you will bring out their money," and "Get some money. I don't care how you get it, but get it. We will take care of the squawk."²⁷

While the investors were paid—if they got anything—mostly with promises and stock, Cochran and his associates had been paid. At trial, a forensic accountant calculated that from October 1923 through March 1927, forty-one months, Cochran received \$158,000. His top six salesmen earned \$17,215 on average or about \$100 a week. To put that in some context, a union newspaper pressman could expect to make about \$45 a week. The accountant also found that on May 1, 1927, two weeks before its books were seized, *Volkszeitung* had \$60.38



Fraud victim Gustav Massow told a compelling story to the jury. In *Pioneer Press*, February 1, 1928, 1, 4.

cash on hand. Cochran had taken a St. Paul institution, turned it into a criminal enterprise, and bled it dry. Now it had gone into receivership.²⁸

And it's no wonder. Under the terms Cochran devised, for every \$1,000 in one-year debt that *Volkszeitung* agents sold, Cochran got \$50, the salesman \$100, and the investor \$70. Put another way, for every \$1,000 *Volkszeitung* borrowed, it received \$780. That's an expensive way to do business. Cochran was looting his own company.²⁹

A Dirty State Player

The most spectacular revelations of the trial had to do with former securities commissioner Nelson. Why had he approved sales of the Hardstone companies securities despite Cochran's unsavory reputation? The story came out at trial in a moment of some drama when the prosecution produced part of a letter that Cochran had written to Lorenz in February 1926:

I got word from a friend of mine that our Scandinavian friend on the Security commission [Nelson, presumably] was ready to enter into negotiations . . . He is not interested in stock, but is interested in cash, and a permit for [Hardstone] Duluth carries a modest fee of \$50,000. . . . This outlandish price, of course, is a holdup . . .³⁰

Even for Cochran, just giving Nelson \$50,000 was too direct. There was (at least according to prosecutors) a better way. While Nelson was a banker, he also had a side business: he and his family owned *Stats Tidning*, a Swedish-language newspaper that just happened to be located in the *Volkszeitung* building and printed on *Volkszeitung* presses. The business limped along.

What happened next was hotly disputed at trial, except for this: Nelson agreed to sell *Stats Tidning* to Cochran for \$50,000. The deal was struck in February and the \$15,000 down payment made soon after. Cochran got immediate access to *Stats Tidning's* subscriber list, later called "the Swede sucker list," supplementing the *Volkszeitung's* "German sucker list." Then, in April, Nelson approved the stock registration of Hardstone Duluth, and, in July, against the protests of staff, Nelson approved Hardstone

Little Falls. At trial, Nelson swore that his dealings with Cochran had nothing to do with it, but the bald facts are these: when he approved the Hardstone registrations, Cochran owed him \$35,000, which Nelson disclosed to no one. Thus, Nelson had a personal financial stake in the prosperity (and cash flow) of Clarence Cochran.³¹

One more detail, in the category of "you can't make this stuff up," came out at trial. At the same time, in April 1926, Cochran bought \$1,375 in diamonds from Nelson. Nelson saw nothing fishy about that either, or so he said.³²

The Verdict

The trial dragged on through February and into the middle of March. Cochran—thirty-eight years old, slim, bespectacled, a family man—testified that he took personal responsibility, sort of, for investors' losses but put the blame for the collapse of his ventures, and thus the worthlessness of the securities, on the State of Minnesota. If only he had been allowed to keep going, to carry out the grand plan, the brick companies would have gotten their machinery, made their bricks, reaped their profits, and all investors would have been paid. But the meddling state stepped in just before it all came together. This is the classic defense of the con man and Ponzi artist.³³

The long-suffering jurors got the case on March 13, 1928, after fifty days of testimony. They took another fifty-one hours to reach their verdicts. Despite everything, they had been paying attention. They acquitted six lower-level salesmen but convicted Cochran and Nelson on all counts and the rest of the salesmen on most. Then Sanborn brought down the hammer: twenty years in Leavenworth for Cochran, Nelson, and Ritter. The five top salesmen were sentenced to ten years each. Of course, this did nothing for the victims. The *Volkszeitung* bondholders got back twenty cents on the dollar; everybody else got nothing.³⁴

Coda(s)

The case has a coda—or a series of them. Arthur Lorenz, on the lam, was caught in Toronto in March 1928 and duly tried, convicted, and sentenced to the same twenty years as Cochran and Nelson.³⁵

On March 28, 1929, State Rep. John A. Weeks, Minneapolis, introduced a bill in the legislature to indemnify those who had lost in the *Volkszeitung* swindle. The state, he said, had “a moral obligation” to reimburse because of Andrew Nelson’s central role in the fraud.³⁶

It was only then that the true scope of the con became public: Weeks published a complete list of those who had been duped and the losses of each. Cochran’s salesmen had found victims in sixty-three of Minnesota’s eighty-seven counties, plus many more in Iowa, Wisconsin, North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, and Montana—over a thousand people in all. There were nearly two hundred victims in Ramsey County alone, their losses ranging from \$20 to the gut-wrench suffered by German immigrant, William Schimmel. Married, with three children, renting a house in Frogtown, he had saved \$14,000 (by one calculation nearly \$250,000 in 2024) that he turned over to Cochran. He lost it all, and there was irony to boot: Cochran’s agents were trained to denigrate Northern States Power stock as worthless trash compared to good German enterprises like Hardstone Brick and get customers to trade it for Hardstone stock. Schimmel labored underground every day for Northern States Power.³⁷

The numbers testify to the extraordinary energy and effectiveness of Cochran’s agents. Unlike, say, financier Bernie Madoff, who fleeced mostly the rich, Cochran and company went after those who could afford to lose nothing. And unlike Madoff’s clients, who reaped bountiful returns until it all came down, Cochran’s investors were promised, at most, a 7 percent return. This was such a Minnesota con: the investors were promised no risk, yes, but only modest returns, and not in, say, precious metals hedge funds, but in bricks. Weeks’s bill, which caused a great hubbub in the House, possibly because it was designed, in part, to embarrass Gov. Christianson, was voted down decisively a few days later.³⁸

Nelson, Cochran, and their cohorts appealed to the US Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit and lost. Nelson and Cochran reported to Leavenworth in 1930; Lorenz in 1931. But Nelson didn’t stay long. The shame, ordeal, and expense of the case, according to one press account, broke his health. He was sixty-two



After two years at the US Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Andrew Nelson was diagnosed with cardiorenal disease and “senile mental deterioration.” From March to August 1932, a flurry of correspondence between Nelson’s wife, Esther, and daughter, Jennie; the prison warden and doctor; and officials at the Department of Justice in Washington, DC, demonstrates efforts to win Nelson’s release because of his illness. He was pardoned and lived another seven months in Minnesota. *Courtesy of National Archives at Kansas City, Record Group 129, Records of the Bureau of Prisons, Leavenworth Penitentiary, Inmate Case Files (1895-1952), National Archives Identifier 571125.*

years old but looked older. After two years in Leavenworth, Pres. Herbert Hoover gave him a pardon on August 18. He was released six days later. Nelson returned to Minneapolis and died there in March 1933, at age sixty-five.³⁹

Clara Bergmeier was never accused of a crime, but testimony showed that on at least two occasions she assured nervous investors that her company (by then, no longer hers) was sound. The receiver for *Volkszeitung* sued her for \$174,000; what became of that lawsuit is unknown. She died in St. Paul in 1934.⁴⁰

Arthur Lorenz entered Leavenworth federal prison on November 21, 1931. In April 1935, he was transferred to a federal medical center in Springfield, Missouri. What became of him after that is also unknown.⁴¹

Clarence Cochran received a commutation of his twenty-year sentence and was released on December 22, 1936. For orchestrating the theft of \$2 million and destroying the life savings of over a thousand people, he served slightly more than six years in prison. Cochran moved to Milwaukee, then back to St. Paul, where he died, living on Ashland Avenue, in 1963.⁴²

Lessons Learned

Was anything learned from the exposure and prosecution of the *Volkszeitung* fraud? The victims probably had a light go on—but too late.

Nelson might have recognized that a public official should not sell diamonds to someone he is supposed to be regulating—again, too late.

But it's probably safe to say that the people of Ramsey County and the rest of Minnesota learned nothing. The exposure of financial frauds was and continues to be followed by more and even greater frauds. The human desire for wealth without risk and the capacity for self-delusion make an irrepressible pair. Cochran's was Minnesota's fraud of the century—but not for long.

Acknowledgments: The author is grateful for the timely and creative assistance of Stephen

Spence of the National Archives and Records Administration in Kansas City, especially for the prison mugshots of Andrew Nelson and Clarence Cochran.

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NOTES

1. "Cochran, Nelson Given 20-Year Terms," *St. Paul Daily News*, March 24, 1928, 1.

2. "Ex-Editor Gets Six Months for Slander," *Twin City Review* (Champaign, IL), September 27, 1923, 4; Arthur Lorenz, "The Finest of the Fine," in *The People v. Spielman*, 318 Ill. 482 (1925), 149 N.E. 466, 2; "Deportation of Staats-Zeitung Editor Demanded: Legion Also Seeks to Suppress Paper," *Chicago Tribune*, December 23, 1921, 2. Lorenz wrote that the legion was "... bought with British gold, to suppress the truth, to gag freedom of conscience, . . . and to betray organized American labor;" "St. Paul Man Arraigned on Mail Robbery Charge," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, May 26, 1922, 12; "Fake Bond Office Here Set to Trap Ring of Dealers," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 17, 1922, 1, 19; "Cochrane [sic] Larceny Charges Dismissed," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 13, 1923, 10; Securities Law Violation Complaint File No. 318, Loring Park Holding Company, in Minnesota Department of Commerce Securities Division files 114.A.9.5(B), Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter MNHS); "Volkszeitung," *St. Paul City Directory* (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co, 1923), 797; "Cochran Plotted Gold Note Deals in Jail, U.S. Charges," *St. Paul Dispatch*, February 4, 1928, 1.

3. "F. W. Bergmeier Dead," *Minneapolis Journal*, September 19, 1905, 8; "The Case of Bergmeier," *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, August 11, 1917, 2; "Bergmeier, Volkszeitung Publisher, Is Held as Alien Enemy," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, August 10, 1917, 1, 2; "Printing Plant Held Not Owned by Daily," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, September 29, 1917, 9; "Clara Helen Linz," Minnesota, US, Marriages Index 1849-1950, ancestry.com; "Mrs. Clara Bergmeier," *Minneapolis Star*, November 16, 1934, 20.

4. "Cochran Plotted Gold Note," 1; "Interned Editor Transferred to Military Prison," *Minneapolis Morning Star*, September 18, 1917, 1.

5. W. C. Deringer, undated statement, in Minnesota Department of Commerce Securities Division

files 114.A.9.5(B), MNHS. W. C. Deringer reported that Clara Bergmeier had a \$25,000 mortgage against her business and another \$18,000 in personal loans and that the company made only \$4,000 per year. Deringer had been an officer in two of Cochran's enterprises and was indicted with him. Securities Commission investigator G. B. Brubaker put most of Deringer's statement into the trial record; "Newspaper Made Selling Agency, Minutes Reveal," *St. Paul Daily News*, January 26, 1928, 1; "Cochran Plotted Gold Note," 1; "Cochran Trial Records Show Policy Change," *Minneapolis Star*, January 26, 1928, 1; "Volkszeitung," *St. Paul City Directory* (1920), 1456.

6. "Tax Cut Plan for Road Work Up Tomorrow," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, July 23, 1922, 16. The sanitarium (so-called), also known as Healthhaven, always had a shaky foundation. It needed a permit from Minneapolis to operate as a hospital and never got one, although it advertised quite the opposite. The Hennepin County Medical Society found that it was "not conducted in a professional manner to the best interest of the patients;" "Short Cuts in the City News," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 12, 1923, 16. Healthhaven owners tried to convert the facility into an apartment hotel; "Were You Ever Before Offered Anything as Good as This: Healthhaven?" advertisement, *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, March 20, 1921, 23; "Gland Surgery Successes Won in City Cases," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, January 5, 1923, 4. Dr. Carl Beyer, medical director, was doing surgery in an unlicensed hospital.

7. "Bill Demands State Pay 2 Million to Cochran Stock Swindle Victims," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, March 26, 1929, 1, 4.

8. "Blue Sky Law Goes Into Effect Today: Exit Swindlers," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, July 1, 1917, 13; Hubert Harvey, ed., "Regulation of Stocks, Bonds and Other Securities," *General Statutes of Minnesota 1923* (St. Paul: Review Publishing Company, 1924:574-578); Minutes of State Securities Commission, Book 6, 106 (December 6, 1924), 129 (January 25, 1925),

198 (March 31, 1925) in Minnesota Department of Commerce Security Division files 114.A.9.5(B), MNHS; "Cochran Says Notes Evaded State Control," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, March 8, 1928, 14.

9. Ward P. (illegible) of the *Martin County Independent*, letters to the State Securities Commissioner, July 2, 1924, and State Securities Commissioner to Washington County Attorney Chester S. Wilson, May 4, 1925, in Minnesota Department of Commerce Securities Division files 416, First Investment Corporation. The Securities Division valued the Loring Park property at \$63,200. Cochran had it appraised at \$525,000; G. B. Brubaker, letter to Floyd B. Olson, November 21, 1924, in Minnesota Department of Commerce Securities Division files 416, First Investment Corporation; Carl Bauer, affidavit in Minnesota Department of Commerce Securities Division files 318, Loring Park Holding Company. Cochran also created the First Investment Corporation which owned two apartment buildings in downtown St. Paul. He financed them by the same means; Mike Holm, "Chapter 192, S. F. No. 42 sec. 2(6), sec. 6(1)(b)," *Session Laws of the State of Minnesota 1925* (St. Paul: State of Minnesota, 1926); Securities Commissioner, letters to Harry Peterson, July 1, 1924, in Minnesota Department of Commerce Securities Division file 293, 114.!.9.4F, MNHS. This file holds dozens of letters from across Minnesota by or on behalf of Volkszeitung investors. By early 1927, Securities Commissioner A. W. Gillam was using a four-page form letter detailing his understanding of Cochran's crimes and methods; "16 Are Indicted for Blue Sky Law Violation," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, August 8, 1924, 13; "Hotel Backers Deny Breaking Blue Sky Law," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, August 9, 1924, 16; "Hennepin District Court Term to Open Monday," *Minneapolis Star*, September 3, 1924, 3. "Loring Indictment Quashed by Guilford," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, December 25, 1924, 11. The Minneapolis indictment was dismissed for technical reasons in December—good work by their lawyer, William Nash, a former Hennepin County attorney sacked for conniving with bootleggers. But Cochran and others pled guilty in Washington County; "Volkszeitung is Defendant in 2 New Complaints," *Pioneer Press*, January 16, 1927, 1.

10. Business Record Details: Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon, accessed February 19, 2024; Hardstone Brick & Engineering Company, 12542-AA, November 1, 1923; Hardstone Brick Company of Duluth, Incorporated, 12544-AA, February 15, 1926; Hardstone Brick Company of Appleton, Incorporated, 12543-AA, July 7, 1926; Hardstone Brick Company of Little Falls, Incorporated, 12545-AA, July 12, 1926.

11. "Regulation of Stocks, Bonds and Other Securities," *General Statutes of Minnesota 1923*, 575; Minutes of State Securities Commission, Book 3, May 2, 1922, 224.

12. "Reorganizing State Begins; 3 Guardians of Tax Funds Named," *Minneapolis Journal*, June 16, 1925, 1; "Twin City Men Among Governor's Appointees," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, June 17, 1925, 4; "Com-

mission Warned to Refuse Cochran," *Pioneer Press*, February 9, 1928, 1.

13. Minutes of State Securities Commission, Book 2, July 1926-January 1927, 65, 74, 79, 83, 108, 147-148.

14. Ehsan Alam, "Anti-German Nativism, 1917-1919," *MNopedia*, December 23, 2015.

15. Talking Points in Minnesota Department of Commerce Securities Division files 114.A.9.5(B), MNHS.

16. James B. Baker, letter dated November 13, 1924, to State Securities Commission in Minnesota Department of Commerce, Securities Division files 114.A.9.5(B), MNHS.

17. "Gillam Takes Office on Feb. 1," *Minneapolis Star*, January 17, 1927, 11; "Hardstone Brick Company Denied Gopher License," *Pioneer Press*, January 15, 1927, 1; "Volkszeitung Is Defendant In 2 New Complaints," 1; "Volkszeitung Records Seized by Deputy Sheriffs," *Pioneer Press*, May 14, 1927, 1, 4; "20 Named on Volkzeitung [sic] Fraud Counts," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, September 25, 1927, 1; "Cochran Held in Chicago on U.S. Charges," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, September 17, 1927, 5; Otto Eitel, letter dated June 13, 1927, to Volkszeitung, in Minnesota Department of Commerce Securities Division files 114.A.9.5(B), MNHS. Otto Eitel, manager of the Bismarck Hotel in Chicago, informed the company that Cochran and Ritter had not paid their \$13 hotel bill. "We are also holding a considerable amount of mail for Mr. Cochran and Mr. Ritter . . . these gentlemen have left no forwarding address. . . ."

18. "Federal Judiciary Act (1789)," National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/federal-judiciary-act>; "Capitol Is Stirred by Demand State Pay Cochran Stock Loss," *Minneapolis Star*, March 26, 1929, 1, 16; "Bill Demands State Pay 2 Million to Cochran Swindle Victims," 1. After the trials, it was revealed that Gov. Theodore Christianson had been warned about Andrew Nelson as early as August 1926 but took no action. In the spring of 1927, G. A. Youngquist looked into it and concluded that Minnesota law could not do much, but federal law could. After that, the state concentrated on cooperating with the feds.

19. Thomas H. Boyd, "The Life and Career of the Honorable John B. Sanborn, Jr.," *William Mitchell Law Review* 23, no. 2 (1997): 205, 213-214; "Blue Sky Law Goes Into Effect Today: Exit of Swindlers," 13. "Cochrane [sic] Larceny Charges Dismissed," 10.

20. Cochran Trial Records Show Policy Change," 1; "Convict 10 in Cochran Case: Six Defendants Acquitted of Fraud Charges—Trial Lasts 50 Days," *Star Tribune*, March 16, 1928, 1-2.

21. "Defense Sets Fireworks in Cochran Case," *Minneapolis Star*, January 20, 1928, 1-2; "Metamorphosis of Volkszeitung Read Into Court Records," *Brainard Daily Dispatch*, January 26, 1928, 8.

22. "Savings Put in Volkszeitung, Says Sailor, 70," *Pioneer Press*, February 1, 1928, 1, 4.

23. "'Dream' Brick Plant Termed Real in Letter," *Pioneer Press*, February 2, 1928, 1, 3.

24. "'Dream' Brick Plant Termed Real in Letter," 1.

Many witnesses testified that Cochran's sales team exchanged their "gold" bonds and notes for stock preemptively and without their consent.

25. "Cochran Took \$100 Savings, Woman Says," *St. Paul Dispatch*, February 2, 1928, 1-2.

26. *Cochran v. United States*, 41 F.2d 193, Eighth Circuit, (1930), <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/41/193/1568377/>.

27. *Cochran v. United States*; " 'Dream' Brick Plant Termed Real in Letter," 1; There was a working Hardstone factory in South St. Paul, one that the Cochran team sometimes took investors to visit. It had no affiliation with Cochran; "Sale Of Paper By Minnesota Officials Is Told," *St. Paul Dispatch*, February 6, 1928, 1-2. There was testimony, too, that Cochran's men told Swedish prospects that the Hardstone brick recipe came from Sweden.

28. "Cochran Deals Set At \$1,900,731 Total," *Pioneer Press*, February 10, 1928, 1-2; Bureau of Labor Statistics, Union Scales of Wages and Hours of Labor, May 15, 1927, Washington DC: Government Printing Office.

29. *Klose (Lorenz) v. United States*, 49 F.2d 177, Eighth Circuit, (1931), <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/49/177/1482349/>.

30. "Letter Declares Money Was Asked for Stock Permit," *Dispatch News*, February 10, 1928, 1.

31. "Lorenz Held in Buffalo for St. Paul Trial," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 29, 1928, 5.

32. License Register, Book 3, May 2, 1922, 224, Book 4, February 1923, 168, Book 5, November 15, 1923, and Book 5, December 17, 1923, 99 in Minnesota Department of Commerce Securities Division files 112.G.12.6F, MNHS; "Sale of Paper by Minnesota Official is Told," 1; "Andrew Nelson Gave Brick Stock O.K., Wells Testifies," *Pioneer Press*, February 8, 1928, 1; "Commission Warned to Refuse Cochran," 1, 7; "Paper Sale Feared By Andrew Nelson, Martinson Asserts," *Pioneer Press*, February 23, 1928, 3; Direct examination of Defendant A. E. Nelson, taken March 3, 1928, in Minnesota Department of Commerce, Securities Division file 293, MNHS. Nelson testified that he visited Hardstone South St. Paul and found it a going concern, yet the evidence is that Cochran had nothing to do with it. Nelson also swore that all the money he got from Cochran for *Stats Tidning* went to Martinson, a close friend of his; "Diamond Deal Featured in Cochran Trial," *Star Tribune*, March 4, 1928, 12. Nelson testified that the diamonds actually belonged to his bank, although he kept them in his personal vault.

33. "Cochran Says Notes Evaded State Control," 14; "Cochran, on Stand, Tells of Activities," *Minneapolis Star*, March 6, 1928, 1, 6; "Cochran Asks Quashing of Fraud Charge," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, March 11, 1928, 10.

34. "Convict 10 in Cochran Case," 1; "Cochran, Nelson Given 20-Year Terms," 1; "Aid for Cochran Victims Asked of Legislature," *Pioneer Press*, March 26, 1929, 1.

35. "Steps Taken to Return Lorenz," *Minneapolis Star*, March 28, 1928, 13; Cochran Aids Held Guilty of Fraud Charge, *Star Tribune*, December 30, 1928, 1; Arthur Lorenz Gets 20-Year Prison Term," *Minneapolis Star*, January 21, 1929, 1; "Three Sentenced in 'Gold Note' Case," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, January 22, 1929, 7.

36. Fraud Blame Placed Upon High Officials," *Star Tribune*, March 26, 1929, 1, 4.

37. "Bill Demands State Pay 2 Million to Cochran Stock Swindle Victims," 1, 4; "Governor Silent on Bill to Repay Cochran Victims," *Minneapolis Journal*, March 26, 1929, 19.

38. Diana B. Enriques, "Bernard Madoff, Architect of Largest Ponzi Scheme in History, Is Dead at 82," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2021, 1; "Gold Note Bill Printing Stirs Row in House," *Minneapolis Star*, April 11, 1929, 1, 2; "William F. Schimmel," family tree, ancestry.com; "Weeks, John Allard," Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, <https://www.lrl.mn.gov/legdb/fulldetail?id=12027>. John Weeks went on to a long career as a Hennepin County judge. Among the Ramsey County victims, sixty-six had *Volkszeitung* bonds and notes (Schimmel was one of these.) Their average loss was \$1,000; the median \$500. Another thirty-four had Hardstone stock, and 192 owned *Volkszeitung* bonds, for which reportedly the losses were only 80 percent.

39. *Cochran v. United States*; *Klose v. United States*; "A. E. Nelson Dies at Home," *Minneapolis Star*, March 29, 1933, 1.

40. "Mrs. Clara Bergmeier," *Star Tribune*, November 16, 1934, 2; "Clara Helan [sic] Bergmeier," Minnesota Death Certificate 1934-MN-026259, ancestry.com.

41. "Klose, Lorenz to Enter Prison," *Minneapolis Star*, November 23, 1931, 7; Sanford Bates, letter dated 1935 to Attorney General, in files provided by National Archives at Kansas City, Record Group 129, Records of the Bureau of Prisons, Leavenworth Penitentiary, Inmate Case Files (1895-1952), National Archives Identifier 571125. Sanford Bates, director of the Bureau of Prisons asked permission to transfer Arthur Lorenz from Leavenworth to the US Hospital for Defective Delinquents.

42. Stephen Spence with National Archives and Records Administration, correspondence with author, January 10 and 19, 2024; Clarence Aaron Cochran timeline 1889-1963, ancestry.com; "Clarence A. Cochran," Minnesota Death Certificate 1963-MN-032213.

Plympton’s Reserve, St. Paul’s Founding, and Desnoyer’s New Bridge Square

DREW M. ROSS

Tourists leaving St. Paul for St. Anthony Falls in the early 1850s might have traveled in one of Willoughby and Powers’ yellow Concord coaches across an undulating prairie interspersed with oak groves. Their first stop could have been Desnoyer’s Halfway House. There, they may have found their “short, rotund, [and] jovial” host pacing the veranda of his stage tavern, greeting visitors and talking up the value of his precious real estate.¹

A story was told of those old days of a visitor who asked Mr. Desnoyer how much his property was worth. “Oh, vell, I’se zinks one hundred tollars per acre,” he is noted by a contemporary as saying. When pressed for confirmation, Desnoyer proudly increased the value to \$125 per acre. The man confirmed they were talking about Desnoyer’s hundreds of acres along the Mississippi River, and Desnoyer asked if the gentleman wished to buy the land. “No,” the visitor replied, before departing. When Desnoyer learned the inquisitor was the Ramsey County assessor who was setting the taxable value of the property, he realized his mistake. He is said to have jumped on his fastest horse and chased after the government official. When he caught up with him, Desnoyer “‘smiled,’ and the [a]ssessor ‘smiled,’ and they kept on ‘smiling,’ (for everybody ‘smiled’ in those days).” Eventually, the two reached a compromise—Desnoyer’s property was assessed at \$25 per acre.²

Introducing Etienne Deynoye(r), et al.

When Desnoyer arrived at the confluence of the Mississippi and St. Peter (Minnesota) rivers in the early 1840s, his poor English heavy with a Canadian-French accent, he was known as Etienne Deynoye—his last name spelled phonetically.³



The Desnoyer Halfway House located on the St. Anthony Falls-St. Paul Road attracted soldiers from Fort Snelling, residents from growing villages along the Mississippi, and tourists traveling to the area to glimpse the cascading St. Anthony Falls. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

He was proud, and, perhaps, arrogant. He tended to be boastful and was as physically large as his overstated claims. One report called him “a shrewd Frenchman,” which may have been a “nicer” way of saying aggressive, combative—even underhanded. He knew whiskey could be anything a person wanted it to be—medicine, currency, or poison. He was a hotelier, a saloon-keeper, a trading post operator with Indians and soldiers, a land speculator, a farmer, and a horse racer. When he died intestate on December 3, 1877, he was Stephen Desnoyer. He was rich, and it was rumored that he buried some of his money on his property. While the supposed treasure was never found, he believed the land to be “treasure,” as he envisioned the development of a growing metropolis.⁴

Desnoyer was born April 22, 1805, in Saint-Jean-d’Iberville, Quebec, about thirty miles southeast of Montreal. He was the oldest of seven children. In 1823, at eighteen, he moved

For more information on the early Desnoyer tavern, see “Stephen Desnoyer’s Halfway House” online at:



up the St. Lawrence River and settled on the southeastern shore of Lake Ontario in Oswego, New York, where he worked as a farmer for four years.⁵

He returned home, now and then, but his relationship with his father was tense. His sister, Mary Desnoyer Jardin, remembered her brother with a woman who drank excessively, and others said that another woman with whom he had a relationship was a Protestant. Either way, his Catholic father kicked him out. In the late 1830s, Desnoyer moved to Troy, New York—near the eastern terminus of the Erie Canal—and operated a mobile concession, selling groceries and liquor from a keelboat along the canal. He married Mary (Marie) Jarvey, and they had a son—John George Isaie. When Mary died in 1838, the infant was taken to live with family in Canada.⁶

Desnoyer traveled west with his keelboat, a common cargo vessel at the time. Long and narrow like a cigar, these boats were used for hauling loads on lakes, rivers, and canals. He headed to Detroit and eventually made his way to the Mississippi where we find him in river towns such as Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and Prairie du Rocher, Illinois. The man was at heart a trader, and his boat was elemental to his business ventures as he transported lumber, clothing, grain, and other goods.⁷

It wasn't long before he married Maurice Doiron in Prairie du Rocher in 1839. The couple moved upriver to the rough lead-mining town of Dubuque in the recently organized Iowa Territory (1838), where he hauled lumber and lead ore. His wife died there on May 30, 1842, at twenty-eight, as did their three-month-old child, Etienne, on July 1.⁸

Desnoyer moved on. He traveled north on the Mississippi toward a US military fort named for Col. Josiah Snelling, an early commandant there. It turns out, the widower was headed to his future home at exactly the right place and time—thanks to decisions and events that took place a few years earlier by Maj. Joseph Plympton, the commander of the fort from 1837 to 1841. Not only would Plympton's decisions affect Desnoyer and his dreams; they would also determine the location and development of the eventual city of St. Paul.

Shaping the Settlement

The story of Fort Snelling has been told many times from many perspectives and involves many key players. For this article, however, we'll provide a narrower focus.

When the US Army selected sites for their forts, they chose to protect waterways. Situating Fort Snelling below St. Anthony Falls at the confluence of the Mississippi and St. Peter rivers made sense. The rivers served as transportation routes, and the falls offered a power source.⁹ The problem was that, between the falls and the confluence, the Mississippi had cut a nine-mile gorge with a steep gradient that ran shallow and strong through an obstacle course of boulders and sandbars. Because the gorge was impassible to most steamboats, the confluence became, in effect, the head of navigation. Situated on the bluff, the fort could defend transportation routes, monitor the fur trade, and engage with the Native people whose land would soon be colonized. The ground directly below served as a premier boat landing in the upper Mississippi basin with calm water; provided accessible, flat land useful when unloading boats; and was a suitable access site to the fort above.

Two roads extended from the fort on the west side of the river. One followed the gorge to the government mills at the falls. The other road connected to lakes Harriet and Calhoun (today's Bdé Makhá Ská). Early maps show road segments on the east side, as well. A ferry at the confluence allowed for easy crossing. The best roads were on the west side and used by soldiers and tourists alike. They foretold of future development, illustrating first efforts to bypass the gorge. But the roads were on the fort reserve, and as long as it was operative, the area was off limits for settlement.

Yet, naturally, the fort and its location attracted nonmilitary newcomers. People began to stake land claims near the confluence, opposite the fort on the east bank following cession of Native land in 1837. Some coming to the area understood the fort to be temporary, as was the case with other regional forts. For example, also in 1837, the US Army began releasing reserve land around Fort Dearborn, which soon led to that fort's decommissioning. The city of Chicago grew rapidly in its footprint.¹⁰



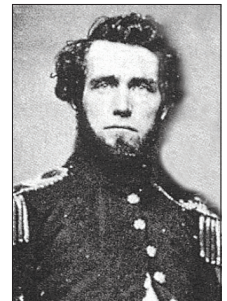
This watercolor by Seth Eastman in 1848 illustrates the favorable conditions for a steamboat landing at Fort Snelling. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

These settler-colonizers viewed Fort Snelling similarly as the natural center of a future metropolis along the upper Mississippi. The small settlement on the east side of the river became known as Rumtown (now Hidden Falls Regional Park), its name referencing the smattering of groggeries, which, like saloons, served as social meeting houses. Unsurprisingly, the proximity of the fort to excessive amounts of alcohol more than occasionally undermined the semblance of an orderly garrison. That was viewed as a problem.¹¹

Enter the previously mentioned Maj. Plympton. Along with the aggravation of drunken soldiers, Plympton, the new commander of Fort Snelling, faced other dilemmas in 1837. He insisted he was short on wood for fuel and pasture for livestock at the fort. He addressed these three issues with a singular solution: expand the Fort Snelling Reserve. Plympton petitioned the War Department in Washington, DC, which authorized his request. He enlarged the area in 1838 and again in 1839. Following the second expansion, Plympton ordered the reserve vacated of all occupants by force and ordered homes destroyed. His problems were solved. But what about those

who had been evicted? Where did the drunkards (largely former soldiers and some Indians) and families (many emigrants from Red River Colony who had settled there for trading, protection, and, sometimes, speculation) go?¹²

With the expansion of the Fort Snelling Reserve, Plympton eradicated the area's primary settlement. Some of the displaced moved downriver along the river corridor on the east side. A few people settled near the easternmost boundary of the reserve (near today's Xcel Energy Center in an area that was, for a time, called Seven Corners). The location fell short of ideal. The top of the bluff where they settled was rough, low-grade land saturated with bogs and swamps. At that time, steamboats headed to the fort never stopped at the bluff's base to service the area. Yet, as rough as it was, this was the only location downriver from the fort where people could access the water from above. They had just one street (Jackson) that extended to the river. It was very steep, requiring a yoke of oxen to haul a single item, such as a barrel of whiskey or flour, up into town. As the settlement grew, steamboats did begin to stop there, but it was not a natural settlement site.¹³



An undated image of Joseph Plympton captures a younger officer. After leaving Fort Snelling in 1841, he fought in the Seminole War and in the Mexican-American War. *Public Domain.*



Maj. Joseph Plympton initially proposed the reserve expansion boundary to stairstep southeast from near today's Marshall Avenue at the river to what we call Fountain Cave. This boundary was surveyed in October 1838 by Lt. James L. Thompson. This boundary would have allowed settlement near the cave. The next year, based on another Thompson survey, Plympton drew the northern boundary straight east to the location of today's Xcel Energy Center. This boundary forced people to settle near that area. *Thompson map (1838) courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons and Thompson map (1839) courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

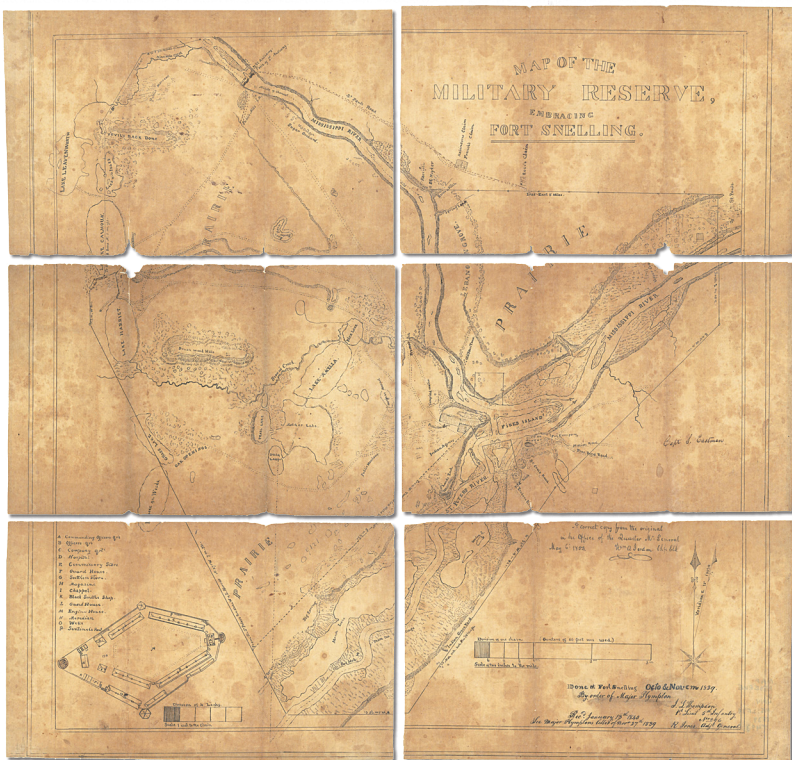
Father Lucien Galtier had been based in Mendota, serving the fort and its surroundings. With the reserve expansion and the community dispersal, the area's first Catholic priest looked to build a chapel that would center and serve the inhabitants. He considered a few locations, including the largest community of forty families at Pointe Le Claire (La Pointe Basse) downstream (near today's Pig's Eye Lake). He ultimately chose the small settlement of displaced Red River farmers (among them Rondeau, Guerin, Bottineau, and Gervais) at the top of the bend primarily because the area did not flood. Nonetheless, the new chapel was built in a "tamarack swamp."¹⁴

It is clear Plympton had, whether by chance or intentional design, situated the residents in a disadvantageous area that had few beneficial features for a settlement, especially compared to the confluence. Yet, people made do, and, in time, the future city of St. Paul would become the new head of the navigable river.

Ulterior Motives?

Plympton's solution to the problems of insubordination and acquiring natural resources missed the mark. Some of his contemporaries criticized the reserve, saying it was poorly laid out, unnecessary, and ill-placed. Others went further, accusing the major of an ulterior motive, that is, enhancing the value of land at St. Anthony Falls—where *he* had interest in staking a claim. In fact, around 1836, a year before the land cession, he had built a cabin on the east bank of the falls—some referred to it as Plympton's Claim. Plympton was trying to protect that claim.¹⁵

There's compelling reason to believe army culture "allowed" officers to speculate in land. The commandant knew this and knew the area better than most. He was a career officer, having joined as a lieutenant in the War of 1812. He fought in the Northwest against the British and their allies and remained in the region for decades with the Fifth Infantry Regiment to build



and manage the forts. In fact, as mentioned earlier, Plympton, had served for a time under Snelling when the fort was under construction in the early 1820s.¹⁶ Plympton had explored the area at that time. In other words, he had been onsite of his renown future claim seventeen years *before* the cession officially opened up the land.

Plympton's son, Gilbert, later wrote a hagiography and touched on his father's role in land speculation, which was illegal for an active military officer, although, as mentioned above, the military often turned a blind eye. According to Gilbert, as the last commander of Fort Dearborn in 1836, Plympton could have had "miles of land . . . [at] the very centre of Chicago." He had many opportunities, but the military's transient life "precluded him from availing himself of these opportunities, even if, at the time, he appreciated them." Well—most of the time. While serving at another location, Fort Detroit, Plympton purchased "the best site for a town anywhere in that district." He and an associate had it surveyed, laid out the streets, and divided the property into lots. The speculation failed. The family sold the claim after his death.¹⁷

Plympton's land speculation in Detroit may have bolstered his critics' accusations that he expanded the Fort Snelling Reserve, at least in part, for self-interest. Regardless of the reasons, ultimately, Plympton's manipulation of the reserve boundary distorted the settlement pattern, moving what could have become a city at the confluence of today's Mississippi and Minnesota rivers downstream.

That's one outcome of Plympton's efforts, but don't forget Stephen Desnoyer. Remember, he arrived a little later—in the early 1840s—after the reorganization of the reserve. And he, unlike some, clearly benefitted from Plympton's decisions.

Bridge Square Dreams

When Plympton extended the reserve, he drew its eastern boundary from St. Anthony Falls down the middle of the river to a bend near today's Marshall Avenue, about halfway between the falls and the fort. At that point, the reserve boundary turned east, creating a northern edge of the reserve. It left the river at a drainage labeled Rum Pitch.



Stephen Desnoyer's first tavern was by the river just above a drainage labeled Rum Pitch on the map (at the bottom of today's Pelham Boulevard). He later built his popular Halfway House by the St. Anthony Road at the top of Pelham Boulevard (dashed line in the upper right corner). Spring Leap is today's Shadow Falls. *Thompson Map (1839), courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Enter Donald McDonald, a Canadian Scot, seasoned trader of the region, whiskey seller, and a translator at the fort. McDonald had no respect for Plympton, who reportedly had ordered McDonald's first house at Rumtown destroyed. While most evicted reserve residents drifted downriver to the bluffs, McDonald went upriver and "subsequently . . . claimed the land" at Rum Pitch—opening up a tavern—just north of the reserve's redrawn boundary. Perhaps, Plympton's plan hadn't worked after all.¹⁸

Not long after, Desnoyer, having lost his second wife, arrived. He'd traveled upriver passing Pointe LeClaire with its voyageur encampments and St. Paul with its chapel perched on a bluff, a few log houses, grog shops, and trading posts.¹⁹ He continued past Fort Snelling and proceeded up the river gorge north of the Fort Snelling Reserve.

There, Desnoyer traded McDonald "a barrel of whiskey and two Indian guns" for the land and the tavern. That trade seems extraordinarily lopsided—so much land for whiskey and guns—but they were not trading for full value. The land had not been surveyed, so they were still considered squatters. "We were all called squatters," noted one resident in one of the state's early anthologies. In essence, Desnoyer traded for squatter's *rights*—a land claim made by occupying the property preemptively. This enabled him to make a claim when the legal process opened. This black-market trade happened in a mostly cashless economy. When Minnesota became a territory in 1849 and the land was surveyed, Desnoyer would have paid \$1.25 per acre.²⁰

Though not entirely clear, it is thought that Desnoyer briefly continued running McDonald's former tavern at Rum Pitch, just above the river (near Town & Country clubhouse).²¹ This

location, halfway between St. Anthony Falls and Fort Snelling, would have been the closest to the fort and soldiers looking for drink.

However, a rough road connected St. Paul with the falls, running through the northeast corner of Desnoyer's property. He soon abandoned the original tavern and, likely by 1843, had built a new Halfway House along that road, complete with a sign above the door. This small move from river to road reflects a change in economic perspective: Desnoyer shifted his business to focus on the thoroughfare. Now on the St. Anthony Falls-St. Paul Road, the tavern was roughly equal distance to all three locations: Fort Snelling, St. Anthony Falls, *and* St. Paul. He either positioned himself or found himself at a local crossroads, and he quickly understood that "[h]e own[ed] a large number of acres of very valuable land."²²

As population increased, Desnoyer was among several who envisioned that St. Paul (named the capital of Minnesota Territory in 1849 and incorporated as a city in 1854) and St. Anthony (1860) would unite as one. For example, early on, Henry M. Rice, the influential politician, predicted that the nearby communities "would form one great municipality." Others agreed. "The time will come" when "the two cities will be united," wrote a traveler in 1855. "This has been the case with other places and we see no reason why it should not be with ours."²³

In 1872, however, it was the younger but growing Minneapolis (1867) that absorbed most of St. Anthony. Still, as development continued, Desnoyer firmly believed the location of his property would "become the Bridge Square of united Minneapolis and St. Paul."²⁴ Both locations had a bridge square—a town center along the river. If the two cities did, indeed, merge, many agreed that Desnoyer's centrally located property was in good position to serve as the *new* Bridge Square.

Desnoyer was so confident in a merger that he claimed to have declined an offer of \$100,000 for his property (about \$2.5 million today). That's \$250 per acre based on 400 acres, double the exaggerated figure he gave the county assessor decades earlier. He refused the outsized offer, he said, because it did not capture the value he foresaw.²⁵

As we all now know, the cities never did unite.

Reflecting Back

Maj. Joseph Plympton created his reserve at a critical moment in the development of our embryonic state in the late 1830s. When Wisconsin became a state in 1848, its new boundary vacated the territorial status of the triangular piece of land between the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers, threatening the stability of their claims. The early settler-colonizers were now in an unorganized territory. What to do? Wisconsin statehood forced the organization of the Minnesota Territory because it still did not have 5,000 voters. In fact, at that time, the population of St. Paul amounted to a few hundred people. Still, the squatters at St. Paul had surveyed a town plat, an unconventional method as the government usually conducted the surveys, so they were ready in 1849 when the new Minnesota Territory needed a capital.²⁶

Rep. Henry Sibley wrote a bill to move the eastern border of Plympton's reserve back to the Mississippi River at the confluence. The bill was introduced in the Senate in 1850 but did not pass until 1852. It would take a few years for the reserve to be surveyed, opening the first section in 1854.²⁷

Had the reserve's size (with the confluence) been reduced and come up for sale *before* Minnesota gained territorial status, it may have produced different settlement patterns. Instead, by the time the reserve opened, St. Paul had roots, was home to over 4,000 residents, and, was in the midst of a speculative land fever with dozens of additions platted.²⁸ There was no going back.

Ironically, Plympton's reserve boundary inadvertently created a settlement at the best point for a land route to St. Anthony and the falls. From St. Paul, the river makes a large bend to the southwest, so a boat heading to Fort Snelling would finish its journey by traveling southwest the last seven miles. Fort Snelling was about nine miles from St. Anthony Falls, as was St. Paul. As the fort dwindled in influence and St. Paul surged in commerce, steamboat traffic shifted. With improved roads, stagecoaches initiated regular service in the early 1850s. The overland route to St. Anthony became the preferred route, further solidifying St. Paul's role in the area. At first glance, this route might appear to be a natural response to the impassable gorge and development of boat landings at St. Paul,

GOSSIP OF THE TOWN

According to the news of 40 years ago, recently unearthed, Mr. Desnoyer refused \$100,000 for his 400-acre farm surrounding the "half way" house between Minneapolis and St. Paul, where Desnoyer park is now located. A Minneapolis correspondent said that Mr. Desnoyer evidently expected his farm to become the Bridge Square of united Minneapolis and St. Paul, but that when the union was accomplished, the charter would have to be "read twice at length."

Stephen Desnoyer's Bridge Square dreams never came to fruition. In *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, April 1, 1912, 6; *Gravestone image courtesy of Drew Ross.*



making it the head of navigation. However, just as with St. Paul's location, the road was constructed in response to Plympton's expanded reserve.

And what of Desnoyer? Desnoyer's life was cut short in 1877. While returning from Minneapolis, "his spirited team of horses" threw him from his buggy, leaving him unconscious. He was carried home, where he survived about two weeks before succumbing to his injuries at seventy-three years old on December 3. Desnoyer was survived by a fourth wife, two sisters, and two children of a sister and a brother. The wife, Sarah (Sally) Johnson Desnoyer, operated the Halfway House as the estate went through probate court. Surprisingly, the court valued the holdings at \$73,257.55, and the inheritors eventually sold the properties to investors for \$100,000. Desnoyer's early estimates he'd given to the assessor were not too inflated after all.²⁹

Desnoyer's big idea did not die with him. Others continued to share his view of the future. They knew the land between the two logistical

points of interest—the upper extremity of navigable water now at St. Paul and the scenic power source of the St. Anthony Falls—would fill in with residents. A quote from the *Minnesota Weekly Times* in 1856 had summed things up well:

We hope to live to see the day when the two cities will be united in wedlock and when the jealousy hitherto existing will be known only in history as once the plaything of a disordered brain.³⁰

Twenty years on, people remained optimistic.

In a grand finale, a concerted effort by influential parties in the late 1880s and early '90s advocated to locate a new capitol building and Catholic cathedral around Desnoyer's property. But by then, Minneapolis and St. Paul had developed separate infrastructures and identities, and their rivalry, which continues to this day, would forever thwart efforts to create a single united city. The St. Paul neighborhood that

For more information on the Desnoyer lawsuits and his third wife, Letitia, see "A Litigious Man: The Court Cases of Stephen Desnoyer" online at:



bears Desnoyer's name was platted in 1887 and stands on land that belonged to him. It includes a park of the same name and the Town & Country Club.³¹

Acknowledgment: Special thanks to James W. Oberly, professor emeritus of history at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, for providing insight over several drafts of the manuscript.

NOTES

1. Joseph A. Corrigan, *The History of St. Marks and the Midway District* (St. Paul: The Church, 1939), 27, 32; T. M. Newson, *Pen pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota, and biographical sketches of old settlers: from the earliest settlement of the city, up to and including the year 1857* (St. Paul: self-published, 1886), 244; Robert Hybben and Jeffrey A. Hess, "Overland Staging Industry in Minnesota 1849-1890," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, United States Department of the Interior, July 1990, 6-8; "Hurrah for the Red Line" and "Fare Reduced on the Yellow Coach Line," *Minnesota Pioneer*, June 28, 1854. An early coach with a suspension system that could handle rough roads was built by Abbot-Downing company of Concord, New Hampshire. In 1849, Amherst Willoughby, a former coach driver from Chicago, joined partner Simon Powers to create a transportation business in St. Paul using yellow Concord coaches. (Their competitor—Pattison & Benson—transported in red coaches.) These vehicles carried mail and passengers, including tourists from the burgeoning city of St. Paul to St. Anthony Falls and other sites.

2. Newson, 244-5. Accounts in newspapers and other sources note differing acreage estimates ranging from 200 to 400 acres.

3. *Pascal St. Martin v. Stephen Desnoyer*, Minnesota Supreme Court case files, general index, and briefs of the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeals, 304.A.5.8F, cases 12T and 53T, Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter MNHS). In trial testimony, John W. North, an acquaintance of Stephen Desnoyer speaking as a witness said, "Desnoyer does not speak good English—speech broken some. . . . [I] think Desnoyer speaks English so as to be well understood perhaps—not perfectly." Desnoyer's name was spelled multiple ways in newspapers and official documents, including in court, census, and cemetery records: Deynoye, Denoya, Deno, Denoyer (tombstone), De Noyes, DeNoyer, De Noyier, and Desnoyer, as is used today. It was spelled Desnoyers in Quebec. In French, the "s" is silent, and the "er" ending is pronounced "ay." He was illiterate, which might explain the spelling inconsistencies because he couldn't correct anyone. For this article, unless his name is in a direct quote, we will use "Desnoyer." Today, locally, we don't pronounce the "s" but do pronounce the hard sound "er."

Drew Ross is a writer who lives in St. Paul's Desnoyer Park. He is a coauthor of Walking on Sand: The Story of an Immigrant Son and the Forgotten Art of Public Service with Rocco C. Siciliano. He is currently writing a book for Minnesota Historical Society Press on the nineteenth-century efforts to unite St. Paul and Minneapolis.

4. "The Up Country—Dottings By the Way, No. II," *The Minnesota Weekly Times*, July 3, 1855, 1. Stephen Desnoyer's property was deemed the Halfway House because it stood about 4.5 miles from St. Anthony in one direction and St. Paul in the other; *Pascal St. Martin v. Stephen Desnoyer*; *J. H. Moroug v. the Estate of Stephen Desnoyer*, Second District Circuit Court, 130.B.15.9B, case 11482, October 24, 1878, MNHS. Desnoyer was litigious, and he was sued for such things as accusing a customer/neighbor of stealing a belt (*Pascal St. Martin v. Stephen Desnoyer*). He was also sued (rather his estate was sued after his death) for selling a lame horse at an overvalued price; Stephen Desnoyer died near midnight on December 3 ("Another Old Citizen Gone," *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 4, 1877, 4) or between midnight and 1 a.m. ("Mr. Stephen Desnoyer," *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, December 5, 1877, 7); Corrigan, 32.

5. One obituary dates Stephen Desnoyer's birth at May 15, 1805, see "Obituaries," MNHS Scrapbooks, 1, 52. See also, "Forgotten Pioneers. . . . VI," *Ramsey County History* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1968): 19. His tombstone at Calvary Cemetery in St. Paul says April 22, 1805; "Forgotten Pioneers VI. . . .," 19. The Oswego Canal connected the lake with the Erie Canal in 1828.

6. *Geo. I. Denoyer v. Dennis Ryan*, Rehearing—Exhibit A, US Circuit Court, Minnesota, in Lightner & Young Law Firm papers (folder four), BM3.1.L7Y7, MNHS; Lightner & Young papers (folder one); "Etienne Desnoyer's Estate," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, May 8, 1884, 1. Mary Desnoyer died from long-standing complications following child birth. One witness claimed the couple was married in Plattsburg, New York, in 1835, where Stephen Desnoyer had siblings.

7. "Forgotten Pioneers" indicates that Etienne Desnoyer was in St. Louis for four years; Zephirin Doiron, letter, to George B. Young, Esq., May 7, 1884, in Lightner & Young papers (folder three). Doiron, an ex-brother-in-law, stated Desnoyer arrived in Prairie du Rocher in 1839. It seems that he was based near St. Louis but not living there; Lightner & Young papers (folder three). Doiron worked with Desnoyer and mentions they would go to St. Louis for trading. He also notes Desnoyer sold equipment at auction there.

8. "Forgotten Pioneers;" Lightner & Young papers (folder one); Rev. P. Burke (Dubuque Cathedral), letter

to J. H. Brown, Esq., February 1, 1884, in Lightner & Young papers (folder three). As his father was Etienne, his son was Etienne III, but Stephen Desnoyer never appears to have presented himself as junior.

9. A note on place names. The Dakota lived and live today in the area that would become the Fort Snelling Reserve. The Dakota name for the Mississippi is *Ĥahá Wakpá*, and the St. Peter (Minnesota) is *Mnisota Wakpá*. The confluence between the two rivers is *Bdóte*; *The Perrysburg (Ohio) Journal*, June 3, 1854, 100. “The water power here is sufficient to turn all the spindles at Lowell, and as much more as you please.”

10. J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of St. Paul, and of the County of Ramsey* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1876), 61, 77; *United States v. Illinois Cent. R. CO.*, 154 U.S. 225 (1894), accessed March 22, 2024, <http://www.neweastside.org/1894.html>.

11. Nancy and Robert Goodman, *Joseph R. Brown: Adventurer on the Minnesota Frontier, 1820-1849* (Red Wing, MN: Lone Oak Press, 1996), 153; Élisée Reclus, *The Earth and Its Inhabitants: North America, Volume III* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1893), 315. This source notes a popularly held view: “The original intention was to group the metropolis of the upper Mississippi basin round about this station [Fort Snelling], and although the place was afterwards abandoned by its neighbours, spontaneous effect will, nevertheless, ultimately be given to this intention, for with the continual growth of these urban groups the fort must become the natural centre of the whole aggregate;” William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota I* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1921), 217-219.

12. Mary Lethert Wingerd, *North Country: The Making of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 157; Williams, 77-82. Joseph Plympton was not the only one who petitioned the US government. In his history, J. Fletcher Williams notes letters of correspondence, including one from the fort surgeon Dr. John Emerson, who described the influence of alcohol on soldiers and Native people. Brig. Gen. John E. Wool reported back to the War Department confirming the concern.

13. People could not settle on the west side of the river because it was still deemed unceded territory; Newson, 24, 38-39; Hampton Smith, *Confluence: A History of Fort Snelling* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Press, 2021), 106. Smith notes the location as “a singular instance of unintended consequences;” Larpenteur, 378.

14. Newson, 38; Williams, 111; *The Minnesota Pioneer*, September 20, 1849, 2-3 and March 13, 1850, 3. “Pig’s Eye,” *The Minnesota Pioneer*, September 20, 1849, 2-3; “A Trip 6 Miles Down from Saint Paul to Little Crow Village (Kaposia),” *The Minnesota Pioneer*, March 13, 1850, 3; Ambrose McNulty, “The Chapel of St. Paul, and the Beginnings of the Catholic Church in Minnesota,” *Minnesota Historical Collections* 10, no. 1 (1905): 238.

15. Williams, 77-78; Goodman and Goodman, 167-168; Evan Jones, *Citadel in the Wilderness: The*

Story of Fort Snelling and the Northwest Frontier (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001 [originally published in 1966]), 215-216. Several of Maj. Plympton’s contemporaries, including Joseph R. Brown, Henry H. Sibley, and Samuel C. Stambaugh, argued to the War Department that by distancing the settlement from the fort, the military could no longer provide its protective service. In fact, the military lost the advantage of its aerial view, which had allowed lookouts to monitor foot traffic in Rumtown. Further, those in disagreement with Plympton argued that the expanded reserve did not contain any significant wood supply, as it had already been decimated; R. I. Holcombe, *Compendium of History and Biography of Minneapolis and Hennepin County, Minnesota* (Chicago: H. Taylor & Co., 1914), 60-61, 66. And speaking of losing, Maj. Plympton ultimately lost the claim to another man—Franklin Steele—as noted in multiple early histories.

16. W. H. C. Folsom, *Fifty Years in the Northwest* (St. Paul, MN: Pioneer Press Company, 1888), 437; Gilbert M. Plympton, *Memoir of the Life and Services of Colonel Joseph Plympton, U.S. Army* (NY: Evening Post Steam Presses, 1881), 14-15. Plympton served at Fort Detroit, Fort Howard (Green Bay), Fort Crawford (Prairie du Chien), Fort Armstrong (Rock Island), and Fort Dearborn (Chicago), among others; Military Service Institution, “The Army of the US Historical Sketches of Staff and Line with Portraits of Generals-in-Chief: Fifth Regiment of Infantry,” US Army Center of Military History, accessed March 23, 2024, <https://history.army.mil/books/r&h/R&H-5IN.htm>; Edward D. Neill, “Fort Snelling, Minnesota, while in command of Col. Josiah Snelling, Fifth Infantry,” reprint, *Magazine of Western History* (1888): 9, 13.

17. Plympton, 10-11. Gilbert Plympton does not mention his father’s claim at St. Anthony Falls. He did assert that his father had passed up the opportunity to stake a large claim in St. Paul, presumably at the reserve location when it was later reduced in the 1850s.

18. Williams, 63, 79. Presumably Donald McDonald built his house at Rumtown. Williams locates McDonald there, but an 1837 military census does not mention McDonald at Rumtown. A few others claimed land in that area according to the maps.

19. Newson, 24, 28-39.

20. Corrigan, 31-32. Corrigan suggests McDonald lost the claim in 1840 when Plympton cleared the reserve and says the rights were transferred to Desnoyer for rifles and whiskey in 1843. He contradicts Williams’s account, which adds significant details; Williams, 61, 63, 83. Williams locates McDonald at Rumtown in 1838. McDonald’s claim after the reserve was vacated was north of the reserve, so it would have been unavailable (in their terms) before 1840. Still, Williams suggests that McDonald made the claim by 1839; Larpenteur, 378. Henry S. Fairchild, “Sketches of the Early History of Real Estate in St. Paul,” *Collections of Minnesota Historical Society* (1905): 423. “No government surveys of lands in Ramsey county had been made prior to 1848, and all previous sales of lands

or lots were simply of ‘squatter’s claims;’” Preemption: Once a cession was complete, the land was surveyed. At that point, people could stake a claim (many staked claims before the survey, although doing so was technically illegal albeit usually overlooked). A preemptive claim required an individual to live on the land and make improvements to eventually secure the land uncontested for \$1.25 per acre. Unclaimed surveyed land was sold at auction.

21. George E. Warner and Charles M. Foote, *History of Ramsey County and the City of St. Paul, including the Explorers and Pioneers of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: North Star Publishing, 1881), 259. Rum Pitch became Kavanagh Ravine. In 1970, Town & Country filled in the ravine. See <https://streets.mn/2019/01/10/reclaiming-mississippi-river-boulevard/>.

22. The road was variously called the St. Anthony Falls-St. Paul Road, St. Paul Road, or St. Anthony Road; “The Up Country—Dottings By the Way, No. II,” 1. Desnoyer also owned land in Lowertown, in the Rondo development, and had his name on a redevelopment of Whitney’s Addition. He survived the 1857 financial crash and was able to buy more land thereafter.

23. Henry A. Castle, *History of St. Paul and Vicinity, Volume 2* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., Chicago, 1912), 640; “The Up Country—Dottings By the Way, No. II,” 1; “Census of Pike Co., Pa,” *New York Daily Tribune*, November 22, 1850, 8.

24. “Gossip of the Town,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, April 1, 1912, 6.

25. “Gossip of the Town,” 6.

26. Jocelyn Wills, *Boosters, Hustlers, and Speculators: Entrepreneurial Culture and the Rise of Minne-*

apolis and St. Paul, 1849-1883 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005) 37. The loss of territorial status also meant the loss of representation in Washington, DC; any standardized legal infrastructure; fiscal appropriations for postal communication with the outside world; a local political body to enact laws and resolve disputes; civil rights (only for white males); and any relevance to westward migration by others; Larpenteur, 378.

27. Folwell, 425.

28. Folsom, 542, 551; J. W. Bond, *Minnesota and its Resources: To Which are Appended Campfire Sketches, or, Notes of a Trip From St. Paul to Pembina and Selkirk Settlement on the Red River of the North* (Redfield, NY: 1853), 119.

29. Corrigan, 32; “Another Old Citizen Gone,” 4; “Forgotten Pioneers” gives Stephen Desnoyer’s date of death as December 4, probably because that is the day it was first in the newspapers. The *Dispatch* notes he died near midnight on December 3 and announced his death on December 4. The *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press* published his obituary on December 5, saying he passed between midnight and 1 am on the fourth. The death date is illegible on his tombstone. However, Desnoyer lived on in the courts, and those court cases consistently date his death as December 3; *Sally Desnoyer v. Mary Jordan, et al*, 304.A.8.10F, case 2894, Minnesota Supreme Court case files, general index, and briefs of the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeals, MNHS; *George I. Desnoyer v. Dennis Ryan*.

30. “Another Old Citizen Gone,” 4; “Mr. Stephen Desnoyer,” 7.

31. Corrigan, 43.

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

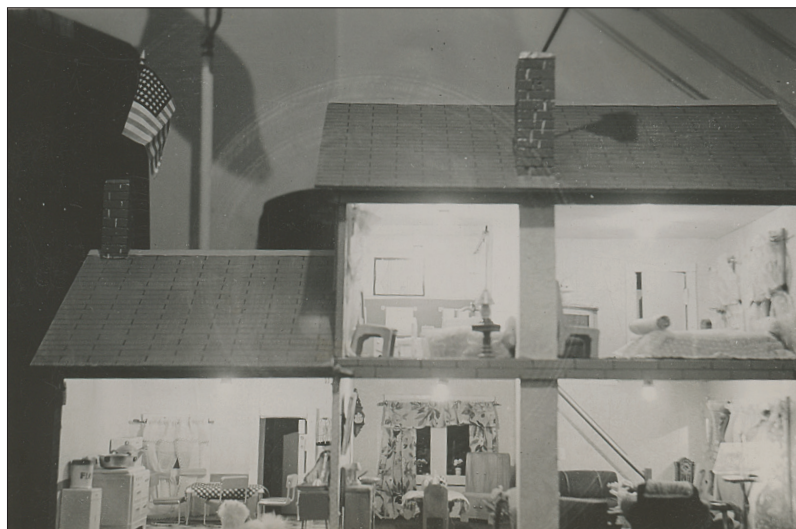
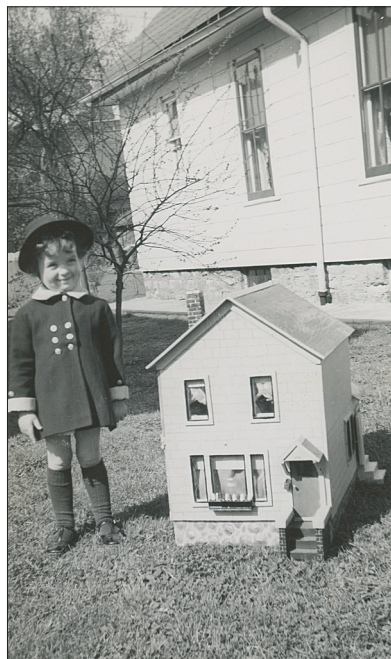
upholstered chair in burgundy—just like ours. The only room that could not be duplicated was the bathroom with its high, pull-chain tank above the toilet and a porcelain clawfoot tub. Instead, they found plastic fixtures and sewed tiny towels.

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.

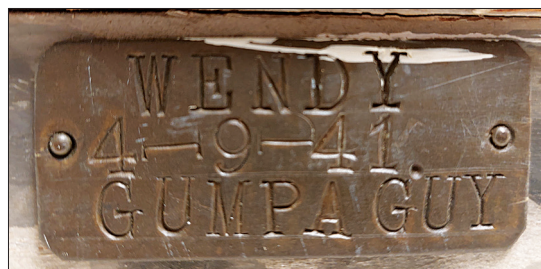
And so it was that on my third birthday, I was escorted outdoors to see for the first time this remarkable collaboration standing “two stories” high in the early spring grass. I don’t recall my reaction, but strangely enough, I vividly remember playing in the snow a few months earlier and hearing a rap 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.



Acknowledgments: Special thanks to the author's sister Joyce Porter and friend Maud Hixson for reviewing the manuscript and providing computer assistance.

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.

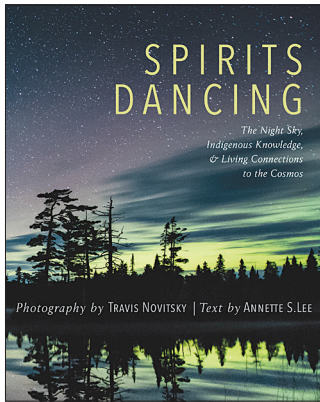
20. Alcott, 391.

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.

Book Review



Spirits Dancing: The Night Sky, Indigenous Knowledge, & Living Connections to the Cosmos

Photography by Travis Novitsky;
Text by Annette S. Lee

St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2023
154 pages; paperback, 117 color illustrations, \$19.95

REVIEWED BY MEREDITH CUMMINGS

... my number one passion is making pictures of the night sky. I love photographing it, but I also love the simple act of being with it and experiencing it. The night sky is the anchor that keeps me grounded and centered.¹

These are personal notes of photographer Travis Novitsky, a member of the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. He collaborated with astrophysicist Annette S. Lee, a mixed-race Native American of Lakota, Chinese, and Irish ancestry, to create a stunning book—*Spirits Dancing: The Night Sky, Indigenous Knowledge, & Living Connections to the Cosmos*.

Minnesotans who live in less-populated areas or who have the chance to escape the light pollution of the cities, may have gazed in awe at the starlit universe and witnessed the dancing lights of the aurora borealis across the far reaches of our northern state. It's considered a "bucket-list experience," as evidenced by night watchers on social media platforms desperate to witness the phenomenon, asking impatiently, Will 'The Lady' dance tonight? Can I see the lights with my own eyes, or do I need a camera? What if I travel three hours north and see nothing? The anticipation is palpable. The

lack of knowledge about how an aurora works and the disappointment when the sky remains quiet is even more so.

That's why this inviting book is a must. It will pique interest, but, more importantly, engage and teach readers about the aurora from three distinct perspectives—Western science, Indigenous beliefs and teachings, and anecdotes from the author and photographer.

The first captivating image is a silhouette of a being reaching toward a night sky blanketed with stars and the long, mystical path of the Milky Way. Readers will instinctively take a breath, slow down, and lose themselves in the beauty as Lee introduces the concept of Etauptmumk (Two-Eyed Seeing). This idea helps us "... see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing ..." and encourages us to "... use both eyes for the benefit of all."²

Nearly every page provides a visual buffet. Novitsky gifts 120 images of the northern lights and a night sky bejeweled with stars through carefully curated galleries. But don't think he instinctively senses the perfect location for a viewing, jumps in his car, snaps his shots, and captures the beauty of our universe just like that. Rather, he's spent years hiking our state's majestic woods and around its myriad lakes, envisioning opportunities where calm dark waters will mirror an exhibition in the sky, and silhouetted pines will "pop" in front of an illuminated backdrop. As a bonus, Novitsky reflects on the solitary hours spent communing with nature, his ancestors, and himself.

Praise, too, to Lee. In chapter two, she explains the science of the aurora and solar cycles, beginning with the history of early scientists who eventually answered the questions about which so many have wondered: What is the sun's role in making an aurora come to life? How many colors can be seen, when, and why? Do the northern lights make noise? Can a sun storm cause problems at home? Do other planets experience auroras? This section can help readers better appreciate and understand the phenomenon before experiencing nature's most impressive light show themselves.

Of course, Indigenous peoples have studied and connected with the night sky for millennia. In chapter three, Lee in-

troduces earth/sky relationships of the Ojibwe, Dakota, and Lakota here in Mnísota Makhočhe along with the Ininew (Cree) in Canada, the Dene in the Northwest, and the Diné (Navajo) in the Southwest. For example, the Ojibwe teach that "[w]hen the soul departs, it travels a path to the west. . . . after other trials the soul comes to a great shining river, one whose reflection can be seen in the night sky . . . the Milky Way." This serves as a pathway to transport the departed to ancestors in the great beyond. The Lakota believe babies are born with a wanąǰi or star spirit. At life's end, the wanąǰi returns to the cup of the Big Dipper. And the Dene refer to the aurora borealis as éthen-kponé (reindeer fire)—"electric sparks escaping from the fur of the celestial white reindeers."³

In this thorough book, Novitsky offers photography tips, including websites that track the solar flares that can spark an aurora. He also adds notes on every photograph—the camera used, the lens, the focal and exposure length, and more. *Spirits Dancing* concludes with an extensive source list and recommended readings for the curious.

Additional gifts offered here are personal stories that encourage readers to reflect. What can the sky teach us today—following a global pandemic, an escalating climate crisis, and the unknowns of technological innovation (or destruction)? Lee points to stillness; Novitsky to patience. Both invite readers to slow down, focus, and find clarity. Journey into nature's night world, and just be. Maybe you'll experience an aurora. Maybe you won't, but you aren't likely to be disappointed once you look up and witness the star-studded sky in its glory.

Meredith Cummings is editor of Ramsey County History magazine. She is a past editor of So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library. She hopes to experience the majesty of the aurora borealis someday.

NOTES

1. Travis Novitsky and Annette S. Lee, *Spirits Dancing: The Night Sky, Indigenous Knowledge, & Living Connections to the Cosmos* (St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2023), 136.
2. Novitsky and Lee, 2.
3. Novitsky and Lee, 74, 76, 81-82.

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



Pathways to Dakota & Pioneer Life
Experience | Understand | Grow

www.rchs.com

info@rchs.com

(651) 222-0701

Gibbs Farm



New RCHS Vice President

RCHS welcomed Youa Vang in a newly created role of vice president in late February. She works primarily with our publishing, communications, collections, and public programs to elevate our work in the community. Youa has a background in journalism, music business, and is an artist and co-owner of Third Daughter, Restless Daughter. She resides in St. Paul with her family and their small dog.

Donate to RCHS at www.rchs.com

**GIBBS FARM
OPENING DAY MAY 25**

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC:

**FRIDAYS
NOON - 3PM
JUNE 21 - AUGUST 30**

**SATURDAYS
10AM - 4PM
MAY 25 - OCTOBER 19**

REGISTER FOR GIBBS FARM
SUMMER CAMP VIA
QR CODE



RCH Magazine Awards

Ramsey County Historical Society and its authors were honored in early 2024 for articles published in *Ramsey County History* magazine:

Minnesota Alliance of Local History Museums Awards

- Nieeta L. Presley, *Traveling Without Aggravation: How Victor H. Green Changed Travel for Black Americans: Green Book Locations in the Historic Rondo Community (1940-1956)* (Summer 2022)
- Paul Nelson with Jacci Krebsbach, *The Children's Preventorium of Ramsey County* (Winter 2023)
- Frank M. White, *From a Star on the Ball Diamond to a Star at the Minnesota State Capitol: Billy Williams* (Spring 2023)

Minnesota Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians' David Stanley Gebhard Award

- Christine Podas-Larson, *The Aesthetics of Bridge Design: A Paean to Two of St. Paul's Elegant Park Bridges* (Summer 2021)

By the Numbers . . .

Author Drew M. Ross introduces readers to two colorful characters in *Decisions, Destiny, and Dreams*: Plympton's Reserve, St. Paul's Founding, and Desnoyer's New Bridge Square." In the late 1830s, Maj. Joseph Plympton expanded the boundaries of the Fort Snelling Reserve. His decisions played a role in determining the future location of St. Paul. A few years later, Stephen Desnoyer claimed and then purchased land just outside the reserve—land he imagined could become the center of a growing united metropolis. Enjoy the following stats about these men who added to the historical record of our city, and then check out the article on page 13 to learn more.

Number of months Maj. Joseph Plympton served as commander of Fort Snelling:

41

Number of times Plympton expanded the Fort Snelling Reserve:

2

Number of reasons Plympton gave the War Department for his proposed expansions:

3

Number of years Stephen Desnoyer ran his Halfway House tavern:

34

Number of spellings of the Desnoyer name:

Countless

Number of lawsuits involving Stephen Desnoyer:

Countless

SOURCES: See endnotes following the Drew M. Ross article.

ON THE COVER



St. Paulite Clarence Cochran was convicted of fraud and reported to Leavenworth in 1930. *Mugshot courtesy of National Archives at Kansas City, Record Group 129, Records of the Bureau of Prisons, Leavenworth Penitentiary, Inmate Case Files (1895-1952), National Archives Identifier 571125. Gold seal image courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

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Message from the Editorial Board

Growing up in a large family, I often escaped from the hubbub into a corner of the hall closet with a flashlight and a book. From a too-young age, I leaned toward tales of shocking crimes and shady characters, which is why our cover story is right up my alley. Paul Nelson breaks down the 1920s scandal that robbed many German immigrants—new citizens already besieged by devastating anti-German sentiment—of their meager life savings. The trial was sensational, and the scheme and its aftermath ruined many lives. However, if you scan today's headlines, you'll see few lessons were learned.

While I was secretly reading age-inappropriate books, my next youngest sister was playing with her beloved dolls. Wendy Rossi's childhood dollhouse would make her giddy with delight, even today. Rossi's careful mother limited her playtime with this custom-built replica of the family home, so it still exists for us to view in person at Ramsey County Historical Society, eighty-three years later.

We would be remiss as a history organization if now and again we did not feature figures from the largely lawless days of pre-statehood Minnesota. This month, Drew M. Ross brings us Maj. Joseph Plympton, whose self-interest predetermined the location of St. Paul, and the infamous Stephen Desnoyer, a rough and tumble fellow who gambled on the development of land between Fort Snelling and St. Anthony Falls. Spoiler alert: fortune did not favor Desnoyer's bold ideas.

Whether you're into true crime, dolls, or the early days of St. Paul, we've got you covered, right here between these pages.

Anne Field
Chair, Editorial Board

Publication of Ramsey County History is 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 Ruel D. Harmon.

Corrections: RCHS notes two corrections to our Winter 2024 issue: On page 10, Alvin Karpis was not tried and convicted at the Old Federal Building, as he pled guilty ahead of trial. On page 23, Leo E. Peyer was listed as a plasterer. He was a plumber.



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Growing Up In Frogtown:
**Little Women, Little
Houses, Lots of Work,
(and a Little Play)**

WENDY ROSSI, PAGE 23

In 1941, Wendy Rossi's Gumpa Guy Metzger built a dollhouse for his only granddaughter—designed to look like the family home at 435 Charles Avenue. See "Growing Up In Frogtown: Little Women, Little Houses, Lots of Work, (and a Little Play)" on page 23. *Courtesy of Wendy Rossi.*