

RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A Family Reclaims Its Heritage

Growing Up with Anna Belle Rideaux

CHERRELLE SWAIN, PAGE 13



Rondo Recreation in the St. Croix River Valley, 1909-1977

HALEY PROCHNOW, PAGE 1



By the Numbers . . .



Ramsey County Historical Society congratulates all Minnesota student historians who won state-level honors at Minnesota History Day in April and competed at the 2024 National History Day (NHD) in June.

Winning projects from across Minnesota selected for NHD:

36

Winning Ramsey County projects selected for NHD:

13

Minnesota scholars attending NHD:

64

Ramsey County scholars attending NHD:

30

Number of peers from the US who competed in NHD:

3,000

"These students showed up to support one another," said Kyle Imdieke, program associate with Minnesota History Day and member of the RCHS editorial board. "History Day isn't just about conducting and presenting research but also about bringing out the best in themselves and students around them." Read more about these winners on page 31.

ON THE COVER



St. Paul residents Anna Belle and James Rideaux purchased the former Silverbrook Mansion in Wisconsin in 1956, renaming it the St. Croix Valley Country Club and opening its doors to family, friends, travelers, and other guests. See companion articles by authors and friends Haley Prochnow and Cherrelle Swain on pages 1 and 13 respectively. *Images courtesy of St. Croix Falls Historical Society, Interstate State Park Archives, and the Rideaux, Edmond, Swain Family Archives.*

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Message from the Editorial Board

Redlining and restrictive housing covenants coupled with lost real estate following the construction of the I-94 corridor greatly affected members of St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood in the twentieth century. This is not new information. This is an old ache, a persistent loss of African American culture, homes, and businesses. But historian Haley Prochnow adds light and depth to this otherwise bleak reality with her article on the St. Croix River Valley retreats and clubs belonging to members of the city's Black community from 1909 to 1977. Transcending racism, violence, and a largely indifferent government, a group of Rondo families found joy and made lasting memories together at their summer homes in the Wisconsin woods—sometimes led by a family matriarch.

We don't hear the word matriarch much anymore—a word out of vogue, signifying "an older woman who is powerful within a family or an organization," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. With *Ramsey County History* magazine, we'd like to revive that word by introducing you to Anna Belle Rideaux and Violet Gould Mather—one a matriarch of St. Paul's Black community, and one from the community of Civic Opera. Each woman's leadership and passion for raising up future generations created a ripple effect still felt today. Documentary filmmaker Cherrelle Swain shares vivid family memories of her great-grandmother, Anna Belle Rideaux, and Christine Podas-Larson recalls her former teacher, Violet Gould Mather of Violet Gould's Operetta School. Both Rideaux and Gould Mather were matriarchs in the classic sense of the word—strong, driven women who got things done, who led the way, and, in so doing, lifted up their communities—one person at a time.

We hope your summer reading will be lifted and enriched by the remarkable people profiled in these pages.

Anne Field
Chair, Editorial Board

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Rondo Recreation in the St. Croix River Valley, 1909-1977

HALEY PROCHNOW

The thermostat is set at 55°F during the winter in the Baker Land and Title Company building to keep energy costs low. I sit in what once was Harry D. Baker's office wearing my coat and hat, digitizing donated photographs, letters, and paper ephemera from past residents of St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin. The St. Croix Falls Historical Society rents this building from the city. It houses our collections, a reading room, and exhibits dedicated to its time as a land management office. The 1882 Queen Anne-style structure with East Lake flourishes resembles a slice of wedding cake wedged onto the corner of State and Washington streets.¹

The building was once the administrative center of white settlement and colonization in the St. Croix River Valley. It was constructed as the Cushing Land Agency by St. Paul architect Abraham M. Radcliff in 1882 to manage acreage, natural resources, and landholdings gained through the Morrill Act of 1862. Years earlier, through the terms of this legislation, Caleb Cushing, an attorney and former US congressman from Massachusetts, was granted 36,000 acres of timberland along the St. Croix River. He paid \$1.25 an acre. Money earned from land grants was meant to establish public colleges, providing opportunities to farmers and other working people. Some opportunists misused or loosely interpreted the terms of this system.²

Maj. John S. Baker worked as Cushing's land agent starting in 1869 and assumed control of the company around 1887. Harry Baker joined his father in 1893. The pair changed the name to Baker Land and Title Company in 1911 and operated the business as a real estate brokerage.³

The younger Baker was responsible for hundreds of recreational land transactions. As travel to Wisconsin from Minneapolis, St. Paul, and other Midwestern cities became more convenient, he focused on lake and riverfront investments. He subdivided and platted land and

advertised the properties in newspapers in the Twin Cities, Des Moines, and Chicago. In a 1950 interview, he noted:

Our principal asset, in my humble opinion, has been the fine, sound, wholesome business principles of my father for reliable dealing and truthful representations in all of our business.⁴

Like his father, the Baker son carried on those principles. However, some of *his* practices would be illegal today. Rumored to be a taskmaster, Baker oversaw the work of his employees until age ninety-two, retiring in 1966. According to local historians, he insisted staff follow a singular rule: no property should be sold to a Jewish or Black person.

Yet—this research examines instances of recreational land purchased by Black families from St. Paul's Rondo community in the St. Croix River Valley.⁵ In the first half of the twentieth century, Rondo was a mixed-income neighborhood with a prospering middle class—home to 80 percent of the city's African American population. These few stories exist within the context of a time in Minnesota history where racial covenants were written into deeds, and real estate purchases limited where nonwhite residents could live.

The first racial covenants existed in Minnesota as early as 1910 and stipulated:

... premises shall not at any time be conveyed, mortgaged or leased to any person or persons of Chinese, Japanese, Moorish, Turkish, Negro, Mongolian or African blood or descent.⁶

Later, real estate companies duplicated this exclusionary language in thousands of deeds throughout the Twin Cities, creating segregated neighborhoods. New racial covenants were

deemed illegal in 1953, but they were not completely prohibited until 1962 in Minnesota and 1968 nationally.⁷

The families highlighted here were prosperous despite this reality. Beyond homeownership in St. Paul, they built equity in recreational land purchases within the St. Croix River Valley. Their stories exemplify the larger narrative of the Black struggle to own property, enjoy the rewards of their labors, and practice social mobility in post-Civil War America, during the Great Migration, and after.

Camp DuGhee on the Apple River, 1909-1920

Fredrick McGhee was born into slavery in Mississippi during the Civil War to Sarah Walker and Abraham McGhee. The family escaped the John A. Walker Farm in 1864 with help from Union troops. From Mississippi, they traveled north to Tennessee.⁸

McGhee's education started at a "freedmen's school" and continued with two years at Knoxville College. He practiced law briefly in Chicago before moving to St. Paul in 1889, becoming Minnesota's first Black lawyer. McGhee, his wife,

Mattie, and their daughter, Ruth, were community leaders, influencing intellectual, social, and political circles. They lived at 665 University Avenue in a grand, three-story home. He was a prolific writer, speaker, and noted criminal defense lawyer as well as a pioneer in handling early desegregation and civil rights cases.⁹

McGhee represented Minnesota in the National Afro-American Council (NAAC) at the turn of the century. Through this organization, he befriended W. E. B. Du Bois. His friendship with Du Bois, an early American civil rights activist, sociologist, socialist, and historian, led to the formation of the Niagara Movement (1905)—the forerunner of today's NAACP (1909).¹⁰

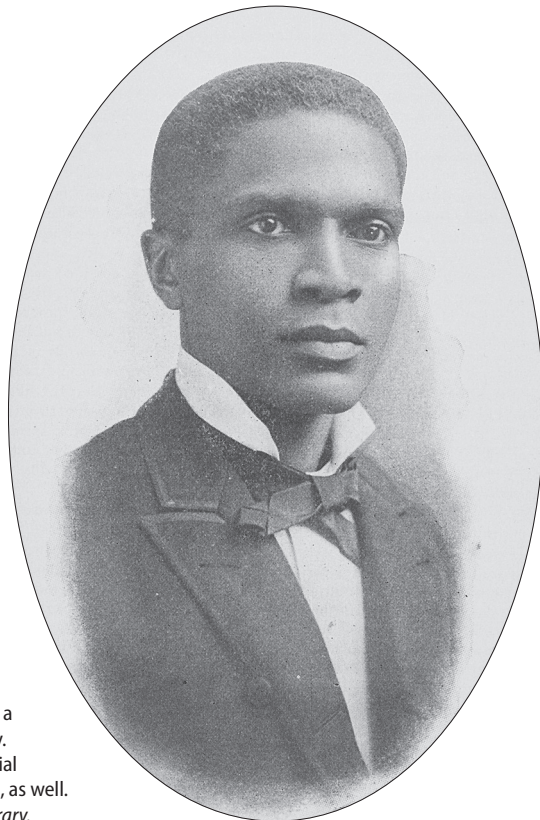
For the Love of Nature

While McGhee's work and civic life were central, friendships and family were equally important, as was the time he spent outdoors. As early as 1889, he enjoyed angling adventures on lakes Sturgeon and Pokegama in east-central Minnesota. He vacationed with close friends, including Dr. Valdo Turner, a prominent physician, and Jose H. Sherwood, a postal clerk. Sherwood and McGhee were two of five people to pledge start-up funds for the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, which Du Bois edited for twenty-four years.¹¹

McGhee's apparent love of nature drew him and his wife to Polk County—in the St. Croix River Valley—seventy-five miles from St. Paul. In 1909, they purchased thirty-nine acres along the Apple River near Amery, Wisconsin, for \$1,500. The couple acquired farming equipment and livestock. The land, "came with a little rustic frame house, and the McGhees spent most of the next three summers there."¹² They playfully called their retreat Camp DuGhee—a combination of the last names Du Bois and McGhee. It made sense, as Du Bois visited when he was in Minnesota, as did others. Critical discussions on race, politics, and, perhaps, early principles of the NAACP were likely incorporated into fishing, farming, and enjoying nature's solitude.¹³

Guests Galore

A regular rotation of Black society spent time there. Dr. Daniel Hale Williams and his family visited the McGhee home and farm on occasion. Williams was one of three Black physicians in Chicago in the 1880s. Appointed to the Illinois



St. Paul's Fredrick McGhee was a local criminal defense attorney. He participated in national racial and social equality discussions, as well. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

State Board of Health in 1889, the skilled surgeon developed medical standards and hospital rules to combat prejudice in medicine. In 1891, he founded Provident Hospital and Training School for Nurses.¹⁴

Other guests included Julius Avendorph—the “Society Prince” of Chicago—and his family. Avendorph worked for the Pullman Palace Car Company and edited the society page of the *Chicago Defender*. He also formed multiple social and civic clubs for Chicago’s Black elite. His flawless style and respect from the community earned him the title of aristocrat.¹⁵

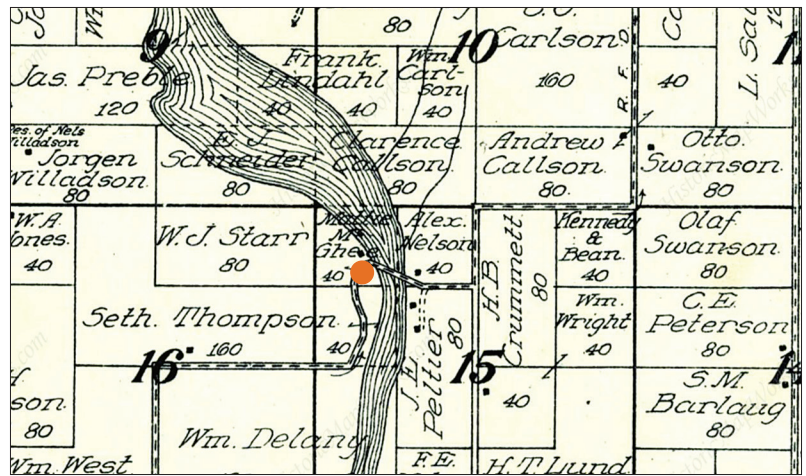
Another close friend and fishing companion was Frederick D. McCracken, a real estate entrepreneur, founding member of The Sterling Club, and an early housing-equity activist from St. Paul. McCracken moved to Harlem in 1930 as head of operating staff and organizer of the Dunbar Forum at the Paul Lawrence Dunbar Apartments, where the Du Bois family lived. This facility, funded by John D. Rockefeller Jr., served as a housing cooperative for Black families and was important during the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁶

Many people enjoyed their retreats with the McGhee family, including McCracken and Du Bois, who noted:

I remember camping with him [McGhee] one summer on the Apple River, Wisconsin, and his clients swarmed over the countryside and with boats invaded the lake where he was fishing in order to consult him. Around the campfire, he used to tell us extraordinary stories of his adventures.¹⁷

A Brief Respite

Unfortunately, McGhee’s years at Camp DuGhee were few. In September 1912, he died due to complications from a leg injury he sustained on the farm. He was fifty. The community celebrated McGhee’s life at St. Peter Claver Catholic Church and, a week later, at Pilgrim Baptist Church. There, the auditorium overflowed with friends, colleagues, and admirers. At the service’s end, mourners sang, “We Shall Meet Beyond the River” to honor this leader. It was an appropriate selection, given the lawyer’s connection to the river and enjoyment of the outdoors.¹⁸



This 1914 plat map of Lincoln Township in Polk County, Wisconsin, shows the McGhee property in Mattie McGhee’s name, two years after her husband’s death. Originally published by Geo A. Ogle and Co., 1914.



This contemporary winter scene on the former McGhee property near Amery, Wisconsin, is serene—if one ignores the many lake homes that have sprung up along the water. Courtesy of Haley Prochnow.

After his sudden death, Mattie and Ruth frequented the farm for the solitude it offered. However, in the 1920s, they followed other Black Americans to Washington, DC, and, later, New York City. Du Bois helped mother and daughter obtain apartments within the Dunbar complex in 1927, where Mattie resided until her death in 1933. Ruth worked as a stenographer and grew close to the Du Bois family, particularly their daughter, Yolande. Ruth lived at the apartments until the 1950s, when she moved to a little house at 303 Charles Avenue back in St. Paul.¹⁹

If you drive to Lincoln Township in Polk County, you can cross the Apple River over a tiny bridge that leads up to what was once Camp DuGhee. Peeking between the modern cabins that fill the shoreline like a mouth of overcrowded teeth, it is still possible to envision the serenity of the land and the wide bend of the river where McGhee fished with friends—a

place that probably once felt like total freedom. McGhee's connection to this place that now offers no trace of him enhances our understanding of the St. Croix River Valley's significance as an influential backdrop for progressive American thought leaders and social pioneers and how they have been underrepresented in history.

The St. Croix Valley Country Club, 1956-1962

The first known mention of the St. Croix Valley Country Club appeared in a Kansas City, Missouri, newspaper in 1956:

Mr. and Mrs. James Rideaux, 707 Rondo Ave., have purchased an 11-bedroom lodge on the lovely St. Croix Riber [sic], at Oscola, Wis., 48 miles from the city. The estate has 200 acres and will be remodelled [sic] for all out-door sports.²⁰

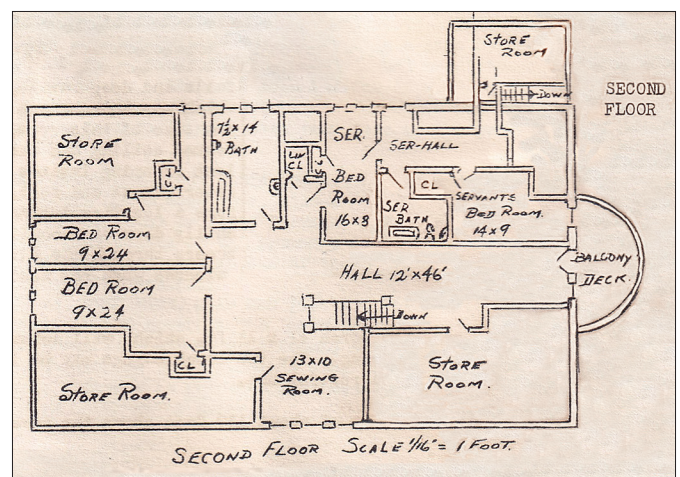
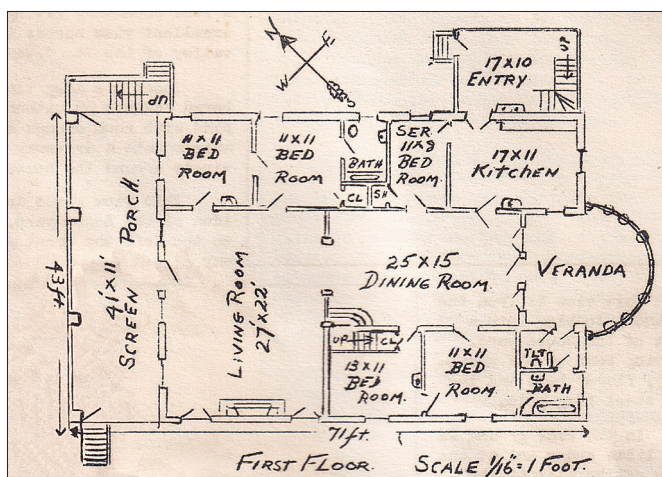
The property, known locally as Silverbrook, was a defunct copper mining venture and adjoining summer estate of St. Paulites Hezekiah and Fannie Holbert (built 1895). More recently, it served as a Swiss-style ski resort that sat empty for a few seasons before Anna Belle and James Rideaux's dream of owning, renovating, and operating a country club was realized. Shortly after purchasing the property, the couple organized an open house. Three hundred attendees from St. Paul and Minneapolis visited over a December weekend. "The guests were served refreshments in the spacious ballroom from a

long Chinese antique table of teakwood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl."²¹ Rondo pianist, Harriet B. Gordon, and her pet bird, Nehru, entertained. The club featured nineteen rooms total and sat high on a bluff overlooking Silverbrook Falls and the St. Croix River.²²

From 1956 to 1962, the Rideauxs' St. Croix Valley Country Club served as a satellite meeting place for Rondo-based social and civic clubs, including the Cameo Social Club, Credjafawn Club, and the Twin City Forty Club. These organizations were founded in the early twentieth century, in part, because Black St. Paul residents were usually unwelcome in white society and prohibited from patronizing many of the city's establishments. Instead, residents gathered at the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, churches, and in living rooms and backyards. The Wisconsin venue was an enviable escape from the city. A weekend there could include socializing, hiking, fishing, hunting, archery, or an ongoing game of pinochle with Anna Belle on the back porch overlooking the falls.²³

The Rideaux Family

Anna Belle and James Rideaux were business owners, civil rights activists, socialites, and residents of St. Paul's Rondo community. They were both born in 1906 in southern states—James in Lake Charles, Louisiana; Anna Belle in Birmingham, Alabama. They did not meet until they each ventured to Minnesota in search of opportunity. Anna Belle said goodbye to Alabama around 1930 and moved here with her



Robert Payne, an early owner of the Silverbrook property, created a booklet that included floor plans of the two-story mansion. This document provides important details of the retreat's design. Assembled by Robt. P. Payne, courtesy of Interstate State Park.

baby daughter, Muriel, and her mother. James came north from Kansas City that same year. The couple met in 1933 and married in Chicago on February 18, 1935.²⁴

James, educated in business and tailoring at Kansas Vocational College, found work in St. Paul's white, high-end establishments, including the University Club and Town & Country. In the 1950s and '60s, he was a redcap night captain at Union Depot. He used his position to help Black travelers find safe lodging, often sending them to Rondo, where Anna Belle ran a boarding house for travelers. Years later, St. Paul Mayor George Latimer honored Rideaux's commitment to service and community by declaring September 26, 1978, "James Rideaux Day." After his death in 1990, he was given the Roy Wilkins Award for his civil rights work.²⁵

Shortly after moving to Minnesota, Anna Belle's name started appearing in the society columns of the *St. Paul Recorder* and *Minneapolis Spokesman*. She was a gifted seamstress and taught community homemaking and sewing classes at Hallie Q. Brown and Welcome Hall. Anna Belle joined the Order of the Eastern Star, St. Anthony Hill Garden Club, the St. Paul Urban League, and was a founding member of the Cameo Social Club and an NAACP Housing Committee cochair for the organization's national convention in 1960. In 1963, she owned and operated a dress shop in Minneapolis.²⁶

For twenty-two years, the couple hosted friends, family, and community to their home on Rondo Avenue. However, in 1959, they were forced to relocate when the city and state began preparing for the construction of Interstate 94 and the demolition of much of the neighborhood—700 homes and 300 businesses. Residents were inadequately compensated for their properties. Ultimately, the initiative led to a massive loss of wealth, public space, and culture. Families and business owners watched in despair as all they worked for was systemically destroyed.²⁷ The *St. Paul Recorder* announced the Rideauxs' move:

Come December 1, Mr. and Mrs. James Riddeau [sic] of 707 Rondo Av., will be greeting their friends in their newly decorated and remodeled home at 765 Marshall Av.²⁸



James and Anna Belle Rideaux on their twentieth wedding anniversary at their home at 707 Rondo Avenue. In the Rideaux, Edmond, Swain Family Archives.

It was during this stressful, anxious time, that the couple opened the doors to their Wisconsin retreat. Their work in providing a place of rest, relaxation, and community was more important than ever.

A Place to Relax; A Place to Organize

The St. Croix Valley Country Club was home to occasional NAACP chapter meetings and celebrations. For example, on January 20, 1957, the St. Paul Branch of the NAACP installed new officers there. The topic of the evening was "Moral Aspects of Segregated Housing." Two notable attendees were Rev. Floyd Massey Jr. and Rev. Denzil A. Carty. These clergymen were local civil rights activists and leaders who fought for equity in housing, public schools, and the workplace.²⁹

The day after NAACP members met at the country club, Rev. Massey was formally inducted as chair of the Minnesota Protestant Pastors' Conference in St. Paul. Among the guests was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who spoke at the ceremony.³⁰

In looking at these two events, it becomes clear that the struggle for civil rights was very much alive in Minnesota and Wisconsin and

To learn more about the Rideaux family, particularly Anna Belle, see "Family Reclaims Its Heritage: Growing Up with Anna Belle Rideaux" by Cherrelle Swain on page 13 of *Ramsey County History* (Summer 2024).

On January 21, 1957, Rev. Floyd Massey Jr. became chair of the state's Pastors' Conference. Those pictured at Massey's home include (back row L-R): William Cratic, Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) commissioner; Rev. Denzil Carty, president of State NAACP Conference; Walter Goins Jr., Pilgrim Baptist trustee board chair; Cecil Newman, newspaper publisher; Frank Smith, president, St. Paul NAACP; L. Howard Bennet, president Minneapolis NAACP. Also, (front row L-R): Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Rev. Floyd Massey Jr., pastor, Pilgrim Baptist. *In St. Paul Recorder, May 25, 1957.*



had gained tremendous momentum by 1957. Clearly, the Rideauxs' club housed crucial discussions and leaders of this movement during its most critical time.

It was also a place of Black excellence, luxury, and respite. For example, from 1957 to 1961, the Cameo Social Club held events like charm school, luncheons, and slumber parties at the retreat. The club even chartered a bus to transport its young debutantes from Rondo to spend a few days at the venue a week before the group's culminating cotillion ball. The cotillion program was the first of its kind in the Upper Midwest. Many debutantes in Mrs. Rideaux's

In 1957, Cameo Social Club debutants attended a sleepover at the St. Croix Valley Country Club the Saturday prior to the Second Annual Cotillion Ball at St. Paul's Lowry Hotel. Pictured here (top to bottom, L-R): Joyce Ann Hughes; Myrna Kathleen Day; Carolyn Joyce Rawlings and Dorothy Johnson; Elsie Mae Stone and Gail Yvonne Payne; and Janet Onetta Walton and Marva Ann Boyd. *In Cameo Social Club records, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*



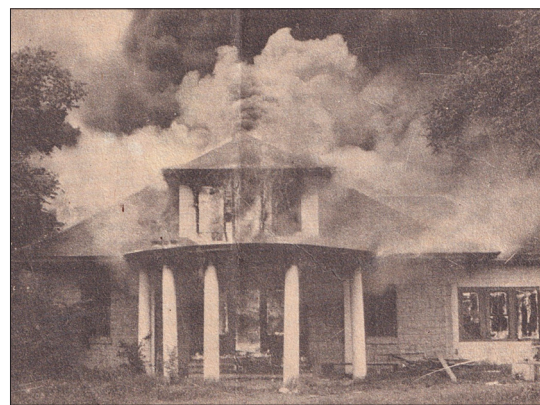
care went on to impactful careers and service to their communities. For example, Joyce Ann Hughes, a Carleton College undergraduate and University of Minnesota School of Law grad (the first Black woman to achieve this honor in 1965), recently retired as a longtime law professor at Northwestern University.³¹

A Short-Lived Dream

While James and Anna Belle worked hard to establish their country home-away-from-home, their work and community were in St. Paul. The distance between the two locations proved to be challenging, and, as Rondo splintered to make way for the interstate, the couple lost the beloved Wisconsin property to foreclosure in 1962.³²

A Los Angeles-based real estate developer purchased the property. Vandals cut a hole in the roof before the developer hired a local family to live in and maintain the home. In 1970, the developer sold the estate to the State of Wisconsin. Once again, it sat vacant. The state could not justify the expense or the complications to maintain the property and declared it a hazard in 1974. Locals took anything of value from inside, removing marble columns from the veranda and filling the concrete foundation with earth and rubble. Firefighters burned the mansion down and removed most remnants of what it once was.³³

Today, the location of the former St. Croix Valley Country Club is open to the public within the boundaries of Interstate State Park on the Wisconsin side of the river. Ruins of a wading



Firefighters in Polk County, Wisconsin, brought the once-majestic Silverbrook Mansion/St. Croix Valley Country Club to the ground in 1974, as it had become a safety hazard. *Courtesy of St. Croix Falls Historical Society.*

pond, water pump house, and limestone gate pillars are still visible on the Silverbrook Loop Trail along an old county highway. Once through the gates, the trail opens into a giant meadow with the remains of bubbling artesian wells and ponds that feed a spring flowing over a waterfall at the bluff's edge. Upon visiting, it is clear this land has a history—a recorded energy of greatness.

Big Round Lake Retreats, 1952-1977

Maceo A. Finney, the Northern Pacific Railway assistant general chairman of the Dining Car Employees Union Local 516; his wife, Lola; and their son, William Kelso Finney, lived at 437 Rondo Avenue. In 1952, Maceo, an avid fisherman, purchased forty acres from a German farmer named Tolbert Shilling in the heart of recreation and resort country—Big Round Lake, Wisconsin. The lake is in Polk County's Georgetown Township. Finney partnered with Emmett Searles to buy and parcel the property for other Rondo families to enjoy. It included pasture and ten lakefront lots and was referred to as both the "Finney-Searles Ranch Resort" and "Finney's Country Place." The Carter Fletcher and Burt Buckner families joined them.³⁴

Life there was enjoyable, and summers spent on Big Round Lake provided a lot of "firsts" for a young William Finney. By age seven, he learned to shoot a BB gun and later became an avid marksman. His father had been raised on a farm and enjoyed country life when he wasn't working for the railroad. Lola Vassar Finney, a lifelong St. Paulite and owner of Finney's Beauty Parlor, was less interested in the rugged life. "Mom called everything a rabbit. 'Get that rabbit!' she'd say, and I'd have to tell her, 'No, that's a chipmunk. No, that's a mouse.'" By age twelve, William learned to drive a car on gravel roads, drive a tractor, row a boat, start a motor, and grow crops.³⁵

Trouble at the Lake

Shortly after purchasing the farm and house and building two cabins on the property, the four families were victims of arson in late 1952 and early 1953 after they had closed their homes for the winter.³⁶

The Fletcher cabin was the first to burn on December 17, 1952. The Polk County Sheriff's Department investigated the fire and blamed



Carter Fletcher and his son Readus Fletcher Sr. in the early 1950s. *Courtesy of Readus Fletcher Jr.*

faulty wiring. Because of this, they ordered electricity to all other structures on the property cut. However, more fires were discovered on January 4, 1953. Flames destroyed the Buckner's cabin and the Finney/Searles farmhouse. This time, it was clear the fires were targeted and deliberately set. The sheriff's department discovered two sets of footprints in the snow leading to the structures and the imprints of a gasoline can and crankcase oil container where two people set it down to climb a fence. Police believed the fires were set in the early morning of January 2 and burned for two days before locals reported them. During that time, approximately an inch of snow fell, obstructing other possible clues and evidence.³⁷

Rupert Fisk, a real estate and insurance agent from St. Croix Falls, had sold the Shilling Farm to Finney and Searles. Fisk told reporters from the *St. Paul Recorder* that there was indignation from locals because the families were Black and owned such desirable lakefront property. Fisk also said the most "resentment came from the tavern in a village named Twin Town that is about a mile and a half from the property" at the intersection of County Highways E and G. Fisk said he had to return the money on a lakefront lot he'd sold after the purchaser had been told a "deliberate falsehood" while visiting the tavern. When interviewed by law enforcement, the tavern owner placed blame on the residents of

the nearby St. Croix Chippewa Reservation and shared hateful opinions that “[N]egroes were not welcome.”³⁸

Fisk notified the families of the first fire on December 19, 1952. Shortly after, Buckner, whose cabin had not burned, received a letter from Integrity Insurance Company postmarked December 19 informing him that his property insurance policy was canceled. By January 10, the Finney and Searles families received notices that their policies also were canceled after they’d just increased them following the Fletcher fire. They were never given a reason for the cancelation. However, Fisk, who had sold the policies to Finney and Searles, said it was too risky to continue insuring the properties unless there was “a change of circumstances [ownership].” Fisk also said he did not think any insurance agency would insure “Negros in that area.” Finney and Searles were resolute. Whether or not they were insured, they would rebuild. The families, with the exception of the Fletchers, constructed cabins in the spring using steel Quonset-hut structures developed during World War II. The Fletchers decided to rebuild on the Apple River near Amery.³⁹

Multiple officials and agencies investigated the fires, including Polk County Sheriff James Moore, Wisconsin Atty. Gen. Vernon Thomson, Deputy State Fire Marshal William Rohn, branches of the Wisconsin and Minnesota NAACP, the Wisconsin Commission on Human Rights, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Rev. Carty, as president of the Minnesota Conference of the NAACP, worked directly with the Commission on Human Rights to spotlight this investigation and increase public awareness. Carty called the fires “acts of terrorism that cannot be tolerated by any civilized people.” The fire marshal assured the newspapers that [we] “are not going to tolerate this sort of thing, even though it may happen in other states . . . we’re going to try even harder in this instance to find the guilty persons.”⁴⁰

Reporters from the *Minneapolis Spokesman* and the *St. Paul Recorder* interviewed Big Round Lake community residents after the fires. “It was their opinion that those they talked with seemed ashamed,” and the fires were cowardly. Many worried it might happen again.⁴¹

William Finney, today a retired St. Paul police chief and recently retired Ramsey County undersheriff, remembers:

Reportedly, the fires were the work of or at the instigation of the KKK leader in the area. He owned a bar down the road from our cabins. At some point during the investigation, his bar mysteriously burned down and was completely destroyed.⁴²

Newspaper accounts support Finney’s memory. On August 21, a fire did indeed destroy the Twin Town Tavern. The blaze started in the garage at 9:30 am and burned so quickly that by the time the nearest fire department arrived, the structure was consumed in flames. Within forty-five minutes, nothing remained of the business or the attached apartment. It was estimated that the damage caused by the fire was about \$75,000. The tavern was never rebuilt. No one was ever prosecuted for the crimes.⁴³

While there is not a definite connection between the Twin Town Tavern to the arsons or the Ku Klux Klan, we can piece together the context in which racist attitudes existed in the St. Croix River Valley at the time.

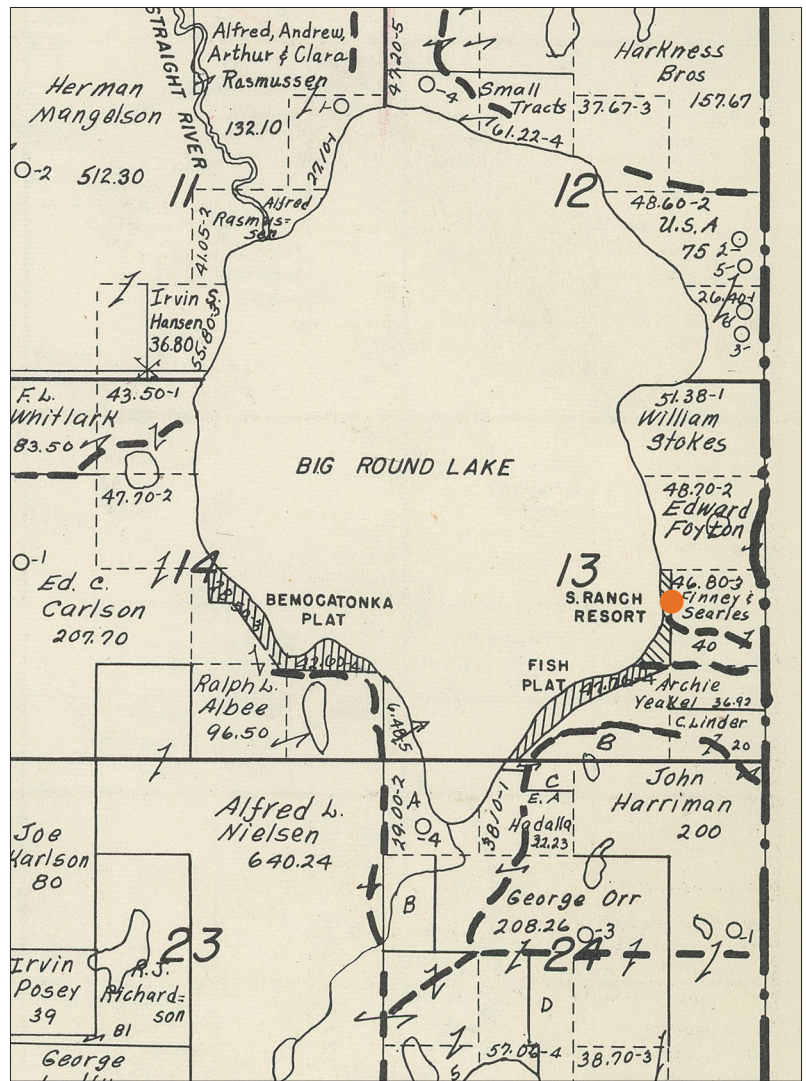
The extremely secretive brotherhood came to the valley in 1924, quickly building membership through Pierce, St. Croix, Polk, and Barron counties. During the 1920s, the KKK was more popular in the North than in the South. Some northern whites were threatened by the growing prosperity of Black Americans moving in from the South. In fact, the Klan argued publicly that “they would be African Americans’ greatest protector provided they stayed within their social position.”⁴⁴ Clear Lake, also located in Polk County and only twenty-five minutes from the Finney and Searles property, was an active recruitment area. The *Clear Lake Star’s* weekly newspaper even included a column called “Klan Kommentar.” The newspaper’s editor was a known member. By the 1930s, after multiple members were exposed and organizational tell-alls were published, the KKK dispersed but took their beliefs and values to other civic groups, business organizations, and political parties. For example, Fred R. Zimmerman, Wisconsin’s secretary of state at the

time of the arsons on Big Round Lake, had, at one time, been a member.⁴⁵

It wasn't long before officials lost focus on the investigation. In the 1953 Governor's Commission on Human Rights Annual Report of the Director on Cases of Alleged Discrimination, Director Rebecca Chalmers Barton wrote that her role in investigating the case was to "keep in sympathetic contact" with those involved and also to remind them that "no premature conclusions could be fairly held as to the attitudes of the community. . . ." While there was definite evidence collected by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies that the fires were deliberate, Barton suggested, "segments of the Negro press played up the incident and jumped to conclusions." The commission stopped actively working on the case that April after the sheriff said any further involvement would "confuse the issue and possibly detract from the work of the law enforcement officer."⁴⁶

Even Atty. Gen. Thomson, who spoke at the Wisconsin State Conference of the NAACP in October 1953, did not mention the arsons despite overseeing the lead state agency investigating the crimes. Thomson became governor of Wisconsin in 1957.⁴⁷

Still, this bleak reality of racism came secondary to the joy experienced and the memorable times the Finney, Searles, Buckner, and Fletcher families spent together at their homes away from home.⁴⁸



In the 1959 Polk County plat book, the properties of the Finney and Searles families are mapped at #13: S. Ranch Resort. Courtesy of St. Croix Falls Historical Society.



Retired St. Paul Police Chief William Finney has fond memories of time spent at Big Round Lake. After the arson on their property, the Finney's built a new cabin. In 1960, family gathered around the fireplace. William Finney's father, Maceo, stands by the fireplace. A young William and his cousin, Beatrice Coleman, appear ready to bolt from the chair so they can play outside. A friend is seated at the right.



William Finney's parents, Lola and Maceo Finney, along with Maceo's sister, Helen Finney Higgins, who was visiting from Los Angeles, paused for a photo outside the cabin on April 15, 1963. Both images courtesy of William Finney.

Leisure at the Lake

Truly, the resort property's significance is much larger than the arsons. The lake was the site of annual picnics, fishing outings, and Labor Day parties for the Lucky 13, Credjafawn, Breakfast Pinochle, and the Twin Cities Untouchables clubs, and, in the case of the 1957 Credjafawn Annual Picnic, residents from the nearby St. Croix Chippewa Reservation were invited to join in the festivities.⁴⁹

Mr. and Mrs. Alex T. Perry and Mr. and Mrs. William Jones built cabins on the property after the fires, as well. The Jones family fittingly referred to their cabin as "The Knew."⁵⁰ After rebuilding, many Rondo residents and their guests enjoyed the time at Big Round Lake for summers to come.

William Finney and his mother sold their portion of the land in 1977 after Maceo passed away. Finney's demanding career with the St. Paul Police Department, community commitments, and the upkeep and maintenance required for the summer home ultimately influenced the decision to sell.⁵¹

A Summertime Reflection

There is so much hope after a long winter. We are eager to plan and envision three months full of outdoor recreation and relaxation. It's a time of release and refreshment—airing out tents and opening cabin windows. Even local roadside attractions like the Baker Land and Title Company Museum open for the season. The world thaws, and we're free to roam and enjoy

the natural beauty that the Upper Midwest has to offer.

But we must remember the past. These select narratives honor the indomitable spirit of families and communities who have persevered, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of local history, and affirm the ongoing fight for justice, equality, and the empowerment of all people.

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Growing Up with Anna Belle Rideaux

CHERRELLE SWAIN

Whether material or spiritual, experiencing loss changes people, families, and communities. This article examines how losing a matriarch impacted her descendants and the Rondo neighborhood. What was gained from loss, what has vanished forever, and what does a community and family strive to reclaim?

I never knew my great-grandmother, Anna Belle Hitt Rideaux, but as a little girl growing up in the 1990s and early 2000s, I heard wonderful stories of Anna Belle and the family she and my great-grandfather, James, raised in St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood. She seemed like a dream to me.

- Great-grandmother Anna Belle was a talented businesswoman, sewing elegant dresses and handsome suits from her home and later owning her own women's dress shop;
- She opened her house to Black travelers looking for an affordable and safe place to stay;
- She, with James, owned a country club in the St. Croix River Valley and invited friends, family, and travelers to enjoy time in Wisconsin's great outdoors; and
- Great-grandmother Anna Belle was most certainly THE "Belle of the Ball" at local social and family events.

Some of these anecdotes sounded like fairytales. I wondered: How could a Black woman have accomplished so much prior to the civil rights movement? And then there was the community where Anna Belle and James settled in their first home together at 707 Rondo Avenue.

Again, I had heard stories, but when I was growing up, I understood that Rondo had changed so much—especially after Interstate 94 ripped through the community in the 1950s



Family matriarch Anna Belle Rideaux. Courtesy of Rideaux, Edmond, Swain Family Archives.

and '60s. Yet, childhood memories of St. Paul are still some of my favorites. My parents drove my siblings and me from our home in Burnsville to Rondo, where we spent many weekends at grandma's house, played with cousins on Selby Avenue, or sang in the choir at Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church, where we made beloved friendships.

Each Christmas Eve, we gathered in Rondo around a gorgeous black Christmas tree decorated with ornaments and white twinkly lights. Gifts enveloped in black wrapping paper and tied with beautiful ivory and gold ribbons sat waiting beneath the tree. Laughter and Christmas spirit filled the space.

Rondo Days is another special memory—an annual celebration and remembrance of a by-gone era. We all looked forward to the outdoor summer event. But despite the celebratory parade, exciting drill team competition, and delicious food, I always sensed that I was missing

the “real Rondo.” I wished to experience the community in its heyday so I could bask in its jovial culture and rich legacy. Rondo Days, while wonderful, always left me yearning for more. Eventually, curiosity led me to ask questions about Great-grandmother Anna Belle and the Rondo of the past. And, so, a journey began.¹

Down Memory Lane with Anna Belle’s Grandchildren

Without ever knowing Anna Belle, I always felt close to her, and, in the last few years as a filmmaker, I’ve begun documenting our family’s history. Last fall, I invited Aunt Muriel Campbell Collins of St. Paul; Uncle Joel (Pootsie) Edmond of Minneapolis; and Uncle Gordon (Gordy) Edmond from Nashville, Tennessee, to join my mother Stacy Edmond Swain at my parents’ home in Burnsville to spend a few hours remembering their grandmother Anna Belle, whom they affectionately called Gaga.²

But this was no ordinary gathering. As a documentarian, I knew I had to think about setting and, so, while my parents were out, and with the help of family members and a couple of kind movers, I transformed the Swain family living and dining rooms, “recreating Anna Belle’s home,” complete with my great-grandmother’s elegant furniture that had been hidden in storage for a decade. My aunt and uncles were pleasantly surprised, but when my mother returned, she was fit to be tied when she saw her furniture had been moved downstairs. As she made her way upstairs, however, her annoyance turned to joy and happiness.

It was a sight to see the ornate heirlooms—timeless French Provincial-style chairs surrounding an elegant dining table.³ As we sat together, the four siblings searched their memories, recalling faces and names they hadn’t thought about in decades. And, as I looked around, I wondered to myself: Who else had sat in these seats? What were they going through? What were their hopes and dreams for our family?”

On top of the table, I curated an exhibit of sepia-toned and black-and-white photographs, along with letters, receipts, and other archival materials spanning the last one-hundred years. Immediately, my mother, aunt, and uncles traveled back in time.

The setup continued in the living room with an elegant recreation of my great-grandmother’s matching furniture set. The chairs and sofa are framed in rich wood—intricately carved with delicate flowers—and showcase Anna Belle’s classic style with uniquely curvaceous designs and tufted backs upholstered in ivory fabric adorned with a subtle floral pattern. It was my



Anna Belle Rideaux’s four grandchildren gathered to reminisce about their grandmother with whom they all lived for a time as children. Pictured (L-R): Stacy Swain (63), Gordon Edmond (68), Joel Edmond (70), and Muriel Collins (74).



Cherrelle Swain recreated Anna Belle Rideaux’s living and dining rooms for the conversation. Images by Jean Paul Dia, courtesy of Ancestral Healing documentary.

first time seeing the set together in its entirety. The scene clearly made a statement as my mom slowly came to terms with her temporarily refurbished home and remembered her childhood:

I thought our grandparents' home was a palace—it was beautiful and elegant inside and out, up and down. Every guest bedroom had a color theme—green, red, and pink.

What other memories would Anna Belle's belongings trigger?

"I remember that party," Mom noted with a nostalgic smile. "And what about this?" she asked Aunt Muriel, pointing at the inside cover of a guestbook, handwritten in black, cursive ink. The book, with its yellowed pages, held an air of timelessness. The delicate aging of the paper carried the weight of beautiful memories:

20th Anniversary—February 18, 1955—of James and Anna Belle Rideaux who received guests with [an] Open House at their newly, and elegantly appointed home.

"Oh my goodness, I wasn't even born," Mom exclaimed.⁴

Aunt Muriel entered the living room and read a note from one of the attendees, "Best of wishes, finest dishes."⁵

"Yeah, they were all about the dishes," she laughed. She and Mom scanned the guest list. Several of Anna Belle's siblings attended the gathering—Aunt Fannie from Detroit, Aunt Cynthia from here in St. Paul, and Uncle Charles from Chicago.

I thought to myself: This was soon after they had redecorated and painted their home. At the time, they had no idea that just a few years later, they would be forced off their beloved Rondo Avenue.

After Anna Belle's passing at age seventy-three in 1979, these archival items along with jewelry and much of the furniture eventually landed in the hands of someone "outside" the family. Anna Belle's heirs—Muriel Holliday Edmond, her four children, and their children—lost possession of these prized belongings. Forced to move on, the items were largely written off as something that would never be recovered. It took thirty years, but thanks to the

Guests		
Date	Name and Address	Remarks
Feb. 18, 1955	Mrs. & Mrs. Charles Bates Hitt 130 East Marquette Road Chicago, Illinois	We love you brother and sister, Best of wishes finest dishes, Love always
2. " " "	Mrs. Fannie Hitt Wells 151 Woodland Avenue Detroit, Michigan	Jack, though absent, joins me in love and best wishes for all time to come.
2. " " "	Mrs. Louise Hitt McCants 5926 Northfield Detroit, Michigan	Mrs. Mary, present in thoughts says "me too".
3. China Cigarette Case 4. Cash trays	Cecilia, Cynthia, & Marnie	Good wishes, three sisters
4.	Louise and Chris	China house picture flatter!
5.	Birdie and Bill	China flower cigarette box
6.	White China Console with Gold edges (Lusting) on white satin ribbon	17 couples, 11 other friends, list headed by Mr. & Mrs. Edmond (see card)
7.	Mrs. & Mrs. C. E. Huggins Mrs. & Mrs. John C. Frew	12 Pk. Bridge hunchment set (Huggins and Frew) Edmond & Frew

tenacity and willpower of Uncle Pootsie and my sister, Natalie Swain Cargile, some of the family property was returned.

Family Values

Anna Belle made her way to the North Star State from Birmingham, Alabama, in 1930 with her young daughter, Muriel, and her mother, Anna Belle Nelson Hitt. Like millions of Black Americans who participated in the Great Migration between 1910 and 1970, the family of three, along with Anna Belle's eight siblings, left the Jim Crow South looking for better lives and opportunities. Some of her brothers and sisters landed in Chicago; others in Detroit. Anna Belle chose Minnesota because the reputation of St. Paul's Black community had preceded itself. She had already heard that Rondo was a "vibrant and resilient cross-section [of the city]."⁶ When she arrived, she was not disappointed. "The neighborhood was the beating heart of [the] African-American community and home to thriving businesses, religious organizations, and social clubs."⁷

Anna Belle met James in 1933; they married in 1935. Looking at a photo of the couple, Uncle Pootsie noted that Anna Belle was the motivator, crediting her for her creativity and acknowledging her know-how to make money and keep her husband on point. Uncle Gordy agreed. "Papi was more of an introvert; Gaga was an extrovert. He often went along with her vision."

Most of the rare photographs were meticulously preserved by Anna Belle Rideaux's daughter Muriel Holliday Edmond. Later, granddaughter Muriel Collins carefully stored these precious photos and heirlooms at her home for decades. In the Edmond, Collins, Rideaux Family Archives.

"It was pretty much, 'Whatever you want, Anna Belle,'" Uncle Pootsie laughed, "She was . . . the brains of the operation, and he was the muscle." Together, they raised Anna Belle's daughter from a previous marriage—Muriel.

Anna Belle was very proud of her daughter. She and James taught young Muriel that education and hard work were essential. Muriel graduated from Marshall High School and, later, Lincoln University—an Historically Black College and University (HCBU)—in Jefferson City, Missouri.

Uncle Pootsie picked up a news clipping about Muriel at a college dance—attended and arranged by Anna Belle. The caption read, "It was a memorable weekend when Muriel's momma came to town to fete her darling daughter with a birthday party in Bennett Hall."⁸ The accompanying picture featured Muriel dancing with a gentleman in the foreground and Anna Belle dancing directly behind her! In a time following World War II when money was still tight for most everyone living in the US, Anna Belle spared no expense. To her, family was everything, and she intended to celebrate her daughter when she could.

Muriel married Joel Edmond in 1953, and Anna Belle celebrated the grandchildren the couple introduced to the world, as well. But—she expected them to behave.

The siblings explained to me that Anna Belle taught etiquette when they were young. They learned that there are certain things you do and certain things you don't do. Uncle Pootsie shared an example:

A lot of kids in the neighborhood didn't like it because they thought we thought that we were better. . . . We were just taught a different way. . . . One time, we were . . . eating, and I turned the plate. Well, that day I learned that you are not supposed to turn your plate. Instead, you use your knife and fork to bring the food closer to you. You couldn't shovel your fork. Oh, Lord, I'll never forget that.

My mother, uncles, and aunt all spent some time during their formative years living at the Rideaux house. Anna Belle loved having them around and treated them as her own children while Muriel balanced multiple jobs to make

sure her family had everything it needed. Anna Belle's rules were carved into their memories, as Uncle Gordy recalled:

If you stayed at [Anna Belle's] house, and you didn't make up your bed, you would be disciplined; you just would. To this day, I do not leave the house without making up my bed, pillow tucked, sheets tucked, and everything. That's how she was, and she instilled that in me.

My mom lived with her grandparents for five or six years. She admitted it was hard. She missed home and felt embarrassed if friends thought the "old people" she was with were her parents. "And they drove a Buick or an Oldsmobile with Batmobile wings, so I was always embarrassed about their car."

Anna Belle taught young Stacy how to make eggnog, sew and garden, iron, and set the table. She learned to play the piano, as did her siblings, and attended Camphor Church every Sunday. Mom reflected:

It was actually a wonderful thing and a blessing . . . [Anna Belle] only had one child, and she wanted many, so we all had our stint living there at one point or another. I just happened to live there last and the longest.

Anna Belle Rideaux—All Business

Over five hours as we poured over photos and shared one story after another, it became evident that Anna Belle impacted not just our family but so many people in the community, and she took on a variety of roles.

People first got to know Anna Belle as a seamstress. "While everyone wanted the most fashionable and fabulous pieces, oftentimes, they wouldn't have the budget," Aunt Muriel commented.

[Her work] was less expensive than going [to] downtown St. Paul or to some of the bigger shops. She would create the most beautiful items for those [who] came to her, and they wouldn't need to break the bank. She didn't use patterns either.

She opened her first dress shop in her Rondo home. In the early 1960s, she operated a storefront near 50th and Bryant in Minneapolis, where the restaurant George and the Dragon and the Patina store now stand.⁹

Both Anna Belle and James were active and entrepreneurial. James worked as a redcap at Union Depot, was a tailor in his own right, and a dedicated trustee of the church. Anna Belle sewed clothing, raised her children, and like many individuals in Rondo, opened the family home to travelers looking for a safe place to stay while in town. One such guest was ballplayer Roy Campanella, who played briefly for the St. Paul Saints before returning to the New York Dodgers in 1948.¹⁰ Aunt Muriel noted that her grandmother owned a fourplex on Iglehart for renters and boarders, “She was entrepreneurial and generated revenue by collecting rent,” my aunt said.

And then there was the St. Croix Valley Country Club, which Anna Belle and James purchased in 1956.

The club—a nineteen-room, limestone mansion—sat on 200 acres of land across meadows of purple aster. Trout ponds fed a spring flowing over Silverbrook Falls.¹¹

“It was the original bed and breakfast for Black people at the time,” Uncle Pootsie recalled.

Visitors came for archery [and] fishing, and people could come on the property to trap. . . . I remember a white man who used to come and catch the minks during that time. . . [and] my grandfather ate what he trapped, even raccoons. . .

As Uncle Pootsie shared his memories of the club with us, he grew sentimental:

My fondest memories were playing behind the waterfall. . . with [you], Gordy. [And] I recall looking out of the front of the property and seeing deer all over the place; they would come [so] close to the front door.

Aunt Muriel chimed in, pointing to a photo of the club, “I slept in this room because I always could see the waterfall. I wanted to be by the water.”

Uncle Pootsie continued to reflect:



Muriel Collins, Anna Belle Rideaux's granddaughter, has fond memories of her grandmother working at the sewing machine. “She made an impact through her sewing; she was a lot of people’s tailor,” Collins said. *Advertisement in St. Paul Recorder, April 19, 1963.*



The Rideauxs’ St. Croix Country Club (when it was known as Silverbrook Estate), looking from the lower trout pond on the property. *Courtesy of Interstate State Park Archives.*

My affinity for the outdoors started in Osceola, [Wisconsin]. I canoed from [there] all the way to Bayport, [Minnesota] as a kid, and I could start a campfire. . . and pitch a tent. I love fishing and tennis. All of my siblings and I learned to swim at a young age. Of course, the winter time is getting kind of rough for an old man, but I still love being outside.

The Destruction of Rondo

The St. Croix Country Club was a welcome place to relax. It was also a necessary place to retreat at that time because the new freeway that tore through Rondo scattered people and businesses. Aunt Muriel remembered dirt blowing everywhere for two to three years. At the time, she was about twelve or thirteen years old.

To learn more about the Rideaux family’s country club, see “Rondo Recreation in the St. Croix River Valley, 1909-1977” by Haley Prochnow on page 1 of *Ramsey County History* (Summer 2024).

Joel and Gordon Edmond at Interstate State Park in May 2022, reminiscing in front of Silverbrook Falls on land that once belonged to their grandparents, the Rideauxs. "We are city folks, but some of us know a little about the country, too," said Joel Edmond. *Image by JJ Swain, courtesy of Ancestral Healing documentary.*



"As a child, I didn't understand it at first," Uncle Pootsie explained. "To me, it was like a giant playground, a big hole in the dirt where they took out two streets. We even used to play on the equipment, which you're not supposed to do," he added with a smirk. "We used to start and stop the machines." He continued:

Once we got older, we realized they put a freeway through an enterprising Black community during a time of racial riots and the civil rights movement. Across the United States, freeways were being built through [many] Black communities.

My uncle was right. From 1956 to 1968, under the Federal-Aid Highway Act, dozens of communities across the country were forced to relocate at the hands of federal and state governments—a glaring example of intentional destruction, violence, and forced displacement of Black communities.¹²

As we talked about this chapter of our family's lives, the mood around the table shifted.

"When the Minnesota Department of Transportation acquired and demolished [Anna Belle's] home at 707 Rondo for Interstate 94," Aunt Muriel reflected, "we were fortunate to buy another home at 765 Marshall. It wasn't about money; the real concern was the destruction of our community." She thought back:

Rondo was vibrant and self-sustaining. We had numerous businesses—grocery stores, restaurants, BBQ shops, liquor stores, printers, medical offices—you name it, we had it. A lot of people I went to school with [St. Paul Central grad, 1967] were gone. Some families left the state; others moved to different parts of St. Paul or to more suburban areas.

It was a tough time. Not only did the Rideaux family lose the home on Rondo Avenue, but eight years after purchasing the country club, they were forced to foreclose on that property.

"It's difficult, nostalgic, and sad," said Uncle Pootsie, wistfully. "[But], we try to keep the spirit of the community alive, and we come together through photographs, stories, and annual events to remember."

Gathering Together

When thinking about growing up in Rondo, Aunt Muriel mostly recalls family. Every year, there was a reunion at someone's large home. Anna Belle's siblings took turns hosting events across the Midwest. Many of the men worked as railroad company redcaps, so it was easy to travel by train. Aunt Muriel chuckled, "[There was] a lot of food, card playing, and doing the Charleston. On Sunday, everyone would go to church.

When together, family gathered in the piano room. "Every last one of them could sing and play the piano. Grandma would get them on cue, and the house would light up," Uncle Pootsie remembered.

According to Uncle Gordy, playing cards was another favorite pastime of Anna Belle's—she loved competing with family and friends:

You name a card game, she could play it. . . . she would play for money, and nobody could beat her. She'd have three-day card events, and all the socialites would be there. . . . I remember the way she would set up the rooms, the decor, and the hors d'oeuvres. The women . . . would have such a good time, playing music, sometimes staying up until 3 am.

Continuing the Legacy

As the discussion about Anna Belle began to wind down, we were all a bit emotional. "Sitting here brings back some very fond memories," Uncle Gordy sighed. "Just to inherit the legacy, to be able to remember, just to be a part of it. This is such a good feeling."

He admitted he didn't remember the names of many faces in the photographs scattered across the table. He'd forgotten a lot of people, but then he'd discover an image that transported him back. In this instance, it was a

newspaper clipping of Anna Belle sitting in her living room on the same furniture we were using for this gathering. A reporter and photographer showcased her elegant home.

With pride, Uncle Gordy shared, “Through this matriarch, we are connected to a generation that goes back. I never realized I would look back on my own family in this way. I am mesmerized. It’s a big wow.”

And although Anna Belle has been gone forty-five years, the siblings still appreciate the significant impact she had on their lives.

For example, Anna Belle taught Uncle Pootsie to cook as a little boy while he stood on a chair to reach the stove. This later inspired him to attend vocational school, where he was trained in French cuisine. Back then, there weren’t a lot of Black chefs in Minnesota, but that didn’t stop my uncle. For thirty-five years, he worked in the industry, serving eighteen years as the executive chef at Hillcrest Golf Course on the city’s far northeast side.¹³

In some ways, I think Anna Belle’s creative entrepreneurial spirit runs through all of us. My Aunt Muriel and her husband, Billy Collins, owned Muriel’s, an upscale footwear store, for a decade.¹⁴

My mom owned and operated a hair salon out of her home, working as a cosmetologist and making women feel beautiful and cared for—just like Anna Belle did. My sister, Natalie, owns The CONNECT Network, a Texas-based television media company focused on inspiring women entrepreneurs and founders. Our brother, JJ Swain, runs Swain Studios, a production company specializing in commercial video and photography. I, too, am an entrepreneur as the creator and producer of Terra Rossa, a community-based production company and creative agency.

In addition, following in Anna Belle’s footsteps, several family members have harnessed the power of real estate to catalyze generational wealth.

For instance, my mother sold a property to my cousin, Brock Collins—Muriel and Billy’s son. He had rented it for twenty years. When she retired, she asked if he wanted to own it:

He put a lot into it, and I wanted to support him any way I could, including providing a



Family meant everything to Anna Belle Rideaux. She and her eight siblings gathered around their mother, Anna Belle Nelson Hitt in the late 1920s. The Hitt children included (L-R): Cecelia, Louise, Anna Belle, Henry, Monoco, Charles, Fannie, and Cynthia. *Courtesy of Rideaux, Edmond, Swain Family Archives.*



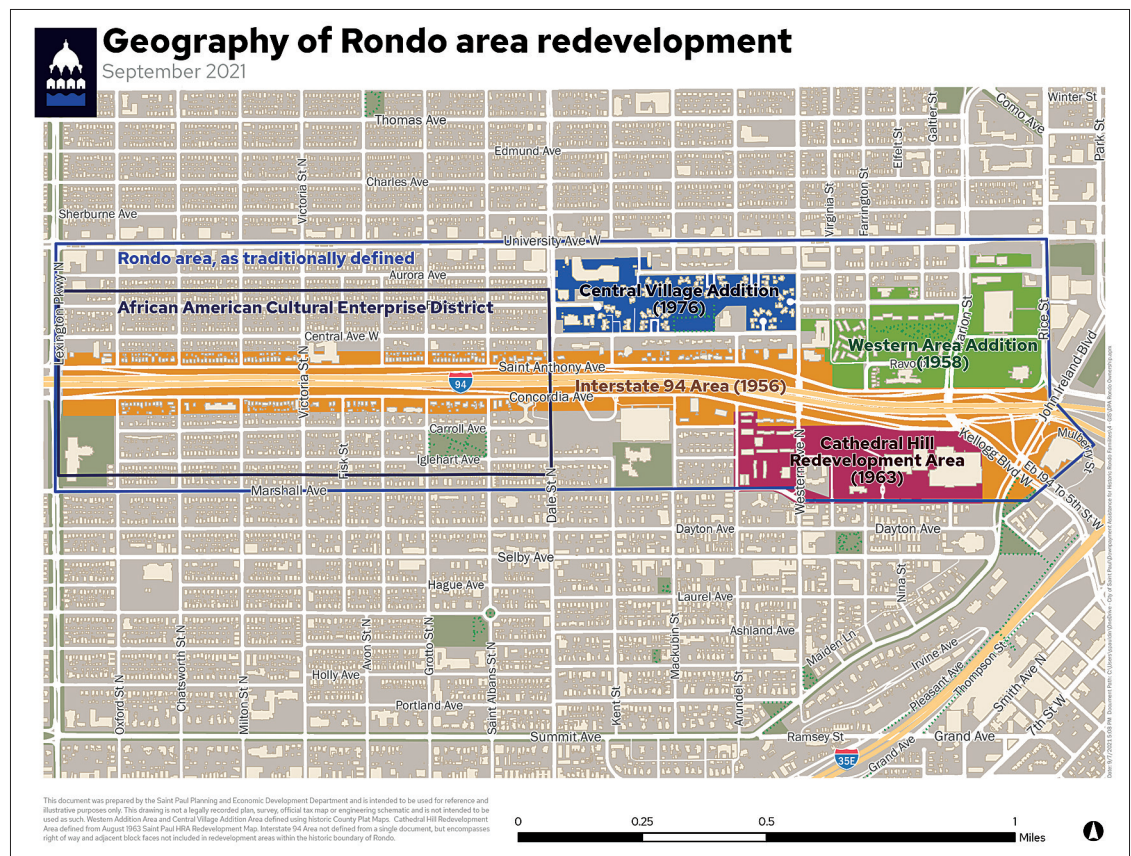
Oliver Towne columnist Gareth Hiebert wrote a feature for the Sunday paper in 1970, highlighting beautiful Black-owned houses, including the Rideaux home on Marshall Avenue. Here, Anna Belle Rideaux sits on the same beautiful living room furniture that great-granddaughter Cherrelle Swain staged briefly at her mother’s while the siblings visited. *In Pioneer Press, April 12, 1970, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

gift of equity that made it possible for him to buy the home. I am really proud of him, and it worked out just as I had hoped.

Another property remained in the family when JJ bought Aunt Muriel and Uncle Billy’s St. Paul home. His purchase was made possible by the gift of equity from our aunt and uncle, along with support from the Inheritance Fund, a local initiative aimed at rebuilding family wealth in the Rondo community. The fund acknowledges that the economic and social diversity of the Rondo area was disrupted when the construction of Interstate 94 began, destroying over \$100 million in wealth.¹⁵

JJ was eligible for assistance from this fund due to the hard work and dedication of Anna

This map from the City of St. Paul website outlines the tentative boundaries of Inheritance Fund recipients, including areas impacted by the I-94 project and the nearby urban renewal projects. *Courtesy of City of St. Paul—Department of Planning and Economic Development.*



Belle and James Rideaux. He did have to prove he was a direct descendant of a property owner whose land was acquired by the Minnesota State Department of Transportation for the I-94 project between Lexington Avenue and Rice Street. This opportunity provided by the city has inspired our family and others from the Rondo community seeking to reclaim their heritage.

We Are Grateful

Our family exercise had wrapped. The five of us were exhausted, yet energized. This very personal journey reclaiming these memories, the furniture, photos and documents, and the essence of our historic community will continue. Together, we realize that through love, community, and by taking care of each other, we strive not just to remember, but to rebuild.

Uncle Gordy said it best:

Thank you, Gaga, for being so enduring, loving, and compassionate. [You were] someone [who] touched the lives of so many people.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to my aunt, uncles, and mother for generously sharing their experiences and allowing our family to archive this history. It means the world to me. Thank you to the generous film crew who shared their time and talent with us: JJ Swain, Jean Paul Dia, Nick Mihalevich, and Jai Winston. Gratitude to my resilient sister, Natalie Cargile, for reclaiming our family's furniture and to Uncle Pootsie for facilitating the return of our heirlooms. Thanks, too, to my mother and sister for storing the furniture over the last decade. I am deeply grateful to author Haley Prochnow for so beautifully bringing to life my great-grandmother's story in the first article. Although not mentioned in this segment, I would be remiss not to extend gratitude to the beloved elders who have helped me more intimately remember my great-grandmother's legacy, including Gordy Kirk and Bernadine McGee and our recently transitioned ancestors Pauline Wallace and Pat Allen.

Cherrelle Swain is a documentary film producer and founder of Terra Rossa, a community-

centered production company focused on social justice. With a portfolio spanning film, beauty, fashion, education, and business, she brings a fresh perspective to impactful storytelling. A former educator, community organizer, and expat, she shares uplifting stories of ancestry, identity, and healing. Descending from St. Paul's Rondo community, Swain lives in Washington DC. She holds her BBA from Howard University and MBA from Universidad de Sevilla in international

business. Swain was an associate producer of the acclaimed documentary film *Black Boys*, which premiered on NBC Peacock and the producer of *In Due Season*, which is now on a film festival and community impact tour. She is currently producing *Ancestral Healing*, an investigative documentary exploring her family's experience in the Rondo neighborhood and the Midwest through the life of her great-grandmother Anna Belle Rideaux.

NOTES

1. "About Rondo Days," Rondo Avenue, Inc., <https://www.rondodays.net/about>. In 1982, Rondo community leaders Floyd G. Smaller and Marvin R. Anderson created the annual Rondo Days event, which takes place the third Saturday in July. The intent was to put together a celebratory gathering and homecoming for residents and families who had moved away following the construction of I-94.
2. Most of the conversations in this article between Muriel Collins, Joel Edmond, Gordon Edmond, Stacy Swain, and interviewer Cherrelle Swain took place at the Swain home in Burnsville in October 2023; The nickname Gaga is now affectionately bestowed on anyone who becomes a grandmother in the family.
3. "How to Identify French Provincial Furniture," Laurel Crown Handcrafted Furniture, <https://www.laurelcrown.com/how-to-identify-french-provincial-furniture>.
4. "Rondo Avenue Renaming," City of St. Paul, <https://www.stpaul.gov/projects/public-works/pw2024rondoaverenaming#:~:text=Description,-,The%20City%20of%20Saint%20Paul%20is%20renaming%20sections%20of%20both,will%20remain%20named%20Concordia%20Avenue;Peter%20Cox,-,Sign%20of%20the%20future%20St.%20Paul%20officially%20brings%20back%20historic%20Rondo%20Avenue%20street%20name,-,MPR,2024,https://www.mprnews.org/story/2024/04/30/sign-of-the-future-st-paul-officially-brings-back-historic-rondo-avenue-street-name>. After I-94 cut through the community, parts of what had been Rondo Avenue became Concordia and St. Anthony Avenues. However, recently the St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission recommended that the city council and the mayor restore parts of these two roads to the original name. The official renaming took place April 30, 2024, at a ceremony at Rondo Plaza.
5. Page from Rideaux family guestbook, February 18, 1955, in *Rideaux, Edmond, Swain Family Archives*.
6. "City of St. Paul Inheritance Fund," City of St. Paul, <https://www.stpaul.gov/departments/planning-and-economic-development/housing/inheritance-fund>.
7. "City of St. Paul Inheritance Fund."
8. In Lincoln University campus newspaper, November 9, 1945.
9. "Camphor Memorial Methodist Church Notes," *St. Paul Recorder*, October 23, 1942, 2; "Annabel's Dress Shop, ad, *St. Paul Recorder*, April 19, 1963, 5.
10. Frank M. White, *They Played for the Love of the Game: Untold Stories of Black Baseball in Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016), 100; 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)," *Ramsey County History* 57, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 2-3; Carl T. Rowan, "Fans Disappointed as Brooklyn Team Recalls 'Campy'" *St. Paul Recorder*, July 9, 1948, 3.
11. The Rideaux land is now part of Wisconsin's Interstate State Park; Haley Prochnow, "Silverbrook and the St. Croix Valley Country Club," *St. Croix 360*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.stcroix360.com/2022/10/silverbrook-and-the-st-croix-valley-country-club/>; "St. Paul, Minn.," *The Call*, November 9, 1956, 15.
12. Farrell Evans, "How Interstate Highways Gutted Communities—and Reinforced Segregation," *History: A+E Television Networks*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/interstate-highway-system-infrastructure-construction-segregation>.
13. Karen Zamora, "Hillcrest Golf Club in St. Paul is Closing," *Star Tribune*, July 28, 2017, B3. Hillcrest closed in 2017, after ninety-six years. It opened as a public golf course in 1921. From 1945 to the 1970s, it transformed into a private Jewish course and club before opening back up to the public. Membership declined in the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century before the decision was made to close. Today, the property is being redeveloped to create affordable housing, parks, and light industrial jobs.
14. Georgann Koelln, "Muriel's shoes march up-town," *Pioneer Press*, n.d.
15. "City of St. Paul Inheritance Fund."

Violet Gould's Operetta School

CHRISTINE PODAS-LARSON

Violet Gould entered stage left and stood in front of the plush curtain. With her white-blond hair coiffed, a hint of pink on her clear cheeks, and her signature violet lipstick, she wore a chiffony dress and clutched a small nosegay of violets.

"It came to me in a dream," she dramatically sighed as she stepped to stage right and laid the flowers on the piano. Almost in a trance, she described her vision of children singing operettas. With a flounce, she exited.

The curtain opened to a Royal Navy set and a troupe of children lustily singing about "sailing the ocean blue" on their "saucy ship" to open a full production of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's operetta HMS Pinafore.¹

Violet Gould believed "singing is fun."² She lived that motto throughout her own vocal career and passed the joy along through the Violet Gould Operetta School, which engaged an estimated 1,000 children in staging operettas and delighting audiences in St. Paul for more than two decades from 1952 to 1974. Her school was no *Our Gang* (*The Little Rascals*) seat-of-the-pants backyard company. To the dazzled eyes of her students, Violet opened the curtain to what real theater could be, producing major operettas with professional stage direction, creating vivid sets and costumes, hiring makeup technicians, and engaging in substantial promotional campaigns. Eileen O'Shaughnessy, who went on to design costumes for the Jawaahir Dance Company, played the mother in a 1961 production of Englebert Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* opera at St. Mary's Hall at Laurel and Howell Avenues. "I realized then what all went into it . . . the professionalism involved," she recalled.³

The fulfillment of Violet's dream for children and her deep knowledge of musical production

arose from her training and experiences as a professional singer and voice teacher, as well as her pure grit and determination.

"The Girl With the Golden Voice"⁴

Violet Adyelynn Gould was born around 1907 in Pierre, South Dakota. Her mother, Laura Hentzelman (1882-1960), came from a prominent family in Davenport, Iowa; Laura and her children sustained close ties to the Davenport community through the years as attested to by local newspaper articles that breathlessly followed Violet's career. Violet's father, Charles H. Gould, also of Davenport, was a "genial tri-city salesman," who transferred to South Dakota shortly after marrying. The Gould marriage did not last. Charles was gone by 1910, leaving Laura with her daughter and seven-year-old son, Leroy. Laura relocated from Pierre to Sherman, South Dakota, and made her living as a musician and by renting rooms in her home.⁵

Violet attended school in Minnehaha County (near Sioux Falls) and was a student in the McClarinnon School of Expression, run by the wife of the local minister. In 1919, her mother remarried widower James A. Helmey, a pharmacist from Minnesota who owned stores in Dell Rapids and Sherman. In 1926 when Violet was about eighteen, James, Laura, and the children moved to St. Paul.⁶

For two years, Violet attended the Conservatory of Music at Macalester College, studying voice under its director, Harry Phillips (who was also on the faculty of the MacPhail School in Minneapolis) and Malcolm McMillan (a prominent chorister who led the Orpheus [choral] Club). She lived with her parents in duplexes in St. Paul's Merriam Park neighborhood and held various clerical positions—her longest employment was as a proofreader with St. Paul hardware wholesaler Farwell, Ozmun, Kirk & Company.⁷

In the late 1920s, Violet began to study voice with Agnes Rast Synder, "acknowledged to be



Agnes Rast Snyder, Violet Gould's voice teacher, appeared in numerous Civic Opera productions, including the starring role of *Carmen* in 1934. Gould also garnered a coveted debut role in the production. Photograph by Kenneth M. Wright Studios for St. Paul Civic Opera Association's production of *Carmen*, in Civic Opera program collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

one of the leading contraltos of the north west," who performed with the Schubert Club and Minneapolis Symphony and was heard frequently in WCCO broadcasts. Snyder possessed a voice of "beautiful quality, well controlled and produced with ease."⁸ She had studied with Rudolph Weyrauch of the Wiesbaden (Germany) Opera and Frank Bibb at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. At the time Violet began study with her, Snyder was on the faculty of the Minnesota College School of Music, located at Harvard and Delaware Streets in southeast Minneapolis. Later, she joined the University of Minnesota faculty and, in 1933, was appointed assistant professor of voice at Carleton College in Northfield.⁹

Under Snyder's coaching, Violet developed as a dramatic soprano, with a "voice of wide range and resonance." She sang with "an easy graciousness which her audiences like[d] immensely."¹⁰ One review dubbed her "The Girl with the Golden Voice."¹¹

The St. Paul Civic Opera: Violet's Musical Home

Violet remarked that "with many . . . , it was almost imperative to go to New York City or even Europe to study music, but she found what she needed in St. Paul."¹² In 1933, the year of its formation, Violet discovered her musical home—the St. Paul Civic Opera Association. Snyder was among its founding board of advisors and likely had a hand in Violet's inclusion in its inaugural roster of artists. The following year, Snyder starred in the Civic Opera's production of Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, and Violet had her breakthrough chance. In the role of Frasquita (*Carmen*'s friend), Violet was a smash hit, causing *Quad-City Times* critics to swoon in their praises: "Miss Gould scored a decided triumph," and her dressing room was a "bower" of congratulatory roses. A wonderful future was predicted.¹³

The Civic Opera made a deep impression on Violet. Organized in the midst of the Great Depression, it fed a community hunger for good opera at affordable prices. Backed by prominent St. Paulites, it had, from its start, a purpose that was both cultural and civic: it was considered a community asset and an artistic service to the city. During those financially challenging times, it provided employment to artists and was supported by the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) under the Federal Music Project. In the program of its opening production, the Civic Opera affirmed the need for the genre, concluding that, "there is a definite niche for opera and the time is psychologically ripe to fill it."¹⁴

Violet was, from its inception through the early 1960s, a mainstay in the Civic Opera's productions and summer Pops concerts. Following her debut in *Carmen*, she appeared in operatic roles as varied as Antonia's mother in Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* and Nettie Fowler in Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's *Carousel*, both in the 1953 production and later, in 1962, with Broadway star John Raitt as the headliner. She felt the part of Nettie was "made for her . . . I do feel like Nettie



Violet Gould's work was noted in Twin Cities newspapers and in South Dakota and Iowa publications. When she debuted in *Carmen* with her teacher Agnes Rast Snyder, the Davenport newspaper printed this photograph and raved about the performance of a "hometown" girl. In *The Daily Times*, October 2, 1934.

when I sing her songs” [like] ‘June is Bustin’ Out All Over’ and ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone.’”¹⁵

For the Pops, Violet sang everything from Bizet and Giacomo Puccini to Victor Herbert and perennial hits such as “The Land of the Sky Blue Water” by Charles Wakefield Cadman and “By The Waters of Minnetonka” by Thurlow Lieurance. The Pops concerts featured musicians from the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra and were produced in the St. Paul Auditorium in conjunction with ice shows by the St. Paul Figure Skating Club. They drew huge crowds (as many as 7,000) from throughout the Midwest. Presented every summer from 1937 to 1962, the Pops ran from mid-July to early September. Each of two or three weekly programs was organized around a theme: “Marvelous Minnesota,” “A Night in Old Vienna,” “Rodgers and Hammerstein,” “Victor Herbert and Jerome Kern,” and so on. The program featured soloists singing two pieces in each act with the orchestra playing two more, followed by an ice show around the same theme. When the Pops began in 1937, it presented a season of nine programs. By 1957, it staged twenty-five. Violet was on the program at least once each summer.¹⁶

Beyond the opera, she sang on KSTP radio broadcasts and performed in numerous civic programs. Her broad repertoire included Broadway hits, operatic arias, sacred pieces, and international music, such as art songs based on the poems of Rabindranath Tagore. She formed the Violet Gould Quartet (based at Central Presbyterian Church), which performed citywide, including at the Hallie Q. Brown Center. Violet was in demand as a church soloist for Hamline Methodist Episcopal Church, First Church of Christ Scientist, and other local congregations. She took on private voice students and coached a thirty-member glee club.¹⁷

An Independent Woman and Civic Leader

By the mid-1950s, with income from her singing engagements and voice students, Violet supported herself fulltime with her music. A single woman, she moved into her own apartment—a duplex on Portland Avenue near St. Thomas College—that served as her studio and seemed “exotic” to her voice students.¹⁸

Inspired by the Civic Opera model, Violet saw music as “an important part of our civic life”¹⁹ and later carried that ethic into her operetta school and her leadership roles in the city’s cultural organizations. She served on the opera’s board of directors from 1954 to 1967, one of only two single women early on. She was a director of the Minneapolis Symphony’s annual fund drive and on The Schubert Club board of directors, leading efforts to make performances accessible to young people at reduced ticket prices and encouraging her private voice students to participate in the club’s Student Section. Respected for her vocal discernment, she was repeatedly named a judge for the Upper Midwest Metropolitan Opera auditions.²⁰

The Operetta School, 1952-1974

The pièce de résistance of her musical entrepreneurship was the Violet Gould Operetta School, founded in 1952. Arising from the vocalist’s dream, its purpose was

to bring to children . . . living operettas to stimulate and satisfy a taste for music, dramatics and operettas . . . and to provide young singers . . . training and experience through participation in actual performances. . . .²¹

Reflective of her Civic Opera ethic, her productions shared operetta with wider audiences at affordable prices.

Children ages four to twelve came to the school through Violet’s connections in the Twin Cities’ musical community, word of mouth, from the ranks of her private students, and from the sheer excitement parents and children experienced in attending performances. Many in the original operetta school were children of musicians involved with the Civic Opera. Initially, the school and performances were held in the hall of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church at Laurel and Howell, then in the Volunteers of America building (at Rice Park) and Women’s City Club, and, finally, in the auditoriums of St. Paul Academy and Summit School. When it began in 1952, the operetta school enrolled sixty children per production. Violet ultimately pared that to thirty, “a more manageable number.”²² In 1961, children were charged \$1.50 per week tuition.²³

Over time, she refined the school's mission statement:

provide each child with an avenue for self-expression; to encourage and guide the child's creative imagination; and to grow . . . in social understanding and cooperation.²⁴

Children would attend the school every Saturday for two to three months, learning an operetta's entire score and all the parts before the roles were cast—often double and triple-cast to give more participants big roles and to provide backup in case of illness. Then, the curtain went up for one to two weekends of performances. She produced three operettas each year. The productions would go on tour to schools, churches, and social clubs throughout St. Paul and further afield to Hastings, Hudson, and White Bear Lake, and even to the ballroom of St. Paul's Lowry Hotel.²⁵

For the operetta school repertoire, Violet chose widely recognized standards, such as Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* and *HMS Pinafore* as well as contemporary works based on fairy tales. These included *Rumpelstiltskin*, from the Hans Christian Anderson story, adapted and written by Jane Dalton with music by Don Wilson; *Johnny Appleseed* by Carmino Carl Ravosa; and *Adventures of Pinocchio*, dramatized by Theodosia Paynter with music by G. A. Grant-Schaefer. She even took on *Mozart the Boy Wonder*, featuring the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and arranged by J. Michael Diack, with children balancing ornate wigs on their heads as they glided about the stage in bustled skirts and silk breeches.²⁶

Violet also made every effort to carve out a place at the adult table for her school. It was formally recognized as an associate of the Metropolitan Opera's Central Opera Service, a national outreach program. An *Opera News* article heralded the wonders of opera in the Twin Cities, highlighting Opera Week, when the Metropolitan Opera would perform at Northrup Auditorium and made special note of "a lady named Violet Gould [who] runs an operetta school for small children."²⁷

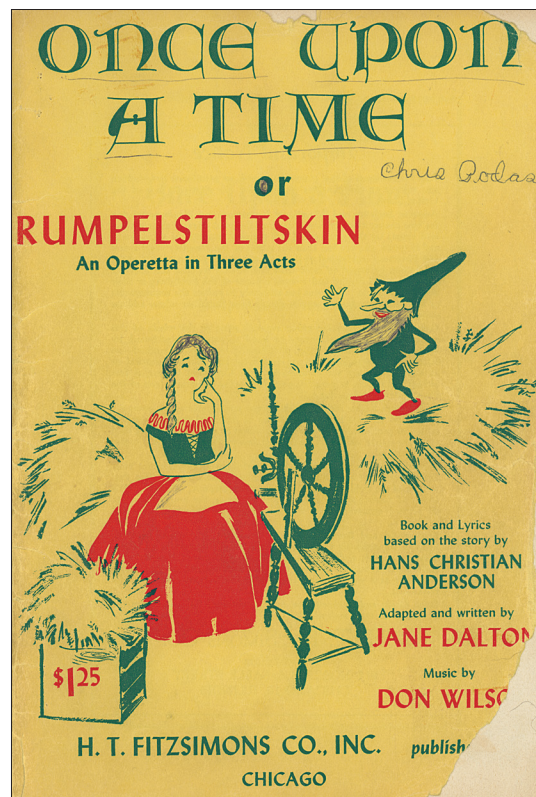
Violet even nurtured relationships with local newspapers. The school received significant



The Violet Gould Operetta School presented *HMS Pinafore* in 1959. (L-R): Linda Kelsey, who later became a Hollywood actress, starred as Josephine. Jonette Lucia took the role of Capt. Corcoran, and Billy Axelrod served as the comic relief as Sir Joseph Porter, the "Admiral of the Sea." In *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 2, 1959, from the collection of Christine-Podas Larson.

media coverage throughout its history, with regular listings for upcoming art events alongside professional offerings. Virtually every production garnered feature coverage, with pictures—often on the front page of the Society and Arts sections—in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and *Dispatch* and the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*.

A special treat for many students was the opportunity to perform in Civic Opera productions. When Puccini's *La Boheme* needed a clutch of street urchins, the casting call came to the operetta school. Among many other productions, students also were featured in *Carousel*, with the



Students in Violet Gould's Operetta School performed a variety of children's operettas, including *Rumpelstiltskin*. Copyright © 2021 by Fred Bock Music. All rights reserved. In the collection of Christine Podas-Larson.



The 1960 production of *Pinocchio* starring Joan Jardine as Cricket, Mary Mirras as Pinocchio, and Hartley George Blomquist as Geppetto was a hit. In *Minneapolis Star*, September 14, 1960, from the collection of Christine Podas-Larson.



In 1961, sisters (L-R) Eileen, Terry, and Molly O'Shaughnessy starred in *Hansel and Gretel*. Molly would go on to lead St. Paul's Montessori Center of Minnesota. In *Pioneer Press*, February 11, 1961, from the collection of Molly O'Shaughnessy.

chance to meet and score Raitt's autograph, and in *Damn Yankees* with Alan Young (star of the *Mister Ed* television series) as the lead. These opportunities left lasting impressions, recalled former operetta student Linda Kelsey. "We were among professional actors and actresses . . . it was a real thrill." As these opportunities arose, Violet always encouraged her students to "remember whom you represent."²⁸

Many operetta school students starred in their high school musicals and plays and community



Besides performing in opera and producing children's operettas, Violet Gould Mather liked to attend performances with friends. (Pictured L-R): Here, Mrs. Ray Wachtler, Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Blomquist, and Violet and Ralph Mather attend a Civic Opera production of *Showboat*. In *Minneapolis Star*, February 17, 1961.

theater, and some continued with professional acting careers. Because of Violet's association with Mady and Max Metzger (*see online sidebar*), the St. Paul Opera Workshop became a performance destination for some of her teenage students who had aged out of the operetta school. Thomas Foster of Edina was chosen to be a member of The Julliard School's first class in drama. He listed the operetta school as part of his artistic resume in making his application. Joan Jardine, a member of the school from 1959 to 1963, was the star of Cretin High School musicals her sophomore through senior years and participated in numerous community theater productions. Karla Strom was on Ted Mack's *The Original Amateur Hour*. Kelsey, the star of the school's 1959 production of *HMS Pinafore*, also participated in the Civic Opera productions of *Wizard of Oz* and *La Boheme*. She graduated with a degree in theater from the University of Minnesota, starred in the Guthrie Theater's production of *The Tempest*, and moved to Hollywood, starring in popular TV shows such as *Lou Grant* and garnering Emmy nominations. Today, she lives in St. Paul and remains a mainstay of Twin Cities' theater.²⁹

A Partner for Violet: Ralph Mather

In November 1958, Violet, at age fifty-one, married Ralph J. Mather, who was nineteen years her senior. They met through the Civic Opera, where Ralph had served on the board of directors since 1939. Their wedding took place in the Summit Avenue home of then Civic Opera board chair Julian Gilman. Ralph was a resourceful and prominent businessman; he spent his career (1927 onward) at Brown & Bigelow as creative director and special sales representative. The St. Paul-based company produced advertising novelties and calendars. Ralph was credited with the idea of featuring Minnesota tourist locations on playing cards that were distributed nationally.³⁰

Born and raised in Springdale, Iowa, Ralph was a graduate of Cornell College. He was an avid horseman who rode over 1,000 miles on horseback in the Canadian Rockies and served as president of the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies. He was involved in local horse shows and recruited Violet to sing the national anthem at show openings at the Minnesota State Fair. Ralph's first marriage (1916-1933) to Adele



Violet Gould Mather presented her student, Christine Poda-Larson, with a signed photograph from Egypt in 1966. In the collection of Christine Poda-Larson.

Bray of Montana ended in tragedy. She died in a boating accident near Ely while with Brown & Bigelow's founder, H. H. Bigelow.³¹

Married for nineteen years, Violet and Ralph served together on the Civic Opera Board of Directors until 1967. They shared a zeal for travel. He had once owned Mather Travel, and Violet approached journeys abroad with entrepreneurial gusto. She led trips to Europe (one a forty-four-day-sojourn that included tulip time in Holland) and followed the adventures by presenting slide shows accompanied by her musical narratives.³² Together, the couple traveled, from the Canadian Rockies to Hawaii, from Europe to Egypt. Ralph survived Violet by less than a year, dying on April 22, 1978, at age ninety.

A Mentor to Young Artists and Entrepreneurs

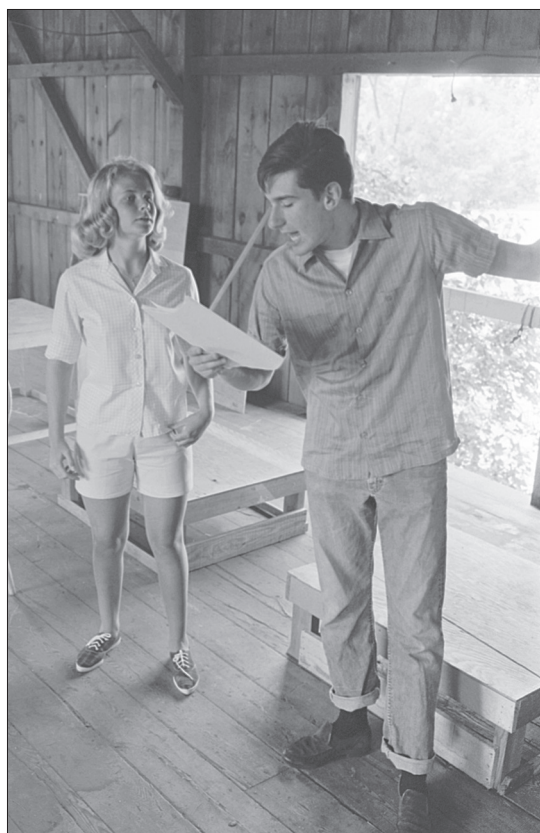
Violet got behind people . . . she took young people seriously.³³

In 1964, Nancy Todora, a recent Monroe High School graduate and Violet's private voice student, won a scholarship to Oberlin

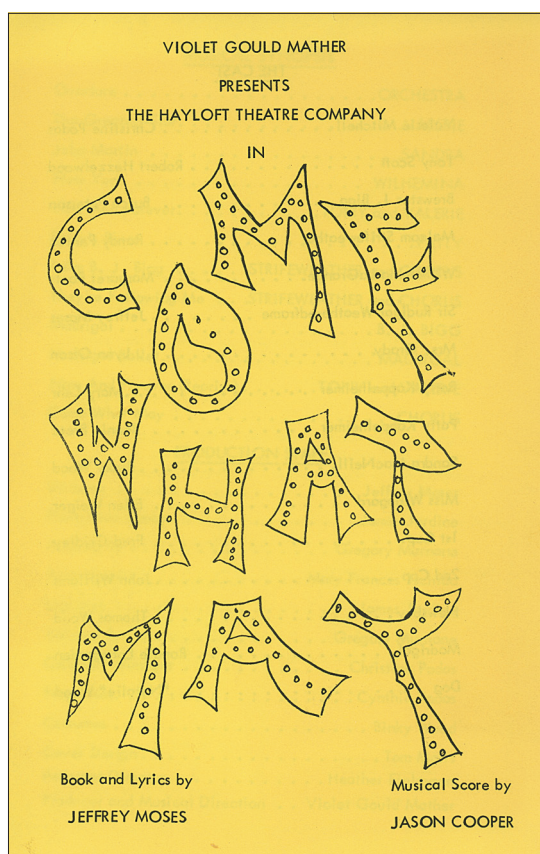
Conservatory of Music in Ohio—one of the nation's premier schools. But there were limitations: Nancy would need funds for any expenses beyond tuition and room and board. Violet presented this challenge to several other voice students, who leapt into action. From their efforts, The Hayloft Theatre Company formed, and their original musical, *Come What May*, played in the Thurston and Jane Wood barn in Sunfish Lake, Minnesota. It was billed as a Violet Gould Mather Production. Hamline University theater major Jeffrey Moses and University of Minnesota music major Jason Cooper wrote an original script and score. Word of the enterprise spread rapidly through Violet's student network and Todora's friends. The cast and crew included students from Monroe and Central high schools, Convent of the Visitation School, Summit School, St. Joseph's Academy, Cretin, and St. Thomas Academy. In the mode of operetta school productions, *Come What May* received extensive media attention, including a full-page feature in the *St. Paul Dispatch*.³⁴

The production played to sold-out houses and achieved its goal. Thanks to lively ticket

Fifteen-year-old Chrissy Podas, the author of this article, was a longtime member of Violet Gould's Operetta School. Here, as lead actress in *Come What May*, she received stage direction from student director Jeffrey Moses. In *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, August 17, 1964, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



The 1964 original production of *Come What May* starred sixteen young cast members and twelve production staff. Program from the collection of Christine Podas-Larson.



sales and special gifts from audience members, Todora had a healthy fund to support her Oberlin education. She later returned to the Twin Cities, starring in the Minnesota Opera's 1976 production of Bedřich Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* and the 1980 production of Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow*.³⁵

Come What May gave those involved real experience and insights into enterprise organization, fundraising, and theatrical production. In addition to their roles in the cast, troupe members served as company manager, composer, playwright and lyricist, and stage and lighting designers. The company literally built the stage within the barn. Summit School and St. Paul Academy continued to use the venue for productions for many years.

Unforgettable

Former students, most now in their sixties and seventies, have vivid memories of Violet and her impact on their lives. Her name conjures the violet-hued aura that surrounded her. As Christmas gifts, they recall bestowing violet powder puffs, pens, linen hankies, and other tchotchkes. Her holiday tree was flocked violet and festooned with amethyst ornaments. They clearly and fondly remember lyrics to operettas and sing them at the drop of a hat.

Violet's ideals of community, cooperation, and love of music had profound and lasting impacts. Students learned through real experience at young ages what it takes to make a show. "She was a trip," commented her former voice student and Hayloft Theatre partner Wood Rockwell. "She gave her students exposure to real adult theater and musical performance."³⁶ Her ventures to support youth-led musicals fostered a new generation of theatrical professionals and nonprofit leaders.

Violet and Ralph moved from their Macalester Groveland duplex to Kellogg Square apartments in the early 1970s, as both experienced declining health. Even then, Violet continued to sing, forming a group of young male vocalists to back up her performances in the facility's reception room. She died on September 14, 1977.³⁷ Those who attended her funeral at House of Hope Presbyterian Church smiled as the casket passed—it was encrusted with glittering violet jewels.

“What matters is to continue singing and it’s surprising how many places there are to sing if you want to.”³⁸

—Violet Gould, March 22, 1953

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Andersen Library. Thanks especially to Molly Larson for her editorial assistance and insights and to photographer Andy King.

Christine Podas-Larson is the founder of Public Art Saint Paul. She was a student in the Violet Gould Operetta School from 1958 to 1962; was in the cast and served as company manager of Hayloft Theatre in 1964; and participated in the St. Paul Opera Workshop production of Showboat in 1965.

Read our supplementary sidebar, “Violet Gould’s Civic Opera Musical Circle,” online at:



NOTES

1. From the memory of Linda Kelsey, interview with author, November 20, 2023, and described in a feature article by Marcia Black, “Voice Teacher Turns Dream into Children’s Operettas,” *Minneapolis Star*, February 23, 1968, 27.

2. “‘Carousel’s Nettie’ Says Music Is Fun,” *Pioneer Press*, March 22, 1953, 24.

3. Eileen O’Shaughnessy, interview, with author, February 1, 2024; *The Story of Hansel and Gretel* program, 1961, in Christine Podas-Larson program collection.

4. “Former Sherman Girl Will Sing Over Radio,” *Argus Leader*, August 11, 1929, 15.

5. “Violet Goald [sic],” South Dakota, US, 1856-1918, https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/178718:6996?tid=&pid=&queryId=ao35edc5-337f-4e55-9436-c27d9c631ab3&_phsrc=red197&_phstart=successSource; “Violet A. Gould,” *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, Pierre City, South Dakota, 1910, <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/157410565:7884>; “Laura Hentzelman,” *Twelfth Census of the United States*, Davenport, Iowa, 1900, <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/16064875:7602>; “Davenport Doings,” *Rock Island Argus*, April 4, 1902; “In the City,” *The Daily Times* (Davenport), April 4, 1902, 5; “Laura Hentzelman,” *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, Pierre City, South Dakota, 1910, <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/157410565:7884>.

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8. “Minnesota College to Dedicate Organ,” *Star Tribune*, February 25, 1923, 51.

9. “Mrs. Rast-Snyder Messiah Soloist,” *Willmar Tribune*, February 8, 1922, 8; “Agnes Rast Snyder Here Next Friday,” *St. Cloud Times*, February 8, 1932, 6; “Agnes Rast Snyder on Carleton Faculty,” *Minneapolis Star*, September 16, 1933, 8; “‘U’ Symphony in Concert Friday,” *Minneapolis Star*, November 27, 1937, 29; “Agnes Rast Snyder Appears in Recital at St. Paul October 23,” *Star Tribune*, October 25, 1922, 79; “Agnes Rast-Snyder Is Re-engaged as Teacher,” *Star Tribune*, July 23, 1922, 59.

10. “Quota July Dinner and Business Meeting Is Held at Country Club,” *Quad-City Times*, July 11, 1930, 4.

11. “Former Sherman Girl Will Sing,” 15.

12. “Carousel’s Nettie,” 24.

13. Program for the Civic Opera’s production of *Samson and Delilah* by Camille Saint-Saëns, December 8-9, 1933, and in subsequent Civic Opera program credit lists, St. Paul Civic Opera Association, program collection, Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter, Civic Opera program collection); Steve Trimble, “Curtain Up in 1933: The Legacy of the St. Paul Opera Association,” *Ramsey County History* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 4; Cast list in Civic Opera program for *Carmen* by Georges Bizet, Civic Opera program collection; “Miss Gould Appears In Opera In St. Paul,” *The Daily Times*, October 24, 1934, 8; “Violet Gould Scores Triumph in St. Paul Role In ‘Carmen,’” *Quad-City Times*, October 24, 1934, 6.

14. Gerald James Olsen, *The Birth, Life and Death of the St. Paul Civic Opera Association*, thesis to the graduate faculty of St. Cloud State College for the degree of Master of Arts, St. Cloud, Minnesota, June 1971, 14-18. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was a national program initiated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to put the country back to work during the Great Depression. The Federal Music Project was one dimension of the WPA, and its Minnesota division sponsored the Civic Opera Orchestra; *Samson and Delilah* program, 1933, Civic Opera program collection.

15. *Martha* program, 1934, Civic Opera program collection; *Carousel* programs 1958 and 1962, Civic Opera program collection; John K. Sherman, “St. Paul Civic

Opera Rides Superb 'Carousel,'" *Minneapolis Star*, February 14, 1962, 14; "Carousel's Nettie," 24.

16. "Orchestra Soloist," *The Daily Times*, August 4, 1939, 10; Kathleen C. Ridder, "Escaping the Heat on a Hot Night: The St. Paul Figure Skating Club and Those Popular Summer Pops Concerts," *Ramsey County History* 34, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 4-12; "Soloists Featured in Tonight's 'Pop' Program," *Pioneer Press*, August 9, 1938, 14; Informal chronology: George S. C. Campbell, *24 years of opera in Saint Paul by the Saint Paul Civic Opera Association and 20 years of Pops*, in St. Paul Civic Opera files, Minnesota Historical Society; "Soloists Featured in Tonight's Pop Program," *Pioneer Press*, August 9, 1938, 14; Ridder, 12; "Orchestra Soloist," 10; Pops concert programs 1937-1956, collection of the Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota; "Ice Revue to Star Soloist from 'U' Faculty," *Star Tribune*, August 7, 1960, 89.

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18. Kelsey interview.

19. "Carousel's Nettie," 24.

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21. *HMS Pinafore* program, June 5-6, 1959, in Christine Podas-Larson collection.

22. Black, 27; Diana Ashmun, "Staging Children's Opera? You Need a Strong Bench," *Minneapolis Star*, September 14, 1960, 43.

23. *The Story of Hansel and Gretel* program, 1961, in Christine Podas-Larson collection.

24. *Pinocchio* program, 1960, in Christine Podas-Larson collection.

25. Various news briefs about the operetta school and performance locations; "Star Calendar—St. Paul," *Star Tribune*, September 18, 1958, 58.

26. Various operetta programs in Christine Podas-Larson program collection; "The Boy Mozart," *Pioneer Press*, January 3, 1971, 2.

27. "Twin Cities: Opera in the Making," *Opera News*, October 28, 1961, 18-21; Ashmun, 43; Margaret Armstrong, "Reasons Are Many for Supporting Opera," *Minneapolis Star*, May 19, 1961, 32. *Opera News* was a publication of the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

28. *Song of Norway* program, January 1957; *Carousel* program, February 1962; and *Damn Yankees* program, April 1962, Civic Opera program collection; Kelsey interview.

29. "Seniors Awarded College Help," *Minneapolis Star*, June 22, 1968, 16; Author's recollection and conversation with James Jardine, March 2024; "Experienced Singer, 12, Seeks Show-Biz Future," *Star Tribune*, July 5, 1965, 9; Civic Opera programs for those productions; Kelsey interview. Linda's older brother, Don, directed *HMS Pinafore* and several other operetta

school productions. Her younger brother, Tom, was only four years old when he sang and swabbed the "deck" of the *HMS Pinafore*.

30. "Ralph Mather and Bride in Chicago," *Star Tribune*, November 16, 1958, 81; "Julian Gilman, St. Paul Executive, Dies," *Star Tribune*, November 4, 1952, 30; "Departmental Ditties," *Star Tribune*, November 11, 1957, 24.

31. "Cornell Alumni Elect Officers," *Star Tribune*, November 11, 1957, 30; Helen de Haven, "All Agree They Love Horses," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, August 24, 1958, 76; Memory of horsewoman Laura Williams, as told to the author, 1966; "Searchers to Patrol Shore," *St. Cloud Times*, September 21, 1933, 2; "Party Feared All Drowned in North Lake," *Albert Lea Tribune*, September 19, 1933, 1. It was reported that Ralph and Adele Mather, Herbert Hues Bigelow, and Charles Ward (then Brown & Bigelow's vice president) had planned a joint camping trip. As the day of their departure arrived, Ralph Mather and Ward stayed in St. Paul to address an issue at the company. Bigelow and Adele Mather traveled to Ely to make final arrangements. They set out with a guide on Basswood Lake in a storm. Their canoe capsized, and all three drowned. The story shocked St. Paul society; "Ward, Bigelow's Cellmate, Elected Head of Company," *Minneapolis Star*, September 27, 1933, 11. Bigelow was a multimillionaire, though he had spent time at the US Penitentiary, Leavenworth, following conviction on a tax charge. His cellmate was Charles Ward. When both men were freed, Bigelow brought Ward into Brown & Bigelow. He worked his way up to an executive position. Upon Bigelow's death, Ward was named the company's president and inherited one-third of Bigelow's estate (estimated between \$3 and \$10 million in 1933).

32. "Manager Named," *Star Tribune*, March 6, 1952, 23; "Travel Ad," *Star Tribune*, February 11, 1962, 74; "Beautiful People," *St. Paul Dispatch*, April 2, 1972, 1; "Words and Music," *Star Tribune*, June 21, 1964, 77.

33. Binky Wood Rockwell, interview, with author, February 2024. Binky Wood Rockwell has been a mainstay of many Twin Cities' theater companies, including the Children's Theatre Company, and has served in leadership roles for the Minneapolis Parks Foundation, and the League of Women Voters.

34. *Come What May* program, August 1964, Christine Podas-Larson collection; "Friends Take Over Barn to Put on Benefit Show," *St. Paul Dispatch*, August 15, 1964, 18; Irv Letofsky, "Benefit Musical May Put a Song in Soprano's Heart," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, August 16, 1964, 1B-2B.

35. Roy M. Close, "Rare Czech opera is lively, entertaining," *Minneapolis Star*, October 11, 1976, 2; Kathy Grandchamp, "Charming prince carries off a cautious 'Merry Widow,'" *Minneapolis Star*, November 11, 1980, 19.

36. Wood Rockwell interview.

37. "Mather," *Minneapolis Star*, September 15, 1977, 97.

38. "Carousel's Nettie," 24.

Honoring Minnesota's History Scholars

Sixty-four “Team Minnesota” history scholars competed at National History Day (NHD) at University of Maryland–College Park in June. Over nine months, students in grades six through twelve identified topics related to the theme, “Turning Points in History,” and created detailed research projects for school, state, regional, and national competition.

“Ramsey County Historical Society applauds all students and teachers who participated in the 2024 History Day competitions,” said Chad P. Roberts, CEO and president of RCHS. “As an organization committed to the preservation and presentation of history, we understand the challenges involved in researching and presenting complex community history. We appreciate their efforts to create projects that bring these stories to the world.”

“Team Minnesota” returned home with ten medals, two affiliate awards, and seven honorable mentions.

Minnesota NHD Medal Winners

- **First place senior group performance:** “Then They Came for Me: The Separation of the German Church and the Resistance Against the Nazi Regime” by Colten, Dexter, Sawyer, Sedona, and September, Christ’s Household of Faith School, St. Paul;
- **First place junior paper:** “The Creation of the Birth Control Pill: A Turning Point for American Women’s Education, Economics, and Role in Society” by Zania, Open World Learning Community, St. Paul;
- **Second place senior individual website:** “A Turning Point in Native American Spiritual Rights: The American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978” by Margaret, East High School, Duluth;
- **Second place junior individual documentary:** “Sunny Days: A Turning Point in Children’s Television” by Maeve, Murray Middle School, St. Paul;

- **Third place junior individual exhibit:** “Griswold v. Connecticut: A Turning Point in Privacy Rights” by Scout, Murray Middle School, St. Paul;
- **Third place junior group exhibit:** “Click It: Buckle Up America” by Harrison, Miles, and Parker, Sunrise Park Middle School, White Bear Lake;
- **Third place junior individual website:** “Life is a Highway: How the Interstate Highway System Transformed Everyday Life in America” by Steven, Olson Middle School, Bloomington;
- **Sixth place/outstanding affiliate entry for junior group documentary:** “The Seven Countries Study” by Charlie, Emmett, and Peter, Murray Middle School, St. Paul;
- **Seventh place/outstanding affiliate entry for senior group website:** “The Six Who Sat: A Turning Point in Long Distance Running” by Alayna and Renn, Mankato West High School, Mankato;
- **Ninth place junior individual performance:** “Ida Tarbell: A Turning Point in Journalism, Politics, Business, and Law” by Grace, Salk STEM Middle School, Elk River.¹

The Minnesota Historical Society is an affiliate sponsor of National History Day, and RCHS was proud to support a few county scholars thanks to donations from board and committee members Anne Cowie, Jo Emerson, Timothy Glines, Deborah Lee, Marc J Manderscheid, Richard H. Nicholson, Chad P. Roberts, Ellen M. Turpin, and Helen Wilke.

“We celebrate the work of these students,” Roberts said, “and look forward to supporting the 2025 researchers as they take on the theme, ‘Rights & Responsibilities in History.’”

NOTE

1. “Minnesota Students Take Top Honors at National History Day Competition,” press release, Minnesota Historical Society, July 17, 2024.

See a complete list of Minnesota projects and the scholars who attended 2024 National History Day online at:



Note: Minnesota Historical Society and Minnesota History Day policy is to list participants' first names only.

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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 Heyáta Othúnwe (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.



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Recognizing the Indomitable Terry Swanson

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With love and appreciation, Ramsey County Historical Society says goodbye to Teresa "Terry" Swanson, who passed away May 25, 2024. Terry was an exceptional leader, fierce proponent of public history, and the definition of a life-long learner. She led Gibbs Farm for a decade, elevating the programming there to be the best of its kind in Minnesota. After she retired, she wrote the RCHS children's book *Grasshoppers In My Bed: Lillie Belle Gibbs—Minnesota Farm Girl—1877* and coordinated the RCHS *Investigate MN!* pilot program that boosted academic achievement for students in St. Paul.

2024 VIRGINIA B. KUNZ AWARD

RCHS presented the 2024 Virginia B. Kunz Award to Eileen Bass, Justis Brokenrope, Dr. Rev. Clifford Canku, Deacon DeBoer, Ava Grace, Heather Menefee, and Šišókaduta for "Dakhóta Iápi: A Brief History in Three Parts," published in *Ramsey County History* (Fall 2023).

Named in honor of Virginia B. Kunz, the original and longest-tenured of the editors of *Ramsey County History*, the award recognizes the best article published in the magazine over the previous two years.



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For twenty-two years between 1952 and 1974, youngsters who attended Violet Gould's Operetta School in St. Paul learned to sing, act, and appreciate live musical theater. *From the collection of Christine Podas-Larson.*

Violet Gould's Operetta School

CHRISTINE PODAS-LARSON, PAGE 22

