

Growing Up in St. Paul

**Looking Back at the
Black Community**

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Hired to Carry the Dagger

Pierce Butler in St. Paul

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Pierce Butler in St. Paul

PAUL NELSON AND JAMES FLEMING

Attorney Pierce Butler could be a bully. He sometimes used his formidable powers—his intelligence, his courtroom skills, his connections, his uncompromising will, even his imposing size—against weaker adversaries, unnecessarily, unwisely, and even cruelly.

Charles Ermisch and Otto Wonnigkeit were young criminals fresh from seventeen months in the St. Cloud State Reformatory, and on a crime spree when they entered Kohlmann's saloon, downtown St. Paul, with pistols at the ready. To their surprise, the bartender, William Lindhoff, had a pistol too. When he reached for it, they fired. Ramsey County Attorney Pierce Butler charged the pair with first-degree murder.¹

Five months later, on October 19, 1894, Wonnigkeit and Ermisch died side by side at the ends of twin ropes, the only double execution in Ramsey County history. The man who made this happen was prosecutor Pierce Butler.

There were many reasons for Ermisch and Wonnigkeit to escape execution. Though Minnesota had had the death penalty, off and on, since 1849, hangings were rare. Ramsey County had not seen one since 1860. There had been a handful of first-degree murder convictions in St. Paul, but only one death sentence, commuted by the governor and thus never carried out. The people did not clamor for vengeance.²

The charge of first-degree murder against Wonnigkeit and Ermisch was an overreach. There was no evidence of premeditation—they were robbers, not killers. Wonnigkeit confessed immediately and agreed to testify against Ermisch, with, it was reported, the hope of escaping the rope—but Butler refused. Lawyers for the young men offered ample testimony that both were products of a chaotic youth, addicted to alcohol from childhood, impulsive, and probably drunk at the time of the crime. And they were very young—between nineteen



St. Cloud Reformatory records at the Minnesota Historical Society include 1892 glass plate negatives of Charles Ermisch (*left*) and Otto Wonnigkeit (*right*). Photos courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

and twenty.³ In nineteenth-century Minnesota, these factors were readily accepted in mitigation of the death penalty. But Pierce Butler, who himself was only twenty-eight, did not bend. His only act of mercy was to move Ermisch's mother from jail, where she was held for trying to help her son escape, to the workhouse, so that she would not hear the sounds of her son's execution.⁴

We may see Butler's bullying tendency as a natural product of his aggressiveness, self-righteousness, and unwavering belief in his own rightness. There was more to him than that—he was public-spirited, tireless, devoutly Catholic, and a family man—but in his professional life, he was a man to be feared.

Origins

Butler was born in 1866 in a log cabin near Northfield, Minnesota. His father, Patrick, came from County Wicklow, just south of Dublin, and left for America towards the end of the potato famine, around 1852. But the Butlers weren't among the starving. Patrick had been educated at Trinity College as an engineer, had worked for the Crown for two years, had traveled in Europe and taught English in Germany. He was an emigrant, not a refugee.

In the United States, Patrick landed in Galena, Illinois, where he met and married another Irish immigrant, Mary Anne Gaffney. They moved to Dakota County, where Patrick taught school and

Pierce Butler, circa 1886.
Courtesy of the Minnesota
Historical Society.



then acquired a farm. The cabin where Pierce, the sixth of nine children, was born was soon replaced by a more comfortable dwelling.⁵

By the time these Butlers arrived in what was then the Minnesota Territory, Patrick's brother John was already in St. Paul and in the construction business; he built the first rail line between St. Paul and Minneapolis (around 1862). Young Pierce attended school in Northfield and then graduated, in 1886, from Carleton College. Unlike, say, that other log-cabin youth, Abe Lincoln, Pierce Butler grew up in a prospering family devoted to formal education. By the time he left Carleton, most of the family had moved to St. Paul and were thriving in the construction business.⁶

The Phenom

He never attended to law school: Young Butler read law for a year with a St. Paul firm, then went out on his own. In 1891, Ramsey County Attorney Thomas O'Brien appointed Butler his assistant; being Irish and well-connected helped Butler all his life. The job meant trying criminal cases and representing the county in civil matters. After two years, the voters elected him county attorney to succeed O'Brien; at age twenty-six, Pierce Butler was in charge.

As chief prosecutor, Butler decided which criminal cases to pursue in St. Paul and environs, and he was in court constantly. The variety was tremendous, from petty theft to murder, with plenty of interesting stuff in between. He tried cases of official corruption, bank robbery, sexual assault, illegal abortion, and many homicides.⁷ He handled all the county's civil legal matters, including lots of wrangling with railroads—in all, priceless experience for an ambitious trial lawyer.⁸

Butler declined to run for reelection in 1896. In 1897, he went back into private practice, by design or happenstance specializing in bankers accused of sticky fingers—among his clients, Republican Congressman Frederick Stevens (acquitted).⁹ He probably also represented the various Butler business enterprises, which by this time included a host of iron mines on the Mesabi Range, as well as Butler Brothers Construction, which built the Minnesota State Capitol.¹⁰

In August of 1899, he took a job as chief counsel for the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Omaha Railroad, known to all as “the Omaha.”¹¹ This was another smart career move for him: Railroads were St. Paul's great industry of the time. The job gave him plenty of trial work, mostly outstate, fighting off the personal injury claims of the countless rail workers maimed and killed on the job. It also put him inside the complicated (and lawyer-friendly) world of the rail companies' endless wrangles with the state and federal governments over freight and passenger rates. It was railroad work that in time propelled Butler onto the US Supreme Court.

It would also make him distrusted, even hated, in many circles. This was an era when politicians could make careers out of denouncing railroads. Every town and every farmer relied on the rails, the only reliable and year-round means of transportation. Both passenger and freight rates were intense political issues, regulated to some degree from Washington through the Interstate Commerce Commission, and locally by the state legislature and the Railroad and Warehouse Commission. Lawyers, needless to say, were everywhere.¹²

In politics, Butler was a Democrat, much identified publicly with William Jennings Bryan and others who railed against corporate accumulation of wealth and power. But when he

went to work for the Omaha, Butler pledged his time and talents to one of the most powerful industries in the country. It got noticed. A revealing scene occurred in a trial he conducted that year in Stillwater. A farmer named Christian Abresch had sued the Omaha for causing a fire that destroyed his barns and granary.¹³ The plaintiff's lawyer was a fellow St. Paul Democrat named John Willis, who said this in his closing argument: "This case is important because it is typical. A citizen standing face to face with a gigantic aggregation of capital, with its attorney hired to assassinate reputations . . . hired to carry the dagger into their scene of action."¹⁴ The *Stillwater Gazette* noted wryly that both Willis and Butler had been "wont to hurl shafts at grasping corporations," but now that Butler had gone over, "he has revised his form of expression."¹⁵ Butler won the case. Willis, with "hired to carry the [corporate] dagger," neatly summarized most of Pierce Butler's career.

Butler took the lead role in what became known as the Minnesota Rate Cases, a direct attack by railroads on the power of Minnesota, and by extension any state, to regulate freight and passenger rates. The stakes were gigantic, and everyone knew the case could only be resolved at the Supreme Court. A grueling trial took place in federal court in St. Paul (at what is now the Landmark Center) that went on, or off and on, for almost three years. The nub of Pierce Butler's argument was that Minnesota's rates amounted to confiscation of railroad property without due process of law. Presaging his Supreme Court years defending property rights, Butler argued that government-imposed rates that guaranteed low returns were, in effect, a theft of property without compensation and thus in violation of the Constitution. He won the case at the trial court, a colossal win for the railroads. The victory, however, did not stand: Three years later he lost it at the US Supreme Court, 9-0.¹⁶

As noted, rail workers were injured and killed at an appalling rate, as the human body is no match for tons of moving metal. They and their survivors had access to the courts, but the law heavily favored the companies in three ways. First, the burden of proof was on the plaintiffs, who were often poor and needed help immediately, not whenever the courts got around to things. Second, the railroads could afford to



Pierce Butler, St. Paul, circa 1917. Photo by Golling Studio, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

buy the best lawyers, like Pierce Butler. Third, there was something called "the fellow servant rule," which provided that if a worker were injured through the error of another worker, the employer wasn't liable unless that worker were his supervisor. So if, for example, a brakeman lost a leg due to the poor training of a coworker, he could only sue the coworker—an empty and futile gesture.

Butler had seen the carnage and the resulting desperation of injured workers and their families. In 1904, he advocated doing away with the fellow servant rule. And in a major speech in 1908, he quoted the grisly figures from the previous year: 4,218 railroad workers killed, 114 of them in Minnesota (and 1,300 more injured). "No more important obligation rests upon the state than the adoption of all reasonable means to lessen the sacrifice and to insure [*sic*] justice to injured workmen and in case of death to those dependent upon them."¹⁷ The implication was

"This case is important because it is typical. A citizen standing face to face with a gigantic aggregation of capital, with its attorney hired to assassinate reputations . . . hired to carry the dagger into their scene of action."

—JOHN WILLIS, ST. PAUL GLOBE



Pierce Butler portrayed arguing a case. From the Chicago Examiner, January 10, 1912.

that the state should require railroads to spend more money on safety and recompense.

Lamenting, then, the inefficiency of the courts in handling death and injury claims, Butler advocated for the creation of a workers' compensation system like the one we have today, a system that guaranteed compensation for injury, regardless of fault. The first steps toward making it law were introduced in the legislature shortly thereafter.¹⁸ So although Butler spent more than twenty years deeply involved in promoting the interests of railroads, and he was often portrayed as the enemy of the worker, this is not entirely the case.

This Gun's for Hire

After six years at the Omaha, Butler went back into private practice, in the firm that would be one of St. Paul's leading firms for the rest of the twentieth century, later called Doherty Rumble and Butler. Here, Pierce Butler earned a reputation as one of the most effective and sought-after trial lawyers in the Upper Midwest: "the dagger," indeed. He went where the money was, yes, but also had the freedom to take the cases that interested him most.

It might have seemed strange to the people of Grand Forks, North Dakota, that the young Maie Douglas Rindlaub hired an out-of-state railroad lawyer to press for a divorce from the town's leading physician, John Rindlaub—but evidently she wanted the toughest tough guy she could find. The trial turned into four weeks of detailed complaints dating back to the honeymoon in Europe and the Middle East, and culminated with accusations that Dr. Rindlaub was a morphine addict and a serial philanderer. It was less a trial than an airing of her endless grievances, and burdened the judge with over 5,000 pages of submissions.

Her tough guy, Pierce Butler, won Maie Rindlaub custody of the three children, child support

of \$75 per month (in the range of \$5,000 today), a lump sum alimony of \$30,000 (perhaps \$5 million in today's money), and \$1,000 in attorney fees.¹⁹ But on appeal, the North Dakota Supreme Court—offended by Butler's trial tactics—took most of it back: She lost the \$30,000 and custody of two of the children. "A meritorious case," commented Justice Fisk, "seldom requires in its preparation and support such extraordinary efforts as have been put forth by plaintiff and her counsel in this case."²⁰ Pierce Butler had gone too far and thus turned victory into defeat.²¹

Butler was a corporate lawyer, but he did not hesitate to switch sides when it might have benefited him. In the fall of 1909, the Department of Justice hired him as a special prosecutor to go up against major milling companies, under the Pure Food and Drug Act, in what came to be known as the Bleached Flour Cases.²² His involvement brought him to the attention, indirectly, of President William Howard Taft, a man who would later play a decisive role in Butler's career.

In the flour cases, the government alleged that by bleaching wheat flour white, the millers adulterated the product with chemicals (nitrogen peroxide) that endangered the public. Butler conducted two major federal court trials, one in New Orleans in February 1910, the second in Kansas City in June. He won both, and the cases demonstrate the breadth and flexibility of Butler's intelligence. If the railroad rate cases were all about accounting, the flour cases were about chemistry: To conduct trials of this nature, counsel has to *understand*. The *New Orleans Times-Democrat* called Butler "the pure food expert of the Attorney General's staff."²³ The Kansas City case went to the US Supreme Court, where Butler's work—through no fault of his—was overturned again.²⁴

Butler's government work got him still another high-stakes gig, this time taking on the great Chicago meatpacking houses—Swift, Armour, et al.—in an antitrust criminal prosecution in Chicago. The trial lasted four intense months, December 1911 through March 1912. The millers had been formidable foes, but pipsqueaks compared to the meatpackers.

This was a rare antitrust case aimed right at the men at the top, men named Swift and

Armour, and it threatened to put them in prison. The ostensible competitors had actually formed a corporation that shared information and imposed obligations on its members to comply with common rules—in the words of the Sherman Antitrust Act, “a contract or combination in restraint of trade.” It came as a shock, then, when the jury acquitted all of them. This was Butler’s worst courtroom defeat.²⁵

The Uncompromising Public Citizen

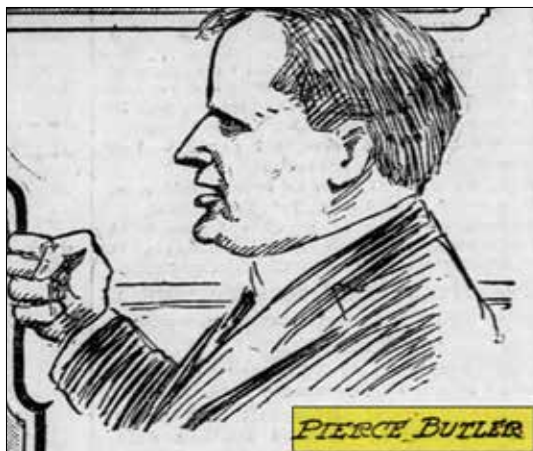
Both effective and connected, Pierce Butler was in steady demand as a speaker, a toastmaster, and on volunteer boards and commissions. The list is impressive: St. Paul Charter Commission, St. Paul Public Library Board, the Capitol Commission, the governor’s commission on reforming Minnesota courts, financing for the House of the Good Shepherd, and President of the Minnesota Bar Association.²⁶

The position that most captured Butler’s time and attention was that of University of Minnesota Regent. He was appointed by his chum, Governor John A. Johnson, in 1907, and continued into 1923. He was instrumental in choosing three successive university presidents, instituting dormitory housing, and creating Northrop Mall.²⁷ But it was his role as regent that brought him the most controversy and the bitterest criticism, criticism that clings to him still.

World War I brought out some of the worst impulses of Minnesotans, from ordinary citizens to state leaders. They responded to war with Germany with a long streak of intolerance and xenophobia, directed at people of German extraction and anyone tinged by political radicalism. Butler saw himself as an uncompromising patriot: During wartime, neither dissent nor doubt could be tolerated.

He had been building towards this view. In 1915, he had proclaimed this astonishing doctrine: “Allegiance [to the government] and protection are reciprocal, and, stripped of all sentiment, the one is consideration for the other—allegiance for protection and protection for allegiance.”²⁸ Rights, in other words, are not rights at all but privileges that the citizen must earn through compliant behavior, as defined by the government.

On September 13, 1917, Professor William Schaper, chair of the university’s political science



Pierce Butler portrayed with raised fist. From the Chicago Tribune, March 26, 1912.

department, was summoned, on very short notice, to a meeting with the Board of Regents. Let us set the scene. The regents were led by the board president, Fred Beal Snyder, a super-patriot and head of the Minneapolis branch of the state’s vengeful and all-powerful Commission of Public Safety. Butler, one of the most feared cross-examiners in the courtrooms of the United States, was a friend of Snyder’s. Schaper was alone. Snyder, Butler, and the regents had an agenda; Schaper did not know what it was. The regents were prepared; Schaper was not. At the meeting he was informed, for the first time, that he had been accused of disloyalty, though no specific acts were cited and no accuser named. This was the University of Minnesota equivalent of Great Britain’s notorious Star Chamber.

Schaper admitted that he had opposed American entry into the war; he now supported the war effort, but did not boost it. This answer set Butler off:

Butler: You are the Kaiser’s man. You want the Kaiser and the Crown Prince to dominate the world, don’t you?

Schaper: That is an accusation, not a question. It is absurd . . . Mr. Butler, you assume the role of prosecuting attorney and assign me the role of prisoner at the bar. I desire to remind you that our relations are very different. I am the Professor of Political Science in this University and you, sir, are a member of the Board of Regents.²⁹

Pierce Butler residence,
1347 Summit, St. Paul,
circa 1898. Photo by
John H. Dickey, courtesy of
the Minnesota Historical
Society.



In this way, Schaper compounded his crime by defending himself; he was fired that day. Butler, for his part, blamed Schaper: “I did not want to fire that man, but he gave me no chance to save him.”³⁰ Thus the executioner blamed his victim.³¹

Snyder and Butler were completely open about what they had done. For Snyder, mere verbal support of the government could be lip service, and therefore equaled disloyalty. To teach at the university, one must “be whole-hearted in [the nation’s] cause, zealous to support its every act in this crisis.”³² Lukewarm patriots must be dismissed. Butler said: “Professor Schaper’s removal is in harmony with the present tendency to silence disloyal communities, institutions, publications, officials and individuals.”³³

Mrs. Pierce Butler (Anna)
and children. Photo by
Charles A. Zimmerman,
courtesy of the Minnesota
Historical Society.



Butler’s venomous loyalism was on display in a prominent case that shortly followed. On August 19, 1918, a caravan of seventy-five or eighty men, led by the most prominent citizens of Laverne, Minnesota, kidnapped the politically unpopular John Meints, an unrepentant member of the leftist Nonpartisan League. He was taken to South Dakota, tarred and feathered, and told he would be hanged if he returned. When Meints sued them, they hired the leading courtroom tough guy of the region, Pierce Butler.

It was going to be a political trial. Meints was represented by Arthur LeSueur, former Socialist mayor of Minot, North Dakota, and secretary of the Minnesota branch of the Nonpartisan League. LeSueur’s career had been of the windmill-tilting variety, taking on big business for the injured and aggrieved and fighting capitalism.

Trial began the first week of November 1919, before Judge Wilbur Booth in Mankato. Meints’s case was conceptually simple and well rooted in the common law: The defendants had kidnapped and hurt him—false imprisonment and battery.

In Meints’s testimony:

They took me out on the prairie and stripped my clothes off. Then they tarred

and feathered me. Standing there in the moonlight, facing the muzzle of a shotgun, I felt the sting of the lash on my naked back. I counted the blows—one, two, three, four. I could stand it no longer; I turned to the man who was flogging me. “For God’s sake, don’t,” I cried. He stopped. The man’s mask had slipped down on his face and I was able to recognize him. He was Rev. H.W. Bedford, pastor of the Methodist church of Luverne.³⁴

Butler’s defense was at the same time brilliant, dishonest, and deeply cynical. He did not contest the facts. His clients, led by banker Otis Huntington, *had* abducted Meints, but here was the twist: Meints was so notorious for his disloyalty to America that he was in constant danger; the good citizens of Luverne had taken him to South Dakota to *protect* him. The brilliance of Butler’s theory was that it permitted him—required him, really—to introduce evidence of Meints’s reputation for disloyalty. And Judge Booth, another super-patriot, let it all in. Thus the trial went precisely as Butler must have hoped: a contest of loyalty versus disloyalty.³⁵

In Pierce Butler’s closing, he said, “They went out there to save his life; they went out there to warn and protect him from harm that seemed lurking in the very air. No one can conceive of a higher citizenship than this.”³⁶ This is the sort of lie that the law protects—it’s called “zealous advocacy.” The trial lasted three weeks; the jury’s deliberations, an hour and a half. All the defendants were exonerated.³⁷

Meints’s lawyers appealed to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. That court rejected every aspect of Pierce Butler’s defense, both facts and law: “There can be no doubt that . . . [Meints] was coerced and compelled by a show of force to submit himself to the will of others, that he was unlawfully restrained of his liberty . . . and assaulted and abused, and that this was done by those who took part in it in execution of their common purpose to drive him from the State of Minnesota.”³⁸ The court of appeals found Butler’s defense so false that the trial court should never have allowed it at all. It is difficult to imagine a more thorough and pointed rebuke than this one. In April 1922, nearly four

years after the tar and the feathers, Meints and his tormentors settled for a payment of \$6,000 (over \$100,000 in current value).³⁹

The Schaper and Meints cases show Butler at his worst: bullying, intolerant, overreaching, zealous without restraint, heedless of the damage done to others. He not only carried the dagger, he used it—but to what purpose?

His Politics

Butler’s record on the Supreme Court led many to see his politics as troglodytic: hyper-patriotic, pro-corporate, anti-worker, rigidly authoritarian. He has the disadvantage, from this distance in time, of having left almost nothing of his private thoughts and—if he had any—doubts. He ordered almost all of his papers burned upon his death, so we have the public record only.

The public record naturally centers around the last seventeen years of his life, his Supreme Court years. And the record looks very conservative indeed; as we shall see, Butler was one of the famous Four Horsemen of the Supreme Court, warriors against the New Deal.

But if we look further back in time, we get a different picture. When the young Pierce Butler first ran for public office, in 1892, at age twenty-six, he was endorsed both by the Ramsey County Democratic Party, and by the People’s Party—that is, the Populists, one of America’s most radical third-party movements. He endorsed the national Democratic Party candidate for president, Grover Cleveland.⁴⁰

One of the most revealing documents to turn up in this investigation is a letter Butler published in the *St. Paul Globe* in 1899, in response to the *Globe*’s hypothetical: If St. Paul received an endowment of \$50 million, how should it be used to make it “an ideal city”? Among his prescriptions were better public-school facilities and higher pay for teachers, a city-wide system of public libraries, and a chain of public parks from Lake Phalen to Lake Como, ultimately linked with the parks of Minneapolis. These positions were, and are, squarely in the realm of good government. But Butler didn’t stop there. He also recommended this: public ownership of the street railway system, heating, telephones, and lighting—prefiguring the Farmer-Labor Party’s socialistic “cooperative commonwealth” of thirty-five years later.⁴¹

Butler was always a Democrat. What that means has changed over time, but in 1896 and again in 1900, he actively supported William Jennings Bryan's presidential campaigns. Bryan tried, with some success, to rally farmers everywhere, and urban workers in the Midwest and East, against big business and the hated gold standard, which kept money scarce and expensive—much to the detriment of borrowers, like farmers.⁴²

And in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War of 1898, Butler stood firmly with Bryan in opposition to American imperialism. He said, "The people of Cuba and Puerto Rico did not ask for government by the United States. . . . The people . . . in the Philippines have not requested the United States to establish a military despotism in the islands. . . . It is unjustifiable and dishonest to seize the islands and set up a government there. This talk of President McKinley about the higher civilization is all hypocrisy."⁴³ But one has to wonder: Later, when he was hounding Warren Schaper out of a job for insufficient patriotism, did he recall his own criticism of his country at war? How much had he changed, and what had driven his turn to the right?

He never wavered from a belief that the Constitution ensured iron-clad protection of private property, but he did not believe that wealth necessarily translated to virtue. He supported some limitations on corporate power and said that business executives who broke the law should be treated as criminals, such as in the Chicago meatpacking case.

As Pierce Butler marked his fifty-sixth birth-

day, on St. Patrick's Day of 1922, he could hardly have predicted that on his fifty-seventh he would be an Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court. But in some ways he was superbly qualified. He had never attended law school, and he was no scholar, but his courtroom experience was vast—immeasurably greater than, for example, any current Supreme Court justice. You won't find anyone on the Court in 2026 who has tried both sides of murder cases, won and lost elections,⁴⁴ tried divorces and personal injury cases, and handled complex regulatory matters. Butler had more on-the-ground legal experience than all the members of today's Court combined.

We shall see in part two of this article, forthcoming in the next issue of *Ramsey County History*, how the qualities Butler developed in St. Paul, as lawyer and citizen, played out as a Justice of the United States Supreme Court. He carried the dagger there too.

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NOTES

1. Janice R. Quick, "The Crimes and Times of Wonnigkeit and Ermisch," *Ramsey County History* 43, no. 1 (2008), 21-27.

2. John D. Bessler, *A Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs and Executions in Minnesota* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Before Ermisch and Wonnigkeit, only two people had been executed in Ramsey County, the Dakota man U-Ha-Zy in 1854 and Ann Bilansky in 1860; both had been controversial.

3. "Murder in the First Degree," *St. Paul Globe*, June 28, 1894, 2.

4. "Their Necks In Peril," *St. Paul Globe*, June 29, 1894, 2; "Death Is Their Doom," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, September 9, 1894, 1 (Wonnigkeit's confession to avoid

death; Butler's refusal); "Doomed by Her Son," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, October 9, 1894, 2 (Ermisch's mother sent to workhouse).

5. David J. Danelski, *A Supreme Court Justice Is Appointed* (Random House, 1964), 4-5.

6. "Laid First Iron Rails," *St. Paul Globe*, November 18, 1900, 3.

7. Butler prosecuted, or assisted in prosecuting, at least nine homicide cases in addition to that of Ermisch and Wonnigkeit: Annie Smith and Kate Davis in 1892; Dr. Thomas Pearce and Phil Rice in 1893; Henry Johnson, Phil Rice (again), Gelsemino Modiano, and Charles Leonard, all in 1894, Charles Lowe and Dr. John F. Johnson in 1895. "With Willful Murder," *St. Paul Globe*,

July 7, 1892, 2 (Smith); "The Davis Trial," *St. Paul Globe*, March 25, 1892, 2 (Davis); "Terrible Tale Told," *St. Paul Globe*, March 10, 1893, 3 (Pearce); "One Discharged, One Held," *St. Paul Sunday Globe*, November 19, 1893, 3 (Rice); "Rollins Murder Case," *St. Paul Globe*, March 15, 1894, 9 (Johnson); "Story of the Murder," *St. Paul Globe*, March 21, 1894, 4 (Modiano); "Leonard a Free Man," *St. Paul Globe*, December 20, 1894, 1 (Leonard); "St. Paul," *The Irish Standard*, November 9, 1895, 6 (Lowe); "Could Both Do It?" *St. Paul Globe*, December 4, 1895, 2 (John Johnson).

8. Danelski, 8-10.

9. In 1897 alone, Butler represented bankers Charles Zschau, "Zschau Is Settled," *St. Paul Globe*, June 30, 1897, 2; George Jackson, "Zschau's Examination," *St. Paul Globe*, June 8, 1897, 2; W.F. Bickel, "Bickel and Brown," *St. Paul Globe*, October 12, 1897, 2; and Stevens, "Fred Stevens Not Guilty," *St. Paul Globe*, June 11, 1897, 1—all charged with theft of one sort or another.

10. Mary Palcich Keyes, "Butler Brothers Left Their Mark on Minnesota," *Mesabi Tribune*, January 23, 2021.

11. Danelski, 9.

12. "Railroad and Warehouse Commission," Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, updated June 1, 2017, <https://www.lrl.mn.gov/agencies/detail?AgencyID=2078>.

13. "Stillwater," *St. Paul Globe*, December 9, 1899, 3.

14. "The 'Retort Churlish,'" *Stillwater Daily Gazette*, December 8, 1899, 4.

15. "The 'Retort Churlish.'"

16. George F. Authier, "State Rail Rate Law Is Declared Invalid; Fight Is Mapped Out," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 9, 1911, 1; *Shepard v. Northern Pacific Railway Co.*, 184 Fed. 765 (D. Minn. 1911); *The Minnesota Rate Cases*, 230 U.S. 352 (1913).

17. "Liability Law the Subject of Discussion," *Duluth Evening Herald*, August 14, 1908, 6.

18. "Lawyers of St. Paul Discuss Labor Problem," *St. Paul Globe*, January 24, 1904, 9; "Move to End Personal Injury Litigation is Object of Proposed Law," *Duluth Evening Herald*, January 25, 1909, 1.

19. "Complete Decision of the Supreme Court in the Rindlaub Divorce," *Fargo Forum and Daily Republican*, February 1, 1910, 5.

20. *Rindlaub v. Rindlaub*, 19 N.D. 352, 125 N.W. 479 (1910), quotation at 395.

21. "Sensational Divorce," *Duluth Evening Herald*, February 4, 1908, 5; "Long Drawn Out Sensational Case," *Grand Forks Herald*, February 4, 1908, 8.

22. "Celebrated Bleached Flour Case To Be Tried Today In Federal Court," *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, February 10, 1910, 4.

23. "Celebrated Bleached Flour Case."

24. *United States v. Lexington Mill & Elevator Co.*, 232 U.S. 399 (1914).

25. "Packers' Fate Hangs on Judge's Ruling on U.S. Evidence to-Day, Defense Forces Crisis by Question-

ing Proof of Conspiracy," *Chicago Examiner*, January 10, 1912, 9; "Packers Free, Plan to End National Co.," *Chicago Tribune*, March 27, 1912, 1.

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Myth, Memory, and the Origins of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center Symphony Orchestra

KATE DIETRICK

Discordant Origins

Two slight taps . . . the lifting of a baton . . . the hushed tenseness of sixty faces revealing differences in age, sex, background, in everything but their common love of fine music and in the present waiting upon their master . . . and thus is ushered in on this fourteenth day of September 1942, the tenth historical season of one of the most unique institutions in St. Paul, the Center Symphony Orchestra.¹

Thus reads publicity describing the dynamic community symphony orchestra hosted at the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in St. Paul. The group, now known as the Minnesota JCC Symphony Orchestra, is still in existence and is billed as one of the oldest community orchestras in the country as they close in on their one-hundred-year anniversary.² Upon researching their storied history, however, that centennial commemoration year became a bit atonal. A simple question arose: When *was* the orchestra founded?

In the publicity statement quoted above, they stated that they were celebrating their tenth historical season in 1942, which would point to having been established in 1932. However, that same publicity document continues, “As a matter of record, however, this orchestra has really long ago celebrated its tenth anniversary, for it was exactly seventeen years ago that Mr. Peter Lisowsky, its director from that time to the present day, called together a group of enthusiasts in the old St. Paul Musicians’ Hall.”³ That would then suggest that the orchestra was established in 1925.

Beginnings can sometimes be tricky, and myths cloud early origins. Institutions may start informally, or lose early establishing documents, or forget early history, and some may start and stop and start up again. So it is not unique that the early years of the orchestra are somewhat hazy. While researching in the archives, I came across several founding years. The aforementioned document noted both 1925 and 1932 as important starts. But if the St. Paul JCC, where the group began, only opened in 1930,⁴ was their orchestra established in 1930? But if in 1988 they were celebrating their sixtieth season, were they established in 1928? Yet another article states that they’ve had a long, consistent history since 1933, while still another states that the first annual concert was in 1934.

So when, in fact, was the orchestra started, and could this humble local group claim the title of oldest community orchestra in the country? The answer, of course, depends on which narrative you believe. The shifting timeline of beginnings can be attributed to one thing: the pull of enigmatic long-time conductor Peter Lisowsky.

A Home at the Center

Over its long history, one thing has been static: The community symphony orchestra, made up of non-professional players, was rooted in place at the St. Paul Jewish Community Center. Jewish community centers, such as the ones founded in St. Paul and in Minneapolis that still thrive today, began as a place for the educational, social, cultural, and recreational lives of Jewish immigrants. Financial support was available for those in need, thanks to Jewish social service organizations, such as Neighborhood House, and other benevolent groups who helped struggling

families and new immigrants gain their footing in St. Paul.⁵

But outside of synagogues, there was no one social gathering space for the growing Jewish population. After years of campaigning and fundraising, in September 1930, the Jewish Education Center opened at the intersection of Holly Street and Grotto Avenue in the Summit Hill neighborhood. The space was originally called the Jewish Education Center, or JEC, because not only was it to be a social meeting space for the community at large, but it also housed the Talmud Torah, educating the next generation of Jewish children.⁶

In the JEC dedication brochure, Rabbi Harry Margolis of Mount Zion Temple in St. Paul extolls the value of the new space: “It stands as a house of learning; it stands as a Beth Ha K’neseth, a meeting place for the community.”⁷ From the outset, the Center was touted as a meeting place for cultural activities, one of which was a community orchestra. On December 16, 1930, not even three months after the Center’s dedication event, a report details the process of organizing a junior orchestra.⁸

On February 2, 1931, a letter was sent to the *American Jewish World*, a local Twin Cities Jewish newspaper, requesting that they publish an invitation from the JEC to anyone interested in taking part in junior and senior orchestras. “Old and young—men, women and children—playing any kind of an instrument are urged to come. The player of jazz music or of classical music will be equally welcomed.”⁹ A mailer announcement that went out the following week listed that the orchestras were organized by Melvin Silver and George Rosen, and noted succinctly, “Come without fail. We need you.”¹⁰ This early group, founded in 1931, is technically the beginning of the symphony orchestra at the JEC.

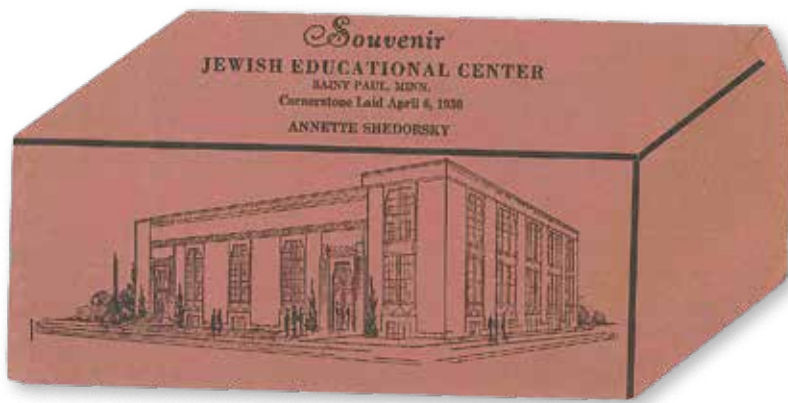
Later meeting minutes share the progress of those early years, noting “the senior orchestra was organized in February 1931 with 25 members. Mr. Dave Nahinsky is director”—clearly an entirely different director than who was listed in the first mailer invitations. It continues that the “junior orchestra was organized February 17th, 1931, with 15 members.” Both the junior and senior orchestras are noted as lacking brass and woodwinds, but that they remained hopeful “in the next season to fill these vacant sections.”¹¹



On January 12, 1932, the executive secretary’s report is frank: “The Hazomir [chorus] and orchestra have been rehearsing regularly, but show small attendance. Their advisers are not giving them the attention needed.”¹² By April 1, 1932, the newspaper for the JEC notes on the front page: “Orchestra Seeks Active Members.” “Approximately one year ago when the Center orchestra was organized, a large number of enthusiastic musicians made their appearance. Since that time regular membership has dwindled to about 15 members . . . new members are invited to join this organization.”¹³ Alas, a document outlining cultural activities in the 1930/31 season tells us the eventual fate: “orchestra—lacked organization and disbanded early this spring.”¹⁴

Only a few months later, in a report on December 15, 1932, the orchestra phoenix rises from the ashes: “We have been fortunate in getting Peter Lisowsky, first violinist with the Minneapolis Symphony orchestra, to direct a

Conductor Peter Lisowsky in action. Part of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center records, courtesy of the Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota.



Brick-shaped souvenir to commemorate the beginning of construction on the St. Paul Jewish Educational Center, 1930. Part of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center records, courtesy of the Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota.

Center orchestra. Mr. Lisowsky has been holding rehearsals every week and this group shows promise of becoming a very fine musical organization.”¹⁵ Only one year later, the orchestra was flourishing, and a 1933 annual report read, “To Mr. Peter Lisowsky, I extend my humble words of thanks for his ardent and assiduous efforts in giving us an orchestra that surpassed any we have ever had at this Center. It is with a feeling of pride as chairman of this division that I extend my thanks to his musical mates and himself for this good work.”¹⁶ So who was Peter Lisowsky, this man who swooped in and saved the Center orchestra in 1932?

The Pull of Peter Lisowsky

Peter Lisowsky was born June 26, 1893¹⁷ in St. Paul, Minnesota. His life-long dedication to music began when he was nine years old, taking violin lessons from Daniel Muhlenbruch, the director of the St. Paul Metropolitan Opera Company. Lisowsky enrolled at the St. Paul College of Music, and later studied in Boston, New York, and Stockholm.¹⁸ A stint studying under a famous Russian violinist, coupled with a foreign-sounding last name, had Lisowsky billed as hailing from Russia during his early years performing. Or perhaps “The Russian Violinist” was simply better branding than being St. Paul-born and bred.¹⁹

Lisowsky played in symphony orchestras in New York and Minneapolis, where he was first violinist and soloist. When World War I broke out, he served in the US Navy, where he conducted the Naval Training Center Orchestra. This proved to be “a serious turning point in his musical career,”²⁰ as he found he enjoyed conducting as well as performing. After the war,

he returned to Minnesota to perform with the Minneapolis Symphony while also giving private lessons to supplement his income.²¹ The latter profession appears to have led him to his love.

Details of his first, short-lived marriage to a Swedish woman named Anna remain opaque;²² rather, it was his second marriage to fellow musician Agnes Thro in which he formed a partnership that lasted a lifetime. Their love letters, sent while Lisowsky was traveling with the Minneapolis Symphony, reveal a passionate love incongruent with his later persona as a gruff conductor. In a letter to Agnes on January 24, 1929, while on tour with the symphony, he wrote: “Puddie, I miss you so much, that time is beginning to hang heavy, on my hands. Babe, I must confess that to live without you is futile. . . . Darling, I have many plans and ideas that we must carry out to the letter, after seeing life all around me, both in the orchestra and otherwise.”²³

Six months later, Lisowsky wrote a letter to the Secretary of the State Board of Law Examiners complaining that his attorney was not moving quickly enough to get him out of his first marriage.²⁴ Clearly successful, by the following year, Peter and Agnes were married. A *Minneapolis Star Tribune* article featuring a then-ninety-seven-year-old Agnes Lisowsky notes that, when they got married in 1930, “Peter was Jewish, and her Catholic family wouldn’t speak to her for years.”²⁵ Regardless, their marriage was filled with music from the start.

How and why Lisowsky began his orchestra and relationship with the St. Paul Jewish Education Center remains hazy. At some point—one article says 1933, another 1928, even another in 1925²⁶—while Lisowsky was still with the Minneapolis Symphony, he had desired to return to conducting. He began the St. Paul Junior Symphony, which met at the Musician’s Union Hall, then the Dyer Brothers Music Building.²⁷ When Lisowsky began his role with the Center in late 1932, it appears that he brought this group of musicians with him to the Center, thereafter known as the Center Symphony Orchestra. This is likely where the confusion of the founding year arises: Can those early years of Lisowsky’s St. Paul Junior Symphony be rolled into the beginnings of the Center’s orchestra?

What we do know is that Lisowsky began the orchestra at the Center in late 1932.²⁸ By October

1934, we see his photograph on the front page of *The Center News* with the headline “Lisowsky Will Lead Orchestra at Center Again.” It goes on: “The Center will begin its third season of sponsoring an orchestra”—which means this timeline of the Center orchestra only starts with Lisowsky’s tenure and does not count the group’s 1931 and 1932 years under other leadership, nor does it roll in Lisowsky’s earlier group history. “Mr. Peter Lisowsky, who has many years of experience as a member of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra and is recognized as an eminent violinist, will again conduct the orchestra. . . . With the completion of a successful last year, a wider scope of musical activities is planned for the coming season. Two or three concerts are planned as well as an all-Jewish night program will be part of the winter season program.”²⁹ A 1935 report notes that the group started out small: There were “13 men and 8 girls” and average attendance was seventeen.³⁰

Again, in 1936, a report extolled Lisowsky’s virtues:

Another volunteer who deserves praise is Peter Lisowsky, who has directed the Center orchestra. As far as I have been able to determine, ours is the only Center in the country that can boast of a symphony orchestra. Mr. Lisowsky has rehearsed once a week regularly with some thirty musicians and two weeks ago presented a concert for an audience of five hundred. The enthusiastic response given the performance is an adequate expression of its place in the community. Mr. Lisowsky needs no introduction as one of the leading musical artists in this city. The orchestra is a worthwhile activity to maintain, particularly when we are able to have someone like Mr. Lisowsky to encourage its success.³¹

By 1938, it appears that Lisowsky resigned from the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra to devote his time entirely to conducting and teaching. He offered violin lessons for young students at his home in St. Paul, alongside his wife, who taught piano and voice.³² Lisowsky did seem to be a dedicated conductor to the group at



the Center. In an undated letter, Lisowsky welcomes his colleagues in the orchestra for their first rehearsal of the year: “I believe that our work through the years in the orchestra has been enjoyable, educational; the opportunity of musical development cannot be equaled in any part of our country; the high standard that prevails both in rehearsal and the performance is a tremendous satisfaction to the members of the orchestra. The very fine feeling of friendliness that prevails also is a very important point in our non-sectarian orchestra. . . . I personally feel that you all are part of my large family, and I love you.”³³ For their part, the leadership of the Center regularly praised the talent of Lisowsky and the strength—and distinctiveness—of their Center orchestra.

As Lisowsky cemented the success of the orchestra, the myth of his greatness arose. A 1966 article touched upon Lisowsky’s legacy, including his temperament, when it noted, “He has been called a task-master by some and eccentric by others, and sometimes there are strained moments. But above all, he is a true musician who deserves the respect of his

“Maestro” Peter Lisowsky featured in the third season announcement on the front page of *The Center News*, 1934. Part of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center records, courtesy of the Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota.

players; a careful artist who wants their best.”³⁴ Whatever his temperament, his success was evident, as Lisowsky kept the community orchestra together for many years.

“Regardless of race, creed or color”

Examining the program for that 1936 concert that boasted an audience of five hundred, there are thirty-nine performers listed, with typically Jewish-sounding names like Katz and Rosenzweig. But for every Schultz, there’s also a Johnson, or a Roberts. The pieces they are playing, by composers like Mozart, Beethoven, Puccini, are not Jewish per se.³⁵ Even though the orchestra was housed at a Jewish Community Center and was being conducted by a Jewish musician, this was not just a Jewish group. In fact, one did not need to be Jewish to join.

A 1944 *Pioneer Press* article noted, “Membership in the ensemble is open to every person, regardless of age or religious affiliation, who is interested in instrument playing, and who desires to acquire a standard orchestral repertoire.”³⁶ The *St. Paul Musician* echoed, “Anyone in the community, regardless of race, creed or color, is very welcome.”³⁷

Lisowsky himself was Jewish; over his career he had orchestrated several Jewish pieces, including a symphonic background for chorus of “Avinu Malkeinu,” which is a prayer recited during the Jewish high holidays. In an article in the *St. Paul Jewish News* years into his professional career, Lisowsky noted, “More important than the music . . . is that I think I’ve been a good will ambassador to our neighbors of other faiths. In our Center orchestra, where 75 percent

Center Symphony Orchestra, 1947-48. Part of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center records, courtesy of the Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota.





Center Symphony Orchestra in rehearsal, n.d. Part of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center records, courtesy of the Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota.

of the players are non-Jewish, there has never been the least dissention over race, creed or religion.”³⁸

That a Jewish organization was open to diverse members is not surprising. As American Jews were routinely pulled in and out of inclusion in whiteness throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries based on the whims of politics, many Jews themselves aligned with minority groups after experiencing decades of persecution.³⁹ As an example of solidarity, during the civil rights movement, it is estimated that between half and three-quarters of the funds raised to support civil rights organizations came from the Jewish community, and this at a time when Jews made up less than three percent of the population of the United States.⁴⁰

As the years progressed, the Center Symphony Orchestra was a point of pride for the Center. In a 1943 publicity brochure titled “It’s

your Center!” they boast about the orchestra: “This activity deserves far more than the brief mention it can be given here. It represents the untiring work and devotion of Peter Lisowsky, a musician so well known to St. Paul and the Northwest that there is no need to recite his many qualifications here.” Yet again, we see the confusion over the founding years as it states, “This year the Center Symphony celebrates its tenth successful season, although in actual fact the orchestra itself is seventeen years old.” This would then put the founding back even farther, to 1925. It goes on, “Peter Lisowsky’s unselfish hard work, given for many years without any fee or salary, coupled with his professional skill, have built this orchestra until today it is favorably known in a wide area. . . . Forty to fifty persons are engaged in this activity, and it is one of several in which a good number of non-Jews take part.”⁴¹

“More important than the music . . . is that I think I’ve been a good will ambassador to our neighbors of other faiths. In our Center orchestra, where 75 percent of the players are non-Jewish, there has never been the least dissention over race, creed or religion.”

PETER LISOWSKY, ST. PAUL JEWISH NEWS

We see this detail time and again in the literature surrounding the orchestra. A 1948 self-study on the Center: “There are thirty-five participants in the orchestra conducted by the Center, 40% of whom are non-Jews.”⁴² An announcement for a fundraising concert: “It is a non-sectarian group. Truly a community organization and the only one of its kind in St. Paul.”⁴³ A press release from 1962 (which states it is in its thirtieth season, meaning

founding in 1932): “Anyone in the community, regardless of race, creed or color, is very welcome.”⁴⁴ This 1962 press release, with its open invitation, came notably before the Civil Rights Act, and before the march on Selma. The first racially integrated orchestra in the United States is considered to be the Symphony of the New World in New York, and they weren’t founded until 1964.⁴⁵ What the actual racial makeup of the members of the Center orchestra was over

Chanukah program at the Center, n.d. Part of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center records, courtesy of the Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota.



Conductor Peter Lisowsky with orchestra. Part of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center records, courtesy of the Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota.



the years remains murky behind enrollment lists, though it is clear that there was a Black soloist, the pianist Anthony White, as early as a 1965 concert.⁴⁶ So while publicity may have stated that the orchestra was open to being racially diverse, it remains unclear as to how true this was in practice.

But the publicity push continued. A 1963 article from the *St. Paul Dispatch* opens with the headline “Symphony Fosters Racial Harmony.” “Racial as well as musical harmony is being created through the 48-member symphony orchestra of the St. Paul Jewish community center. ‘There has never been any friction among members of the orchestra,’ said Peter Lisowsky, the orchestra’s conductor, ‘because of differences in race or religion.’” The article goes on to state, “As diverse as the racial make-up of the symphony has been over the years with its polyglot membership of Jews, Irish, Mexicans, and other nationalities, it has been no less diverse in the occupations and professions of its members.”

The article then launches into the wide range of professions included among the orchestra.⁴⁷

It bears noting that while current framing of diversity often implies race and sexuality, diversity in the mid-twentieth century could mean something different. Class stratification, generation of immigrant status, and employment all played into concepts of diversity in this community orchestra. These were not paid professionals who might command elite paychecks, but rather people with day jobs who enjoyed playing orchestral music with a dedicated group in their downtime. As the May 18, 1956 *St. Paul Dispatch* article blasts under a headline of “Ph. D.’s and Businessmen Beat It Out With Bach,” “Every Monday night, housewives and businessmen, joined by two doctors of philosophy and chemistry, a physician, a dentist, an accountant, a social worker, several engineers, a jeweler, several music teachers and a few bobby-soxers, meet to make up this musical organization.”⁴⁸

A 1962 article (which states the start of the

organization in 1933) again points to the unique backgrounds of the members: “Peter’s eyes move on to the violinist Alfred Thom, the insurance man. Sitting in the same row—Dorothy Memmer, who sells typewriters by day, and Bernard Marver, the accountant. . . . Watching him closely in the cello section, Idell Tenenbaum, housewife and artist; Herb Heise, who works at the post office, and Edward Fishman, a German refugee with a long story.”⁴⁹ Examining member lists shows many members came from St. Paul, but also some from Minneapolis, St. Louis Park, Circle Pines, and Hudson, Wisconsin. Some were students at Macalester College or even living at the Commodore Hotel in St. Paul. Attendance sheets illustrate excellent attendance across the board; many members were consistent attendees coming back every single week.⁵⁰

And no wonder—the orchestra would give performances that were well received and well attended. One 1957 letter, written by the Center’s executive director, raves over a successful

concert: “The concert was held at Mechanic Arts High School, to a standing-room-only audience of 1100 young boys and girls. The program was enthusiastically received. This is worthy of mention in view of current fads and tastes of young people in popular music. The audience was extremely receptive and received each one of the numbers with a tremendous ovation.”⁵¹ These “current fads and tastes” can be illustrated by the fact that the number one song on the American Top 40 singles that week was Elvis Presley’s “All Shook Up.”⁵²

The orchestra put on an average of two to three concerts a year, with an annual spring concert. Performances included a routinely successful young people’s concert performed for families, showcasing young audience favorites like *Peter and the Wolf* and *A Night on a Bare Mountain*.⁵³ When the JEC was renamed the Jewish Community Center of St. Paul in 1948, and moved from their first building at Holly and Grotto to a new building in Highland Park in 1956, the orchestra went with them. A modern



Conductor Peter Lisowsky with orchestra and grand piano. Part of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center records, courtesy of the Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota.

facility, opened in 1964,⁵⁴ included an auditorium fit for the symphony orchestra—already hailed as one of the longest-running community orchestras in the country.

Community Legacy

Peter Lisowsky conducted the community orchestra until his death in 1970. Having served in World War I, he was buried in the cemetery at Fort Snelling, his grave adorned simply with a Star of David. His wife Agnes, who was twelve years his junior, would not pass away until 2004.⁵⁵ They did not have children. Years after his death, a 1986 *Star Tribune* article on the orchestra noted the long shadow he still cast, noting that “the long-term members get together to talk of conductors of the past, especially of the moody Peter Lisowsky (‘We all loved him; we all complained about him.’)”⁵⁶

The St. Paul JCC Symphony Orchestra still thrives to this day, nearing what they will be touting as their one hundredth anniversary. Their publicity still highlights their inclusivity and diversity of musicians from all backgrounds.⁵⁷ It remains evident that early histories of organizations are tricky. When the orchestra celebrated their ninetieth anniversary in the 2017/18 season, they chose to count from the 1928 founding date that folds in Lisowsky’s early group, prior to the founding of the Center itself in 1930. (They also claim the group as the longest-running community orchestra in the country.)⁵⁸ But even that choice of including Lisowsky’s 1928 founding hasn’t always been

consistent. Center reports in 1943 note the orchestra’s tenth anniversary; 1958 correspondence notes their twenty-fifth anniversary. Clearly, in these early years, the founding of the group was indeed traced back to Lisowsky’s first season at the Center in 1932/33; only years later does the story shift to draw in those early Lisowsky orchestra years at other locations prior to being at the Center—some say 1925, others 1928. All of these differing years, however, have one thing in common: centering Peter Lisowsky’s influence on the orchestra.

Where is the beginning? And is the group, now known as the Minnesota JCC Symphony Orchestra, *the* oldest community orchestra still in existence in the United States? Was the pull of the great and powerful Lisowsky the reason for the success of the group, setting up yet another mythos around a musical man? Origins remain tricky, but what endures is a fascinating legacy of a long-running American community orchestra, based right here in St. Paul.

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Looking Back at the Black Community

EULA T. MURPHY (WITH DAVID V. TAYLOR)

Editor's Note: In order to share this magazine with you sooner, we pulled this article from the archives, which was originally published in the Winter 1992-1993 issue of Ramsey County History. David V. Taylor, who was at the time the dean of the General College at the University of Minnesota, collaborated on this piece with his mother, Eula T. Murphy. She passed away in 2006, and her son has offered the note below to accompany the reprint.

The original included this note on language:

"The term 'black' has been used consistently throughout, except for a few places where 'colored' is used for emphasis to be more in keeping with the period being described." I have likewise retained the terminology chosen in 1992, in order to hear the writer's story as she wrote it—contextualizing the piece as a historical document in itself, reflecting the conventions of the time. Today, updated style guides capitalize the word "Black" as a cultural identity, and ensure the word is used as an adjective, not a noun.

Foreword from David V. Taylor

My mother, Eula T. Vassar, was born in Birmingham, Alabama on August 25, 1919. Encouraged by family members residing in St. Paul, her family relocated to St. Paul when she was an infant. Her father, Joseph Vassar, gained employment as a redcap porter at the St. Paul train depot. Her mother, Eloise, was a housewife and parent to seven girls. She died at the age of thirty-six in St. Paul. Upon her death, her sister, Marie, relocated to St. Paul to assist Joseph in the raising of the girls.

The extended Vassar family was well known in St. Paul's Black community. The Vassar girls were engaged in activities at the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center and Welcome Hall. Although raised in a supportive environment, young Black women were not necessarily encouraged to pursue higher education but to marry and raise families. Employment opportunities were limited.

Mother graduated from high school and was to attend Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Because

of the Great Depression, the opportunity never materialized. However, she kept the train ticket purchased by her father to Tuskegee all her life. She later received training as a nurse's assistant. Mother would marry three times and have three children. Although she did not receive a formal college education, four of her sisters did. She, as well as her sisters, would share stories with their offspring about migration out of the South, growing up in St. Paul, and the importance of an education. My early interest in history was nurtured by these conversations.

While attending Central High School in St. Paul, I was encouraged by my American History teacher to attend the University of Minnesota and earn a doctorate in history. I did, and my doctoral thesis was "Pilgrim's Progress: Black St. Paul and the Making of an Urban Ghetto 1870-1930."

This article was inspired by these conversations with my mother and her sisters about coming of age as young Black women in St. Paul. Part II, published in spring 1993, reflected my coming of age as a Black male in her community.



Read David V. Taylor's story in "Growing Up in St. Paul: Looking Back at the Black Community—Part II"

I was born in rural Alabama in August of 1919. The Armistice ending the Great War had been agreed to the year before. The Treaty of Versailles was signed by the Germans in June of 1919. Black troops who had bravely fought for democracy in Europe were in the process of being demobilized and returned home when racial rioting erupted in major cities across the United States. Reports of black men being lynched in uniform were common, particularly in the South.

The lynchings in Alabama may have been the reason for my father's decision to move to Minnesota. Father worked as a delivery boy for Kaheen Brothers Dry Goods store in Birmingham. Earning six dollars per week, he supported a wife and three children. Father was unskilled and not well educated. It is uncertain whether he ever finished high school. My mother was better educated, having completed a private Episcopal high school. She was trained as a seamstress and was employed by well-to-do white families. Joseph Vassar and Eloise Shaw were married in Birmingham on December 29, 1914. In September of 1915, their first child, Beatrice Bailey Bell Vassar, was born. Two years later they had another daughter, Lola Mae.

During the winter of 1920, Father's favorite aunt, Josephine (Vassar) Hargrave, became gravely ill with pulmonary tuberculosis in St. Paul. Several years before, after the untimely death of her husband, she and her five children had moved to St. Paul from Goldsboro, North Carolina. Her brother, Carroll Vassar, had moved to St. Paul in 1888 and may have been the reason that she chose to settle there. Having been notified of her condition in May, Father immediately made preparations to leave for St. Paul. Unfortunately, Aunt Josie (as she was called) died while he was in transit. Father arrived in time for her funeral. With the loss of their parents, the Hargrave children, now approaching adulthood, still needed the support and guidance of surrogate parents. At their urging, my father returned to the South to prepare the family for the move north. The prospect of earning \$14 a week in the South St. Paul stockyards was attractive. The additional income that Mother could earn as a seamstress would make a more comfortable living possible.



Eula T. Murphy in 1961 when she was forty-one years old.

The photographs with this article are from the author.

We moved into the Hargrave home at 292 North St. Albans some time between July and August of 1920. A short time after relocating, the Hargrave and Vassar families moved into a more spacious five-bedroom, three-story Victorian house at 685 Carroll Avenue, about one block away. The house was in a respectable, racially mixed neighborhood one block south of Rondo and two blocks west of Dale Street. Many prominent black families lived in the area, including the Harris, Rhodes, Lewis, Goins, Moore, and Jackson families. Some, like the Jacksons, were also migrants from Alabama. They had known my parents while living in the South, and it was their life-long friendship that sustained Mother through particularly tough times.

The employment opportunity that my father sought was partially realized. He began work at Swift's Packing Plant in South St. Paul—for \$13.50 per week. He left there to work as a redcap at the St. Paul Union Depot in 1922. Unfortunately, he could not escape from his psychological fear of indiscriminate lynchings in the South. On June 20, 1920, while Father was in the South preparing to relocate, three



Eloise Vassar in front of 292 St. Albans Street in 1920.

black men were lynched in Duluth for allegedly raping a white woman. The fact that such an event could have happened in Minnesota left the Twin Cities black community traumatized. Years later, I remember sitting at the top of the staircase as a child, listening to adults discussing that incident and other race-related affairs in muted voices almost as if they were afraid of being overheard.

In the new house, our family was assigned the front two bedrooms on the second floor. I shared a bedroom with my sisters, Beatrice and

Lola. We slept on a leather couch with a retractable bed. My parents' bedroom was next to ours. My earliest memories of that period surrounded the birth of our sister, Myrtle Vivian, in the adjoining bedroom. She was delivered by Dr. Valdo Turner, a well-respected black physician. The year was 1921. I was almost two years old. Other memories of that period include watching the lamplighter at dusk through the same bedroom window with his ladder and long gas pole making his rounds igniting the streetlights, and the particular awe in which I held a black police officer by the name of Lawrence Liverpool. Officer Liverpool had a huge black horse which he watered at a tank located on the corner of St. Albans and Carroll. The city water truck used the same tank to water down the streets.

In 1923, anticipating the birth of their fifth child, Josephine Leobald, my parents moved to 417 University Avenue, a single-family home converted to a duplex in a neighborhood of blacks, Jews, Italians, and Swedes. Father was now employed as a Pullman porter "running on the road," leaving Mother to direct the family during his long absences. In that house Father contracted a serious case of rheumatism, which incapacitated him for a period of time. The poor sanitary conditions, rats, dampness, freezing water pipes, and difficulty in heating the apartment during the winter led to a decision to move again, in 1925, to 509 University, above a grocery store called Zeff's that was owned by a Jewish couple. It was here that the sixth child, Eloise Pauline, was born in January of 1926. My sisters and I began attending the "old" Jackson School at Mackubin Street and Sherburne Avenue. (The new Jackson School was built in 1926 on Arundel Street between Edmund and Thomas Avenues.)

University Avenue was on the outer fringes of the (then) black neighborhood. Most blacks lived along the Rondo Avenue corridor stretching from lower Rondo (in the area of the Capitol approach) out to Lexington Parkway and

Mother's aspirations were limited by social custom, but she was determined that her daughters would have more opportunity to understand and experience life. An appreciation for learning, the arts, proper social etiquette, and a determination to succeed were hallmarks of our upbringing.

from Central to Iglehart Avenues. Even though the black community was small in number, it was divided socially. Lower Rondo, below Dale Street, was referred to as “Cornmeal Valley,” a vague reference to a food staple in southern diets; lower Rondo was home to the materially unfortunate. Above Dale Street was called “Oatmeal Hill.” There the socially prominent lived in better housing along Iglehart, Carroll, Rondo, St. Anthony, and Central Avenues. In spite of social class differentiation, every family knew all the other families.

Lower University Avenue was part of Frog-town, perhaps a reference to the original inhabitants of the area (frogs). As a black family, we made many friends. As black children, however, we were constantly harassed going to and from school by whites. On one occasion, at the age of six, I beat up the school bully, a white boy twice my size, by biting and scratching him. That encounter earned for me the name of Kitty, a reference to my cat-like fighting ability.

With the onset of the depression, black porters and redcaps were being laid off. Dissatisfied with his position, in October of 1929 Father requested and was granted a transfer to Cleveland, Ohio, where we stayed for almost a year. A recurrence of his rheumatic condition forced the family to return to St. Paul. The move back to St. Paul cost Father his seniority. As the economic depression lengthened, he was laid off.

The depression hit the black community in St. Paul very hard. The major railways were forced to lay off personnel, many of whom were black. Workers in the meat-packing industry and those in domestic service were also affected. Unable to work, most black families, including ours, had to accept public assistance. In order to supplement food commodities issued by public assistance programs, Father was employed by the Works Progress Administration at \$16.50 per week. During this time another daughter, Barbara Alfreda, was born in 1932.

In 1934 the economic depression was beginning to lift enough that the railroad industry was able to recall some of its workers. Father was recalled to work at the Union Depot. Unfortunately, just as things appeared to be on the upswing, Mother, pregnant with her eighth child, a boy, suffered a miscarriage and died. She was only thirty-six years old; I was fifteen. The



Eloise Vassar with Josephine during a visit to Alabama in 1924-25.

family had not been prepared for Mother’s untimely death. Father seemed overwhelmed with grief and the prospect of raising seven girls. My older sisters contacted Mother’s sister, Marie Shines, in Birmingham and asked if she would come north to help stabilize the family. Aunt Marie accepted the challenge. Single and black in Alabama, she had nothing to lose. Although Father would marry twice again (outliving each of his wives), it was Aunt Marie who became the matriarch of the family.

Mother was a gifted person, married to a man with limited ability. It was her personality and determination to improve the material circumstances of the family that shaped our character. Apparently she came by her gifts quite naturally. I learned later from her sister that several of their relatives were college graduates and professional people. My great-grandmother, Mary Davis, was the offspring of Margaret Willis and Oliver Harrison, a descendant of William Henry Harrison, the ninth president of the United States.

In spite of her obvious abilities, the only avenues in which Mother could express her creativity were sewing and homemaking. This was not an uncommon situation for black women of her generation. Few had marketable skills. They were expected to be housewives. They bore large families, and raising children was a full-time occupation. Mother’s aspirations were limited by social custom, but she was determined that her daughters would have more

Eula Vassar and a friend named Hyordis, with a goat cart around 1920 or 1921.



opportunity to understand and experience life. An appreciation for learning, the arts, proper social etiquette, and a determination to succeed were hallmarks of our upbringing.

Mother encouraged us to read. She secured library cards for all of us and on Saturday mornings walked with us three miles to the central library building downtown to exchange books. We were seldom absent from school. She enrolled us in health, dance, drama, and social etiquette classes at the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, where we were also exposed to adult role models. Our instructors there taught us appreciation for Negro history and introduced us to the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. Mother taught us the Negro national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” She saw to it that we took Bible studies classes at the Christian Center. We were devoted members of Zion Presbyterian Church (a black church located at 379 Farrington Street) and also patrons of Welcome Hall Community Center, an outreach program of Zion Presbyterian Church.

Mother had intended that we would each attend college or acquire some occupational skill. However, upon her death my options were as limited as those of any other “colored” girl. At fifteen, I was too old to be a girl but not old enough to be a woman. Without Mother’s guidance and

encouragement, I found it increasingly difficult to achieve focus in my life. I learned quickly that the housekeeping skills Mother had taught us had more practical applications. When I was at the point of graduating, the high school counselor recommended that I seek employment as a domestic servant. In spite of the desire of most black parents for their children to be placed in college preparatory courses, all “colored girls” were tracked into a curriculum that included some social sciences, home economics, stenography, and other business-related courses. Upon graduating from Mechanic Arts High School in 1936, I had asked Father’s assistance in order to attend Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Although he was able to secure a rail pass, he was not able to raise enough money for tuition.

Of necessity, I sought employment. Opportunities beyond domestic work were limited or non-existent for young colored girls—discrimination was pervasive. Black women without independent means, skills, or business interests were relegated to work as matrons, domestics, elevator operators, or lounge attendants—or they resorted to prostitution. The lack of employment options made it virtually impossible for young black women to become self-reliant. Consequently, many frittered away time at unproductive activities until an unplanned pregnancy

Eula V. Taylor with David at the age of two in 1947.



resulted in a hasty marriage. They often became the next generation of homemakers, exchanging one cycle of dependency for another—from their father's household to their husband's.

My first job was as a maid in the ladies' lounge at the World Theater. Later, in 1939, under the auspices of the National Youth Administration, I was placed as a filing clerk at the Metropolitan Life Insurance Home Nursing Service. Fortunately, through several administration projects during the depression, many young girls were able to get jobs not normally made available to blacks. It was during the summer of 1939 that I met the man who was to be the first of my three husbands.

My sisters were more fortunate. Three were able to attend Macalester College, although only two graduated. Another sister graduated from the University of Minnesota. Yet another attended the University briefly and later finished a cosmetology school program in St. Paul. Still another completed a course of study at Poro Cosmetology School in Chicago. (Poro was founded by Madame Walker, the first black woman millionaire, who produced a successful line of black hair care products.)

To be young and black in St. Paul before and during the Second World War was exciting. The black community was small. The older adults made an effort to provide recreational outlets for young adults. One could audition for plays and dance revues that were held regularly at the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center. Adults' social clubs created junior memberships for the younger set. One such club was called the Credjafawns. They provided picnics, socials, parties, and dances where young people could meet and socialize. The Sterling Club, a men's club, also provided social outlets. The churches were still another recreational outlet.

And then there was Jim Williams's Bar. Located on the southwest corner of Kent and St. Anthony Streets, a block north of Rondo, it was one of few "colored" eating and drinking establishments in the city. Jim's was the gathering place of the young, the old, and the restless. A decent girl did not walk into Jim's unescorted. A group of decent girls could. It was "the place to be seen" on weekends. During summer evenings young men and women would park and sit in big cars near the bar to socialize or watch

activities on the sandlot diagonally across from the bar.

Those who wanted more excitement would sneak over to north Minneapolis. Although St. Paul girls were routinely admonished not to get involved with northside boys, there was an element of fatal attraction—the risk of being found out that made those liaisons so exciting. North Minneapolis was known for its vice elements, which seemed to escape the notice of the authorities. Any St. Paul woman with a reputation to protect would not be caught dead (escorted or unescorted) in that area.

Being young, restless, and with a reputation to protect, I focused my energies on dancing, hoping against the odds that I would be "discovered." It was during this period that my first husband, Clarence Taylor, tap-danced his way into my heart. Originally from Fort Wayne, Indiana, he attended Xavier University in New Orleans briefly. He migrated to St. Paul, intending to stay with relatives until employment could be found. He had taken tap dance lessons as a boy and had become a masterful dancer as a young man. Often he used this talent to supplement his income. He was perhaps typical of many black

men who migrated to St. Paul seeking opportunities. Although he was a high school graduate and reasonably intelligent, he had no skills to offer the labor market. During the depression there were many college-trained black men and women marking time in unfulfilling jobs.

We were married in January of 1940. Because my husband was unable to secure employment in St. Paul, we decided to move to Fort Wayne, where our first child was born in August of 1940. Unfortunately, we learned that discrimination in Fort Wayne was worse than in St. Paul, whereupon we returned to Minnesota at the onset of America's entry into World War II. Upon our return, Clarence was able to secure a job with International Harvester, which he retained until being drafted in December of 1944. His tour of duty was brief. He was assigned to the Philippine Islands and was stationed there when the Japanese surrendered in August of 1945. Our second child was born in July of that year. After Clarence's return from the war, things were never quite the same. Although he had steady work with the post office, he did not seem to care for the responsibilities of parenting. Irreconcilable differences led to divorce in 1950.

During the war years I made that difficult transformation from youth to adulthood. I married, bore two children, and managed a divorce. I learned to work and accepted the responsibility of raising children without public assistance. I also stopped dancing. I would marry twice again before 1952. The second marriage failed but produced another son. The third lasted thirty-five years.

For black women in St. Paul, the war years brought a perceptible change in status. Many of my girl friends were able to secure education or training that led to new employment opportunities. Some became teachers or lawyers and one, a nurse by training, married a physician who would later become dean of the Harvard Medical

School. Others had successful marriages and were financial contributors to their families.

The community changed as well. Many of our young black men did not return from the conflict. Those that did began raising new families and taking places of leadership now relinquished by the elders who had raised us. During the war the economic boycott threatened by Cecil Newman, editor of the *Minneapolis Spokesman*, coupled with the work of the Urban League and the NAACP, helped to pave the way for better employment opportunities for black men and women. Together with expanded educational opportunities afforded returning veterans, some members of the black community made moderate economic gains. Those gains made it possible for a small black middle class to develop. Ironically, the children of these parents, who came of age in the 1960s, helped to confront the remaining vestiges of overt discrimination that continued to compromise our lives in the Twin Cities.

The physical features of the community also changed. Both Oatmeal Hill and Cornmeal Valley became victims of urban renewal in the late 1950s. The construction of Interstate 94 was responsible for the demolition of hundreds of homes along the Rondo corridor. Although detrimental to the social and political fabric of the black community, the condemnation and purchase of property afforded many black families the opportunity of moving into standard housing that might not have been affordable under ordinary circumstances. In 1983 a community celebration called "Remember Rondo" was established by long-time residents of the area to recapture a sense of community pride and a history of the area.

Eula T. Murphy (1919-2006) was a lifelong resident of St. Paul and, at the time of this writing, a senior volunteer at the Rondo Magnet School.

ALAN HOWELL
SENIOR ARCHITECT, MSP AIRPORT

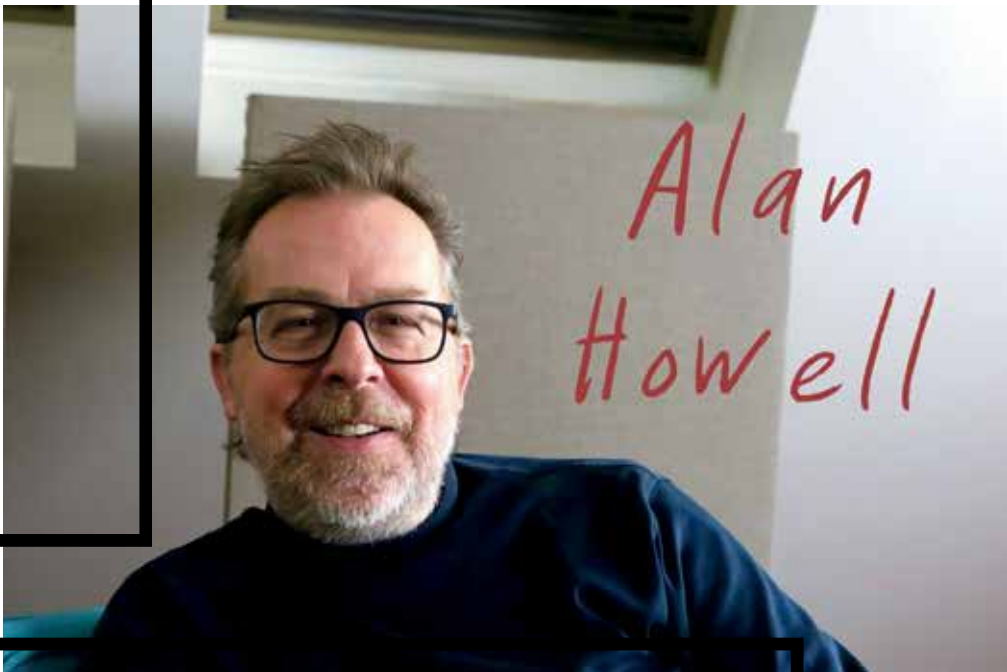
What is your favorite place in Ramsey County?
The Glacial River Valley.

What is your favorite restaurant and your "must order" dish?
Neopolitan pizza on Grand Avenue, deep-dish pizza on Grand, other pizza on Selby Avenue—local food, where possible.

What is your favorite song?
"I wanna know" by Mucilage. Most anything by The Fixx.

If you could invite any three people from history to dinner, who would you choose?
Pliny the Elder (to talk to us more about Roman concrete)
Ptolemy I (to talk about collecting all the world's knowledge), and a Celt from an island north of current France (so they may tell us their story).

What is your favorite part of the day?
Favorite day-part, sounds like food/restauranting ... the hour before sunrise as the birds are talking.



BETWEEN 2 URNS

Ramsey County Historical Society is proud to announce the launch of our podcast, *Between 2 Urns*, in spring 2026.

The podcast is an interview-based podcast that weaves together the personal stories of everyday people doing extraordinary things—and extraordinary people living everyday lives. Each episode invites listeners into a conversation that explores what drives us, challenges us, and connects us as humans.

Through thoughtful, empathetic interviews, *B2U* uncovers the humor, heartbreak, and hope within real human experiences—from artists and educators to entrepreneurs, community leaders, and change-makers.

Get to know our guests before you listen.



SEITUV JONES
ARTIST

What is your favorite place in Ramsey County?
The entire length of the Mississippi River as it flows through St. Paul and Ramsey County. My second favorite place is Willow Reserve, a small but isolated site.

What is your favorite restaurant and your "must order" dish?
Catfish Po'boy at Golden Thyme Restaurant and the Vegetarian Spare Ribs at Khou's Kitchen.

What is your favorite song?
The entire Marvin Gaye album, the timeless "What's Going On"—50-year-old masterpiece.

If you could invite any three people from history to dinner, who would you choose?
George Washington Carver to talk about plants and art, Dr. Martin Luther King to talk about love and Augusta Savage to talk about her sculpture.

What is your favorite part of the day?
Dawn.

MORE INFO
HERE



IN OUR COLLECTION



In Our Collection shares the pieces acquired by Ramsey County Historical Society.

The collection contains tens of thousands of pieces, including archives, books, objects, and photographs, which are maintained by Director of Collections and Exhibitions, Mollie Spillman, in downtown St. Paul.

**NO. 5 NOVICE'S HONEY EXTRACTOR
DONATED BY: OAKLEY SURINE
ACQUIRED: 1997
RCHS COLLECTION: 1997.13.1**

Donated by Oakley Surine, a longtime 3M employee, this faded, bluish-green, barrel-shaped honey extractor was added to the Ramsey County Historical Society's collection in 1997. On the front of the barrel, painted in white lettering and topped with a scroll design, is written "No. 5 NOVICE'S HONEY EXTRACTOR," and just below is the manufacturer's painted label: "THE A.I./AIR/ROOT CO./MEDINA/OHIO./U.S.A."

At the center of the barrel is a three-leaf clover, each leaf painted with a letter, while above it, a bee appears in flight against the glow of a rising or setting sun. The barrel itself is supported by three metal braces bolted to its sides, each curving downward at the base to form sturdy feet.

The extractor's mechanism is hand-powered, using a wooden crank connected to a gear system that turns a single rectangular basket. The basket, covered on two sides with wire mesh, holds a honeycomb in place. Beekeepers would place filled combs into the holder inside the extractor. As they turned the crank, the basket would spin rapidly, and centrifugal force would draw the honey from the comb onto the inner walls of the machine. The honey then flowed downward to a collection spout, emerging as pure, wax-free honey.



THE A.I. ROOT HONEY EXTRACTOR

The A.I. Root honey extractor transformed the way honey was harvested, as this efficient and elegant solution allowed beekeepers to harvest honey without damaging the wax. Extractors were also manufactured in much larger sizes—some reaching seventy-two inches in diameter or more—for commercial honey production.

The extractor is the result of the ingenuity of Amos Ives Root, born in 1839 in Medina, Ohio. Originally a jeweler, Root's life changed one day when a massive swarm of bees covered the window of his shop, darkening the room and sparking his curiosity. This moment led him to beekeeping and innovation.

In 1869, Root began manufacturing a revolutionary beehive that allowed honey to be extracted without killing the bees. His success led to the founding of the A.I. Root Company in 1878, after he purchased the Medina County Fairgrounds and established his manufacturing operation there. The company later expanded into beeswax candle production in the 1920s, a tradition that continued even after Root's death in 1923.



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RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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

Established by a community of history lovers led by Mrs. Ethel Stewart, Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) has been preserving, interpreting, and presenting the remarkable history of our capital county since 1949. Created to preserve the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, a National Register of Historic Places site since 1974, RCHS has expanded to include publishing, exhibits, preservation, research, and public programming spanning the entire county.

RCHS's vision for the future recognizes the trusted role it plays in our community as a key steward of our shared heritage. As we strive to preserve and share the lessons of the past, our hope is that it will help all of us build a better future for our descendants.

Vision: *Ramsey County Historical Society will continue as a trusted, innovative steward and teacher of history, committed to working with our community to build and sustain a more just and vibrant future.*

The largest and most popular program of RCHS is Gibbs Farm, serving more than 15,000 students every year as well as thousands of teachers, families and individuals. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, RCHS began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, now telling the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of Hĕyáta 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 and in 2010, it created the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center. Collections entrusted to RCHS total more than four million items ranging from a historic farmstead to building permits to images and maps that capture the unique history of our community.

Our mission, vision, and values guide our work and unite a team of volunteers, members, donors, and staff to serve more than 50,000 people every year while ensuring our history is preserved and accessible. We are honored to have the support of so many in our community and welcome you to join us if you have not already.

Values

- We strive for **AUTHENTICITY** and **ACCURACY** in all programs and activities.
- We embrace **INNOVATION**; seeking new and unique ways to collaborate with and educate our community about familiar and unfamiliar history.
- We act with **INTEGRITY**; adhering to the highest ethical and professional standards.
- We prioritize **INCLUSION** and **EQUITY** in our activities, processes and decision-making.
- We embody **RESPECT**, listen with intent, and work to build trusting relationships.

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.



ALAN HOWELL
SENIOR ARCHITECT, MSP AIRPORT

What is your favorite place in Ramsey County?
The Glacial River Valley.

What is your favorite restaurant and your "must order" dish?
Neopolitan pizza on Grand Avenue, deep-dish pizza on Grand, other pizza on Selby Avenue—local food, where possible.

What is your favorite song?
"I wanna know" by Mucilage. Most anything by The Fixx.

If you could invite any three people from history to dinner, who would you choose?
Pliny the Elder (to talk to us more about Roman concrete)
Ptolemy I (to talk about collecting all the world's knowledge), and a Celt from an island north of current France (so they may tell us their story).

What is your favorite part of the day?
Favorite day-part, sounds like food/restauranting ... the hour before sunrise as the birds are talking.



BETWEEN 2 URNS

Ramsey County Historical Society is proud to announce the launch of our podcast, *Between 2 Urns*, in spring 2026.

The podcast is an interview-based podcast that weaves together the personal stories of everyday people doing extraordinary things—and extraordinary people living everyday lives. Each episode invites listeners into a conversation that explores what drives us, challenges us, and connects us as humans.

Through thoughtful, empathetic interviews, *B2U* uncovers the humor, heartbreak, and hope within real human experiences—from artists and educators to entrepreneurs, community leaders, and change-makers.

Get to know our guests before you listen.



SEITU JONES
ARTIST

What is your favorite place in Ramsey County?
The entire length of the Mississippi River as it flows through St. Paul and Ramsey County. My second favorite place is Willow Reserve, a small but isolated site.

What is your favorite restaurant and your "must order" dish?
Catfish Po'boy at Golden Thyme Restaurant and the Vegetarian Spare Ribs at Khou's Kitchen.

What is your favorite song?
The entire Marvin Gaye album, the timeless "What's Going On"—50-year-old masterpiece.

If you could invite any three people from history to dinner, who would you choose?
George Washington Carver to talk about plants and art, Dr. Martin Luther King to talk about love and Augusta Savage to talk about her sculpture.

What is your favorite part of the day?
Dawn.

MORE INFO
HERE



IN OUR COLLECTION



In Our Collection shares the pieces acquired by Ramsey County Historical Society.

The collection contains tens of thousands of pieces, including archives, books, objects, and photographs, which are maintained by Director of Collections and Exhibitions, Mollie Spillman, in downtown St. Paul.

**NO. 5 NOVICE'S HONEY EXTRACTOR
DONATED BY: OAKLEY SURINE
ACQUIRED: 1997
RCHS COLLECTION: 1997.13.1**

Donated by Oakley Surine, a longtime 3M employee, this faded, bluish-green, barrel-shaped honey extractor was added to the Ramsey County Historical Society's collection in 1997. On the front of the barrel, painted in white lettering and topped with a scroll design, is written "No. 5 NOVICE'S HONEY EXTRACTOR," and just below is the manufacturer's painted label: "THE A.I./AIR/ROOT CO./MEDINA/OHIO./U.S.A."

At the center of the barrel is a three-leaf clover, each leaf painted with a letter, while above it, a bee appears in flight against the glow of a rising or setting sun. The barrel itself is supported by three metal braces bolted to its sides, each curving downward at the base to form sturdy feet.

The extractor's mechanism is hand-powered, using a wooden crank connected to a gear system that turns a single rectangular basket. The basket, covered on two sides with wire mesh, holds a honeycomb in place. Beekeepers would place filled combs into the holder inside the extractor. As they turned the crank, the basket would spin rapidly, and centrifugal force would draw the honey from the comb onto the inner walls of the machine. The honey then flowed downward to a collection spout, emerging as pure, wax-free honey.



THE A.I. ROOT HONEY EXTRACTOR

The A.I. Root honey extractor transformed the way honey was harvested, as this efficient and elegant solution allowed beekeepers to harvest honey without damaging the wax. Extractors were also manufactured in much larger sizes—some reaching seventy-two inches in diameter or more—for commercial honey production.

The extractor is the result of the ingenuity of Amos Ives Root, born in 1839 in Medina, Ohio. Originally a jeweler, Root's life changed one day when a massive swarm of bees covered the window of his shop, darkening the room and sparking his curiosity. This moment led him to beekeeping and innovation.

In 1869, Root began manufacturing a revolutionary beehive that allowed honey to be extracted without killing the bees. His success led to the founding of the A.I. Root Company in 1878, after he purchased the Medina County Fairgrounds and established his manufacturing operation there. The company later expanded into beeswax candle production in the 1920s, a tradition that continued even after Root's death in 1923.



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RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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

Established by a community of history lovers led by Mrs. Ethel Stewart, Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) has been preserving, interpreting, and presenting the remarkable history of our capital county since 1949. Created to preserve the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, a National Register of Historic Places site since 1974, RCHS has expanded to include publishing, exhibits, preservation, research, and public programming spanning the entire county.

RCHS's vision for the future recognizes the trusted role it plays in our community as a key steward of our shared heritage. As we strive to preserve and share the lessons of the past, our hope is that it will help all of us build a better future for our descendants.

Vision: *Ramsey County Historical Society will continue as a trusted, innovative steward and teacher of history, committed to working with our community to build and sustain a more just and vibrant future.*

The largest and most popular program of RCHS is Gibbs Farm, serving more than 15,000 students every year as well as thousands of teachers, families and individuals. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, RCHS began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, now telling the stories of the remarkable relationship between Jane Gibbs and the Dakota people of H̄eyáta 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 and in 2010, it created the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center. Collections entrusted to RCHS total more than four million items ranging from a historic farmstead to building permits to images and maps that capture the unique history of our community.

Our mission, vision, and values guide our work and unite a team of volunteers, members, donors, and staff to serve more than 50,000 people every year while ensuring our history is preserved and accessible. We are honored to have the support of so many in our community and welcome you to join us if you have not already.

Values

- We strive for **AUTHENTICITY** and **ACCURACY** in all programs and activities.
- We embrace **INNOVATION**; seeking new and unique ways to collaborate with and educate our community about familiar and unfamiliar history.
- We act with **INTEGRITY**; adhering to the highest ethical and professional standards.
- We prioritize **INCLUSION** and **EQUITY** in our activities, processes and decision-making.
- We embody **RESPECT**, listen with intent, and work to build trusting relationships.

Acknowledging This Sacred Dakota Land

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Join us at Gibbs Farm on July 25, 2026 for our annual Farm-to-Table Dinner with music from Chris Koza.

Top photo: Harvest moon from Farm-to-Table Dinner. Photo by Steven Cohen



Dear readers,

As I've stepped into the role of Editor with the Ramsey County Historical Society, I have hoped to connect with the readers of the magazine—a constituency that has a deep commitment not only to this place, but to understanding all that has shaped it.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Across my past work building publications and other platforms for exchange, I take the notion of the “public” to be an integral part of “publication.”

Periodicals like this one shape the historical record, but they also shape publics in real time.

Engaging with local history has the potential to shift how we engage with this place in the present: how we tend to the land, how we sustain civic participation, and how we come together with our neighbors. As I write in February 2026, in the midst of occupation, these responsibilities are particularly urgent.

The pieces in this issue were seeded more than a year ago, and so since I entered the editorial process only last fall, I recognize all the work that preceded me. As I've dug through the archives, the care that has sustained this magazine for decades is evident to me, and I have also noted how the tone of each era is reflected in the way that history is written.

The mission of RCHS offers a meaningful lens through which to read the articles in this issue: How can these views on the past inform our present, and how can they inspire the future? To wit: How do the individuals within the justice system affect the lives of everyday people? How do the arts make space for us to gather, with shared identities and across difference? How have the inhabitants of Ramsey County built networks of kinship and persisted despite oppression?

EMILY GASTINEAU



Emily Gastineau (she/her) is a choreographer, writer, performer, editor, and cultural worker. Her performance work has been developed and presented in North America and Europe, and she maintains a parallel practice in arts writing and publishing. Her writing has been published in *Sixty Inches from Center*, *MARCH*, *ASAP/J*, *Temporary Art Review*, *Culturebot*, *Mn Artists*, and elsewhere. Emily co-founded the peer response platform *Criticism Exchange*, and she was the editor of *Mn Artists*, an interdisciplinary arts writing publication of the Walker Art Center. She studied at *DAS Choreography*, *Amsterdam University of the Arts* and is currently adjunct faculty at the *Minneapolis College of Art and Design*.



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Under Lisowsky's Baton

Myth, Memory, and the Origins of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center Symphony Orchestra

KATE DIETRICK, PAGE 10



Peter Lisowsky conducts the St. Paul Jewish Community Center Symphony Orchestra. *Part of the St. Paul Jewish Community Center records, courtesy of the Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota.*