



Ramsey County Historical Society
"History close to home"
Landmark Center, 75 W. 5th St.
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RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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Editorial Assistant: Caroline Harney

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ON THE COVER: The corner of Fifth and Wabasha streets photographed in 1873. On the left is the United States Customs House and the Post Office where Patrick O'Brien worked before moving to the Old Federal Courts Building in 1902.

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An outdoor concert at Lake Phalen, ca. 1925. Photograph by C.P. Gibson.

The Ghost of the Roaring Twenties

By Lucille Arnold

The Roaring Twenties decade did not roar in, but neither did it slip in quietly. Like a toddler, it arose on its own two feet after World War I and invited my sister, Thelma, my brother, Archie, and me, as teenagers, to become part of it.

On weekdays we girls dressed like flappers, and the boys — would-be-sheiks — jumped from the 5:30 commuter's train when it stopped at the Gloster station. We wore flowing capes. We had long sweeping feathers on our hats which we pulled down so we could

see out of only one eye. The "sheiks" were in their twenties. They carried swagger sticks and drove flivvers.

The town, which now has been swallowed up by Maplewood, was called Gladstone, and it was like one of today's suburbia, except that only one family had money. One fall we, as 4H Club members, became excited about being invited to a corn husking bee at the rich man's house. However, lunch was served outside and no one set foot inside. Not long after that, the family moved away. There was an air of mystery about the move, but parents didn't discuss it.

I went to Johnson High School and worked on Saturdays and during the summers at J. George Smith's Chocolate Dreams. Later I worked at the Golden Rule Department Store for \$2.50 a day. Part-time or full-time jobs

About the Author: Lucille Arnold grew up in Gladstone, now part of Maplewood, and began recording some of her memories of her early years after enrolling in a class in creative writing at Wilder Senior Citizens Center in St. Paul.

were available for those who wanted them. Transportation was no problem since the bus, streetcar, and train services were excellent.

In school we studied *Twelve Centuries of English Literature*, plus writers like St. Paul's F. Scott Fitzgerald. Our summer reading consisted of the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Flaming Youth*, and once, an uncensored copy of a book called "*It Isn't Done*." We seldom had time for any other reading except for the headlines and the comics in the *St. Paul Daily News*. Once a year we staged an amateur play.

FROM THE 50-CENT balcony seats of the Metropolitan Theatre, we watched the great actors perform. We participated in Christian youth organizations, cheered the high school teams, skated, swam, sang, and danced. We talked about Babe Ruth, Cornelia Otis Skinner, Nazimova, and Gloria Swanson as if they were our neighbors. Our parents talked about Silent Calvin Coolidge, Harding and something about a Teapot Dome.

Summer evenings we walked to Phalen Park to hear White Brothers and Stendahl promote the jazz age by singing "Ain't We Got Fun?", "Lil Liza Jane," and "In the Little Red Schoolhouse." However, we never walked down chicken alley — that was only for those who couldn't get dates any other way. The

wolf whistle had not yet been heard, but the boys had their own methods of indicating approval. We girls responded by strutting a bit and exclaiming "Don't you just hate that?"

We danced the Charleston and the Black Bottom faster and faster until we were no longer teenagers. Most of us were having too much fun for marriage and sex was a dirty word.

In 1927 Paris and New York City went wild when Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic. The stock market began to climb higher and higher without anything to support it. Our spirits climbed with it. We seemed to have been caught up in a sinister tunnel cloud that eventually had to spend itself.

ONE AUTUMN EVENING I sat at the large oak dining room table with the ten other members of our family eating either boiled beef or baked beans prepared on a cook stove. If my mother knew there was such a thing as beef steak, she never let on. Archie tousled 6-year-old Robert's hair and asked, "What do you know?"

"I know there's a lady ghost by the graveyard on Larpenteur Avenue," Robert said.

Amid a chorus of boos, laughter, and "There ain't no such thing as a ghost," Robert sat straight and, looking to my father for

The Metropolitan Opera House which stood at 100 East Sixth Street, in 1919.



support, declared, "There is, too. She stands in the middle of the road. She's got a long thin white dress on like a bride, and she holds one arm up and one crossed in front of her like this." He demonstrated. "Can we go see her tonight, Pa?"

My father's eyes always smiled before his mouth did. He chuckled and he grinned like a Cheshire cat. "The men at the shop were talking about it today," he said. "As soon as it gets dark, I'll take you little ones and Ma up there."

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know," he replied.

I knew he had his own theory, and he wasn't about to share it with anyone. He was an exasperating man. Without even an eighth grade diploma, he could fix anything, especially the furnace, after he had two drinks.

SHORTLY AFTER the ghost hunters had left, Archie announced that the rest of us could have a quick look for the ghost. My sisters Thelma and Elsie, and my brothers, Jody and Edward, and I piled into Archie's fliver and headed for Larpenteur Avenue, a macadamized road that had to be oiled every summer. There were no arc lights, but I felt that the half-moon would lend its glow to ghost hunters.

Five minutes later we came to a slight incline in the road. Without any warning, the ghost stood in the middle of the road, just as Robert had described her. Archie slammed on his brakes. There was an eerie silence. We looked but there was nothing on the road. We circled and drove back a second time. There stood the lady as though she hadn't moved. When we stopped, she disappeared. Archie laughed and declared that he had no idea what the ghost was.

A few nights later I had a date with a man who had a new Model A coupe. When he suggested driving along Larpenteur Avenue, I said, "Oh, good. Maybe we can see the ghost."

"She's gone," he replied. "Didn't you see the article in the paper? It didn't explain what she was, but she caused quite a few traffic jams."

I HAD WANTED to search behind the tombstones and among the branches of the willow trees for the lady in white, but time had prevented it. Her disappearance made me feel sad as I sometimes did when walking home from Lake Phalen on a beautiful day, hoping to enjoy the autumn colors but instead getting



Metal brocades and velvets were featured as the season's style in evening dress, according to Good Housekeeping magazine for October, 1925.

an empty feeling because such colorful wonderful days were numbered for the year.

The next day I asked my father what the ghost was. He went into his Cheshire cat act. "Haven't you figured that out?" A chorus of "Let's not tell her" went up. A little later in the evening I shampooed my hair and was setting it with waterwave combs when Robert came to the table with his story book. He pushed aside a book which was open to a picture of the Statue of Liberty. "Who's she?" he asked. "She looks like the oily lady."

I jumped up. "Like what?"

"You know. The Oily Lady by the graveyard."

Robert's mind was already on his story book. Mine skipped from my father's Cheshire cat grin to the lady ghost. An Oily Lady! That was it. Just a fresh oil slick on the road.

At the end of October that year, the whole world shuddered as the stock market crashed. By the end of the year the dust had settled, and like the lady ghost, the Roaring Twenties slipped quietly into history. The decade which followed became known as the Terrible Thirties.



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THE GIBBS HOUSE

at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County Historical Society as a restored farm house of the mid-nineteenth century period.

The Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. Its chief function is to collect and preserve the history of the city and the county and share that history with the people who live here. The Society is the county's historian. It preserves those things from the past that are the community's treasures — its written records through the Society's library; its historic sites through establishment of the Irvine Park Historic District and its successful efforts to help prevent destruction of the Old Federal Courts Building, now Landmark Center. It shares these records through the publishing of its magazine, brochures, pamphlets, and prints; through conducting historic sites tours of the city, teaching classes, producing exhibits on the history of the city, and maintaining its museum on rural county history. The Gibbs Farm Museum, the oldest remaining farm home in Ramsey County, was acquired by the Society in 1949 and opened to the public in 1954 as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler. In 1966 the Society moved onto the property a one-room rural country schoolhouse dating from the 1870s. Now restored to the period of the late 1890s, the school is used for classes, meetings, and as the center for a summer schoolhouse program for children.

Society headquarters are located in Landmark Center, an historic Richardsonian Romanesque structure in downtown St. Paul, where it maintains the center's only permanent exhibit, a history of the building during the seventy-five years it was the federal government's headquarters in St. Paul.

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