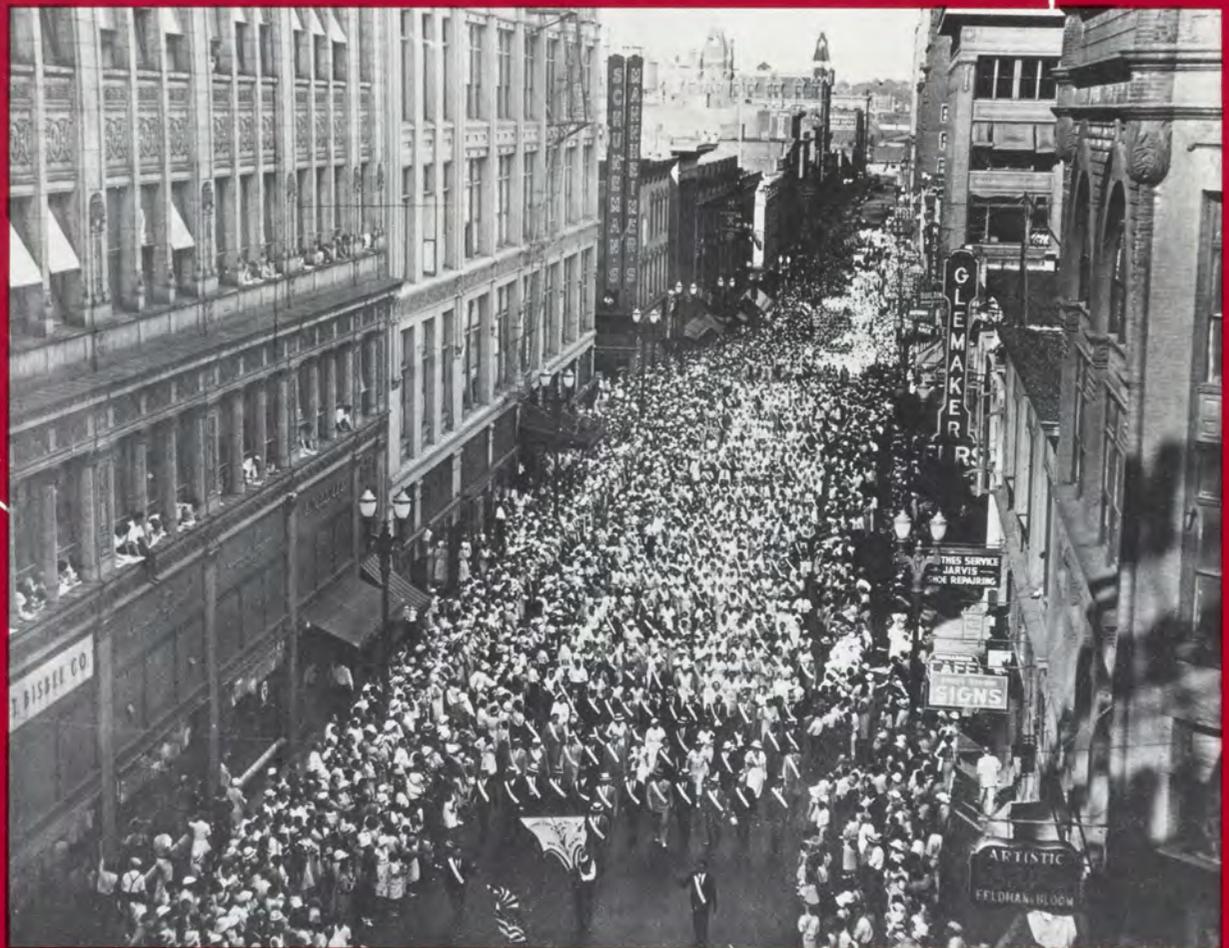


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Ramsey County Historical Society

A Pioneer Writes Home
Alexander Wilkin and 1850s
St. Paul

Volume 24
Number 2



Ramsey County History

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Contents

Volume 24
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A Pioneer Writes Home
Alexander Wilkin and 1850s St. Paul
By Ronald M. Hubbs — Page 3

Boom, Boom, Bust! The '29 Crash
By Woodrow Keljik — Page 17

Cold Weather, Warm Hearts — Page 26

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ON THE COVER: An N.R.A. parade, in downtown St. Paul, in August, 1933, demonstrated support for Franklin D. Roosevelt's efforts to cope with the Depression that settled over the country after the stock market crash of 1929. The small ink drawing is of W. H. Forbes' trading post in downtown St. Paul, as sketched by Robert O. Sweeny, a young druggist and artist, in 1852. It was one of a number of sketches Sweeny made of sites in pioneer St. Paul.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The photograph of Alexander Wilkin on page 8 is from the archives of The St. Paul Companies. All other photographs are from the audiovisual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The original of the broadside reproduced on page 7 is in the Ignatius Donnelly papers, Division of Library and Archives, Minnesota Historical Society. The original of the Sweeny drawing is in the Minnesota Historical Society's art collection.

The Protestant work ethic is deeply embedded in the American character. It is evident today. Success and achievement are equated with the accumulation of material possessions, and they are consciously or unconsciously viewed as the approbation or judgment of God. In the late 19th century, the Reverend Russell Conwell's popular sermon, "Acres of Diamonds," was delivered thousands of times over the years: "To secure wealth is an honorable ambition, and is one great test of a person's usefulness to others. I say 'Get rich! Get rich!' *Plus ça change, c'est plus la même chose* — the more things change, the more they remain the same.

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Cold Weather, Warm Hearts

"It is proverbial that Saint Petersburg and the capitals of other cold countries are the gayest places in the world during the reign of winter," the *Minnesota Pioneer* observed on January 2, 1850. The paper proceeded to prove its point in an account of a particularly festive holiday season.

"The festivities and hilarity of our town on New Year's Eve confirm the truth, that cold weather can never freeze warm hearts. Saint Paul was, yesterday, swarming with animated fashion. The sideboards of many of our citizens were provided with free entertainments which would do credit to the wealthy burgers of Gotham."

The celebrations seem to have been an interesting mixture of the frivolous and the serious and apparently the gatherings were crowded to the rafters. As the *Pioneer* described it:

"At 11 a.m. our people assembled at the Methodist church to attend the exercise of the Minnesota Historical Society where an introductory lecture was delivered by the Rev. Mr. [Edward Duffield] Neill which was not only instructive but thrillingly eloquent, his subject being the earlier voyageurs of the Northwest...one could seem to see actually stirring before him the events described...the exercises were enlivened by the instrumental music of that excellent band from Fort Snelling."

That evening there was a ball at the Central

House with some 100 "gentlemen and their ladies present," and it was, according to the newspaper's somewhat breathless account, the "largest collection of beauty and fashion we have ever seen in the West. The only hindrance to perfect enjoyment was the excessive members of the party. There being room for only five cotillions...so great was the throng that Mr. Kennedy was unable to complete the arrangement of the table. This was probably mortifying to the host and hostess who had spared no expense in the ample preparation of numerous dishes which it was not possible for them to convey to the table, so great was the crowd."

Still, St. Paul's enterprising pioneers seemed to have kept their eyes on the bottom line. The following advertisement appeared in the *Minnesotian* on December 4, 1852:

"CHILDREN CRY FOR THEM"

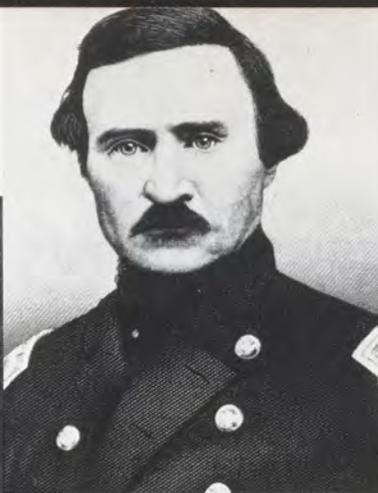
"O, don't you remember, 'tis now in December
And soon will be Holidays come.

O, t'will be so funny, I've plenty of money
I'll buy me a sword and a drum."

"RENS & KARCHER have received direct from the hands of the manufacturers a general assortment of toys for the Holidays — every kind and variety that can be thought of, too numerous to mention in detail. Call at their establishments on Third Street and in the Upper Town."

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Sioux treaty chiefs on a visit to Washington D.C. See page 3.



*Alexander Wilkin.
See page 3.*



*Homeless men during the Great Depression.
See page 17.*



*W.P.A. helper bathing her small charge.
See page 17.*

The Gibbs Farm Museum, owned by the Ramsey County Historical Society, at Cleveland and Larpenteur in Falcon Heights.



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