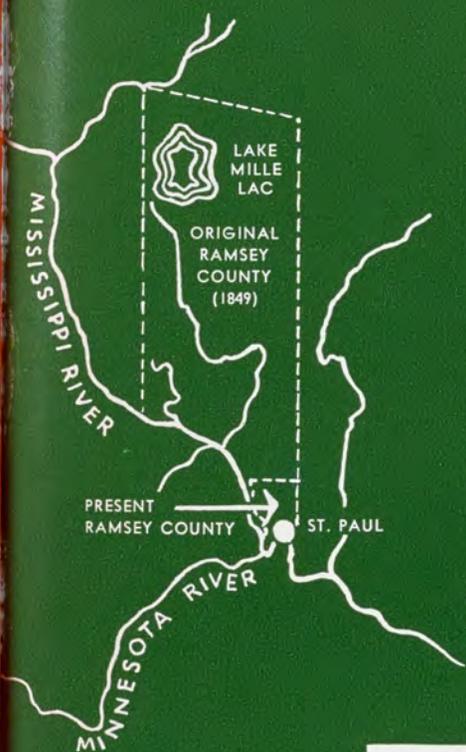


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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ON THE COVER:

Red River ox carts lined up on Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard) in front of Cheritree and Farwell's Hardware store in 1859. Charles William Wulff Borup, as agent for the American Fur Company, arranged for carts to haul furs for traders.

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Forgotten Pioneers IV

RAMSEY COUNTY has had its share of famous pioneers whose names fill the pages of the history books. But there have been many more men and women who have been almost forgotten but who made outstanding contributions and left their names upon streets, parks, buildings, and in the official records. The following article is the fourth in a new feature in Ramsey County History, a series of sketches of "forgotten pioneers."

AMONG the most forgotten of Ramsey County's forgotten pioneers are the patient, courageous wives of the men who founded, settled and built St. Paul and the surrounding communities in the county.

A man's contribution may have been recorded in some way, however obscure, but his wife, with rare exceptions, remained the woman-behind-the-scenes. Yet these women put up with the inconveniences of pioneer life, shared its perils, and often coped with them alone. There is little information about Ramsey County's pioneer women, but these stories tell us about some of them and their lives during St. Paul's early years.

Mrs. Abraham Perry, wife of Abraham Perry, a French-Swiss fur trader from the Red River of the North, was one of the first women to settle in the area. In 1838, before their cabin near Fountain Cave was finished, the Perrys were selected for an attack by the Indians. Perry was chosen because he was thought to be less likely to make a bold defense, he was the richest man, in cattle, in the area, and he was Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant's nearest neighbor at that time. This proximity is significant when it is remembered that Parrant operated a flourishing saloon.

"ONE MORNING—Parrant had been doing a thriving business all night—a small band of savages put in an appearance at the Perry cabin and made wild demonstrations, indicating an intent to slaughter the family. Mr. Perry had gone afield and Mrs. Perry tried to pacify the marauders. She did succeed in turning them from their original intention and instead of killing the frightened women in the house they went after the cattle in the bottoms and killed

several head. This incident was by no means unique."¹

In April of 1839, within a year of the coming of the Perrys, Rose Perry became the bride of J. R. Clewett, a young Englishman employed by one of the fur companies. The ceremony was the first legal marriage performed at St. Paul. Mendota, however, was then and for some years afterwards, the center of social life, and many dances were held there during the long winter months.

"These dances were by no means lacking in light, life and color. The women did not lack for finery but it was not always so effective as the dress of the men. They were tireless dancers and Denis Cherrier was the fiddler who furnished the music for most of these dances. It was to one of these dances that fate led James Clewett. He had traveled 5,000 miles [from England] to stand in the doorway, an onlooker at the dance.

"AMONG THE DANCERS was a girl who had traveled a weary way from the north, Rose Perry. Clewett went home that night with the Perrys when they crossed the ice, and did not leave in the morning nor for many a morning thereafter. Papa Perry was constrained to accept the persistent wooer as a son-in-law and on April 9, 1839, Clewett married Rose, the Rev. Mr. [J. W.] Pope of Kaposia mission officiating."²

Another reference is made to Rose, again in an incident involving the Indians. "The Sioux had little fear of lethal weapons but they could make no reprisals when Clewett gave a beating to two of them whom he caught carrying off the washing Rose had hung on the line."³

On June 26, 1841, Adele Perry, Rose's



Mrs. Selby



Mrs. Robert



Mrs. Clewett

sister, married Vetal Guerin, an employee of the American Fur Company and one of the most respected of the early settlers. This marriage was notable because it marked the first use of the name of St. Paul. When Father Lucian Galtier published the bans for the marriage, he described the candidates for matrimony as being of St. Paul's church, a log cabin chapel, then in the process of being built at what is now Jackson Street and Kellogg Boulevard. The wedding took place in the morning and the bridal party consisted of every man, woman and child in the settlement. After the ceremony, the wedding party proceeded to Benjamin Gervais' house where provisions had been made for the feeding of a multitude.

"CARCASSES of three deer had been roasted; scores of prairie chickens; dozens of rabbits; stacks of fish from the river, and piles of cakes made of flour not too white,—all these had been baked or boiled according to the fashion of the times. Honey had been brought in by some of the neighbors and also some black and bitter tea. [Denis] Cherrier's fiddle squeaked all day and all night. Meals were served continuously and there was much mad capering on the dance floor."

". . . in the night Vetal Guerin led his bride up through the woods to the home he had prepared for her . . . Adele Perry might have shrunk from the home to which

Guerin took her . . . [but] so many days had she spent in the crowded house of [her] Father where comfort was sacrificed for warmth, that she was more than satisfied with the house of Vetal Guerin. . . ."⁴

Their cabin also was located only a few rods from Parrant's establishment "and the powerful . . . 'minne-waken' he sold the Indians there. . . . The lives of Guerin and his bride were often times in danger, and their honeymoon was somewhat a stormy one, take it all in all. Once . . . nine or ten Indians made an attack on the house, and tried to kill Guerin."

"THEY BROKE IN the window and attempted to crawl in. Mrs. G. concealed herself under the bed, expecting to be murdered. Guerin seized an axe . . . but, luckily before any bloodshed occurred a friendly chief named 'Hawk's Bill' came up and remonstrated with the [Indians], urging them to leave. While they were parleying the Guerins . . . slipped out of the door, and fled to Mr. Gervais' house. The Indians then went away, after shooting Guerin's dog with arrows."⁵

Mrs. Mary Turpin Robert was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1828. When she was 13 years old, she married Captain Louis Robert in St. Louis, lived for a time at Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, and came to St. Paul in 1844. At that time, there were only three white women there, Mrs.

Gervais, Mrs. Henry Jackson and Mrs. Perry.

Mrs. Robert made many trips with her husband on his fur-trading expeditions among the Indians. They camped out in a tent or an Indian cabin. In 1851, Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois visited St. Paul and dined with Mrs. Robert in their little house on the bluff near where Kellogg Boulevard and Robert Street now meet.

"Mrs. Robert had many hair-breath escapes from Indians who wished to take her and make her their wife, and if she refused, they would threaten to kill her, often times had the knife raised, when some friendly hand interposed. Altogether she had a very rough experience of frontier life,"⁶ concludes one historian of the era, in an account which may be somewhat over-drawn.

SEVERAL CHILDREN were born to the Roberts but only two daughters lived to reach maturity. Mrs. Robert remarried some years after her husband's death and died in 1882. Her mother, Mrs. Amable Turpin, is mentioned in the early histories as having given room and board to Bishop Cretin upon his arrival in St. Paul, since there were no other quarters available. She also taught catechism to the Indian children before the arrival of Father Galtier, "being the first religious teacher in this locality, except the missionary work among the Indians."⁷

During the spring or early summer of 1845, Matilda Rumsey established a small school for children in a log building on the bottom lands near the upper levee. This was the first school in St. Paul. However, the school was not kept up very long. There were only a handful of pupils and it was abandoned when Miss Rumsey married Alexander Megee.⁸

T. M. Newson mentions in his *Pen Pictures* "a woman of strong business character, quietly spoken, who ranks among the most respected of the 'old settlers'." Her name was Mrs. M. L. Stoakes and she came to St. Paul in 1849. She established the first regular millinery store in the city on the corner of Third and Washington Streets.

MRS. STOAKES lived in St. Paul for 18 years. She moved to Montana in 1867, but she retained property in St. Paul and made

yearly visits to take care of her business affairs and visit old friends.⁹

Newson describes with old-fashioned gallantry still another pioneer woman, Mrs. J. W. Selby, who came to St. Paul with her husband in 1849. Selby was a member of the 1852 Legislature, a city assessor and a member of the Board of Ramsey County Commissioners.

Mrs. Selby "did her share towards molding public sentiment. I remember her as a bright, jovial woman, always cheerful and scattering sunshine in her path. She toiled with her husband to accumulate their property, and after his death [in 1855 at the age of 43] visited Europe and then married her old lover, now Senator Conger from Michigan."

"In the early days the writer [Newson] advocated the principles of temperance strongly, and on the incoming New Years he suggested that the ladies present nothing to their gentlemen friends stronger than coffee. So Mrs. Selby, in the goodness of her heart, set a special table for my benefit, where coffee was the leading feature."

"UNFORTUNATELY, I was prevented from making my New Year calls, and during all these years I have been regretting the loss of that delicious coffee which was intended as a compliment to my temperance principles. The reader can appreciate this point when he comes to understand that intoxicating liquor was the universal rule, not the exception."¹⁰

After remarrying, Mrs. Selby lived in Michigan but made a "yearly pilgrimage" to St. Paul to, according to Newson, "live over again her young married life."

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THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue W., St. Paul, Minn.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958 the Society erected a barn, behind the house, which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.