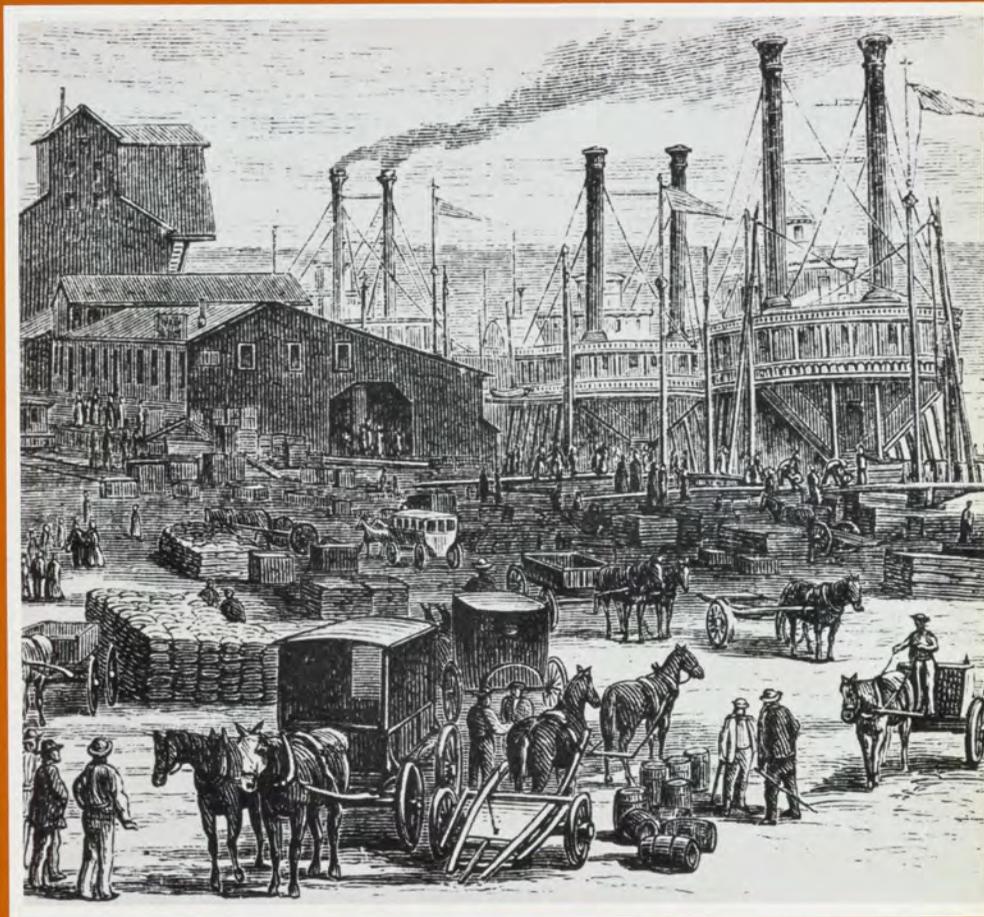
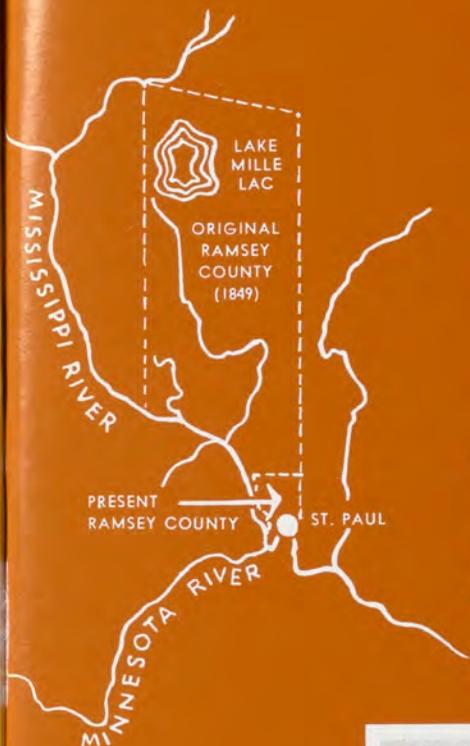


# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Fall

1971

Volume 8

Number 2

# Ramsey County History

Published by the RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

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*ON THE COVER:* This steel engraving of St. Paul's Lower Landing as it looked in 1853 shows the bustling river front during the boom years of steamboat travel on the Upper Mississippi. See story beginning on page 15.

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:* Pictures illustrating the story which begins on page 3 are from the author's scrapbook, except for the pictures of Battle Creek and the little railroad station. All other pictures used in this issue are from the audio-visual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The editor is indebted to Eugene Becker and Dorothy Gimmestad, of the state historical society's audio-visual staff, for their help.



Steven Desnoyer's Halfway House, opened in 1843 and photographed in 1894 by B. J. Sturtevant. Its site, now part of the Town and Country Club, is one of Merriam Park's historic spots.

## Merriam's Vision: Rural Village Between Cities

BY JOHN SONNEN

In 1843 when Steven Desnoyer opened his wayside inn on the old ox cart trail as an extra-curricular activity to his 300-acre farm that included the fairways of today's Town and Country Club, he hoisted this sign over the door: "Desnoyer's Halfway House — 1843."

For the inn's conviviality, it was not an appropriate label; for its geographical location, it announced the truth. Halfway it was, equidistant between St. Paul's busy river front and St. Anthony, the village upriver at St. Anthony Falls.

Today, 128 years later, the Merriam Park area of St. Paul, of which Desnoyer's site is one of its historical spots, is certainly the "halfway house" of the two cities. Shifting downtown boundaries and a freeway which has changed the traffic flow in the area have not budged old Merriam Park from this geographic fact. The freeway, excavated and poured along the historic ox cart trail on St. Anthony Road, has accentuated it. Mileage

from Minneapolis' city hall to Merriam Park's old center street, Prior Avenue, is five miles. Mileage from St. Paul's city hall westward to the Prior Avenue overpass is five miles.

THE LOCATION of the area between St. Paul and Minneapolis may have been one reason Colonel John L. Merriam became vitally attracted to it in 1880. In that year, the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad completed its "short-line" between St. Paul and Minneapolis. Merriam, father of William Merriam, a governor of Minnesota, was one of St. Paul's astute businessmen. He recognized the potential of a village, rural in nature, at the midway point between the two cities.

In 1882 he platted the development. Its northern line was the Chicago, Milwaukee Railroad's right-of-way, its southern boundary today's Marshall Avenue. The eastern limit was a north-south line 212 feet west of present-day Fairview Avenue, or approximately Dewey Avenue. The western line was Union, now Cleveland Avenue. The plat encompassed some 140 acres. It was planned well.

Colonel Merriam reserved a three-acre parcel as a park at the center line of Prior

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: John Sonnen is a free-lance writer by avocation. A graduate in journalism and geology from the University of Minnesota, he has lived in Merriam Park since 1939 and has served as Housing Committee Chairman of the Merriam Park Community Council. His family once operated a grocery business, founded by his grandfather, in Merriam Park.*

Avenue. Along this same center line, south of the park at the corner of Iglehart, he located the village school. It opened in 1883 — a three-room frame building with brick veneer, two rooms on the main floor and one on the second. He named the school Longfellow, and its successor still stands at Prior and Iglehart on the same, but greatly enlarged, site. The village depot also was located on the Park's center line of Prior Avenue where it met the "short-line" railroad at the street's northern point. From this station platform the Twin Cities' first commuters caught the early morning trains for either city, depending upon which town's rat race of those Victorian days they were ensnared in.

LIKE TODAY'S grim-faced freeway drivers or jostled bus riders, there apparently were stoic commuters then, too. In his autobiography, Dr. Paul Magnuson, a Veterans' Administration surgeon who was born in Merriam Park, described how his father, a successful grain dealer accountant in Minneapolis and a director of one of St. Paul's largest banks, arrived home the day the bank went broke.

The doctor's mother, having heard the terrible news from earlier arriving neighbors, had shepherded the children out of the way into the parlor, with instructions to be quiet. She then greeted her husband solicitously and alone on the front porch: "Oh, dear! Have you heard the bad news?"

"Yup," he answered, "bank busted. Supper ready?"

It was, without a doubt, the days before the bar car.

Fare to either city was 7-1/2 cents. Mileage to St. Paul was 5.8 miles, to Minneapolis 5.1 miles, figures that are as correct today as they were in 1882. It was not until the late 1920's, when the Merriam Park depot was demolished after being closed and boarded up for years, that "Merriam Park" was deleted from the Milwaukee Road's time table. The station's sign, however, stood tall and proud on its erect post beside the tracks at Prior Avenue until it finally was removed during the construction of the I-94 freeway and the rebuilding of the railroad roadbed.

THE OLD TIME tables starting at Chicago with zero, listed St. Paul at 410.6 miles, Merriam Park at 416.4 miles and Minneapolis at 421.5. The run to either city from the

Prior Avenue depot took 12 minutes. With fast and reliable transportation at such reasonable rates, Merriam Park was bound to grow and prosper.

To prevent speculation, Colonel Merriam inserted a clause in every deed stipulating that a home not costing less than \$1,500 had to be completed within 12 months after purchase of the lot. Milwaukee Avenue and sections of St. Anthony Avenue along the Park's north boundary, now obliterated by the freeway, were built in their entirety. Large Victorian style homes, with high-ceilinged rooms, scalloped eaves and turreted roofs, lined these two streets near the depot.

Residents who desired more elbow-room purchased lots along the blocks farther south in the development. Here they had space not only for larger homes but for a two- or three-horse stable, sometimes a cow or two, a vegetable garden, and even a Concord grape arbor.

*The Northwest Magazine*, a popular illustrated journal of "Literature, Agriculture and Western Progress," reported in the early 1880's that in Merriam Park "no cheap or inferior residences [were] permitted. Consequently the rapid upbuilding of a very delightful neighborhood is evident." The forecast was that demand for homes in the area would be great and that land values were expected to increase. Lots were "going for only one-fifth the value of those on St. Anthony Hill" (today's lower Summit Avenue and the Cathedral area). The forecast proved correct.

TWO YEARS after Colonel Merriam's original development was platted, the village's growth had mushroomed to such an extent that second, third, then fourth and fifth additions were laid out. Their lots sold at mounting prices. The city of St. Paul, booming despite the national financial depression of 1884, was by this time eyeing the ripening plum that was Merriam Park. Maneuvers in the Minnesota Legislature resulted in passage of a bill extending St. Paul's city limits westward to the Mississippi River, thus allowing the city to annex Mer-

**Overleaf: Pictures of Old Merriam Park.**

Story continued on page 14.



riam Park. Before Governor Hubbard signed the bill into law, some clever negotiators, perhaps led by Colonel Merriam himself, stipulated that another bill exempt Merriam Park from taxes for the existing bonded indebtedness of the city. A third bill prohibited the licensing of saloons and the sale of liquor within a circuit of four miles from the center of Merriam Park.

The last bill could conceivably be the first legislation in Minnesota having a "metro" ring to it, for just one mile west of Merriam Park flowed the Mississippi River, the eastern boundary of Hennepin County and, years later, the city limits of Minneapolis. However, since there was no concentrated settlement of people within Merriam Park's four-mile circle, there was no opposition to this third bill, either. If in December of 1877, Steven Desnoyer had been able to hold his spirited team (would he have any other kind?) in check while returning from St. Anthony, thus avoiding his fatal runaway accident, there undoubtedly would have been boisterous opposition, indeed, but Desnoyer was quiet at last in Calvary Cemetery. Merriam Park was in the hands of affluent conservatives and they wanted no surroundings with a boom-town atmosphere. After all, they had moved to this pleasant village to escape all that river-front revelry.

BUT ST. PAUL had Merriam Park in the fold, liquor limits and all, and the city swelled westward, aided by an expanding streetcar system, now electrified, and the dynamic John Ireland, archbishop of St. Paul, who had visions of an eventual metropolitan city encompassing St. Paul and Minneapolis under a single municipal government. The archbishop's ringing words, spoken on the occasion of St. Paul's electric

August Swanson's greenhouse was one of the business enterprises which flourished in Merriam Park.

streetcar system reaching the Merriam Park area, may well place him in the halls of the prophets:

"Tread reverently upon this ground. It is the Midway, the very heart of the coming great city. Look at it! Admire it! Has not Providence been generous to it? No wonder that friends of mine across the river covet it. It is the precious gift by which St. Paul will woo and win fair Minneapolis."

Today those who drive along the freeway I-94, still follow the old ox cart trail. And at the Prior Avenue overpass or the Cretin-Vandalia exit, the ghosts of those men and women who once lived in the Merriam Park area — including Steven Desnoyer and the revelers at his "Halfway House" — may be watching.

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### THE GIBBS HOUSE

*Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.*

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 farm 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. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

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.