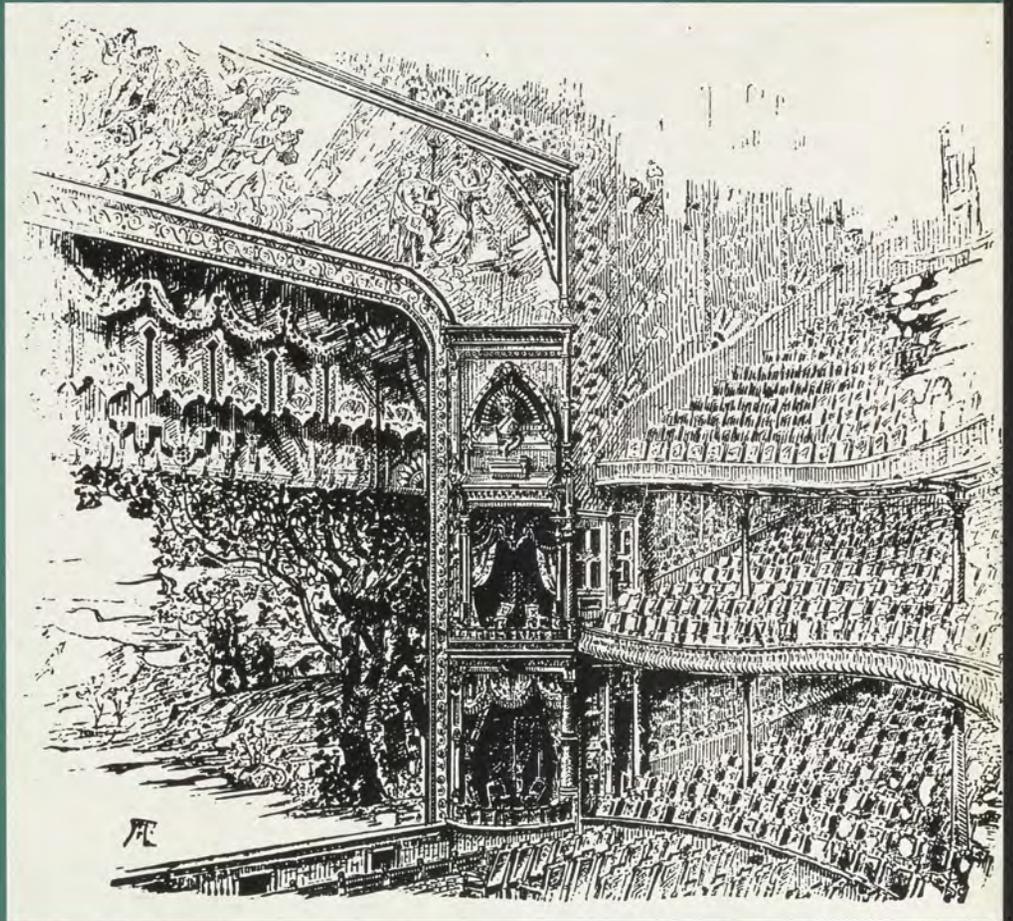


# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Fall

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*ON THE COVER: Interior view of the Grand Opera House, St. Paul.*

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: All pictures used in this issue are from the audio-visual department of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.*

# *Memories of Early St. Paul--* **Perilous Escape from Fire Down Eighty-foot Bluff**

By Mrs. George R. Becker  
with George A. Rea

**I**n 1870 my father, August Mueller, with his brother Charles, owned and operated a tailor shop located on Third Street (present-day Kellogg Boulevard), which at that time was the heart of St. Paul's business district. It was near the site now occupied by West Publishing Company and their establishment was located on the top floor of a three-story building.

The weather was cool and windy the afternoon of May 17, 1870. The windows in the shop were closed, the coal burning stove was going strong, and the Mueller brothers, just back from lunch, were busy with their work. A shipment of some bolts of cloth, probably men's woolen suitings, had just arrived. The two tailors may have been drowsy, just after lunch, or maybe their thoughts were elsewhere. They were soon to be married to two sisters, Augusta and Louise Albrecht.

One of the brothers may have stopped stitching to put more coal on the fire, and may have passed close to the window. At any rate, he said to his brother, "Listen, don't you hear somebody shouting in the street below?"

"IT IS JUST those boys from the business college yelling and fooling around now that school is over for the day," his brother may have replied. Byant and Stratton Business College was located across the street on the north side of Third Street.

One of the brothers opened the window to hear what the boys were shouting, and he heard them shouting, "Fire! Fire! Fire!" They were pointing to a blazing fire coming

from the livery stable next door. Then he noticed that their own building was on fire.

The brothers ran for the small hall which was the anteroom to their shop. From it the stairway led to the first floor. They saw at once that a thick, black cloud of fumes and smoke was pouring up the stairway. Their only means of escape was on fire. So they ran to the windows facing the steep bluff overlooking the river.

First one, then the other climbed out on the sill. They realized that if they jumped they might be killed. Spectators on the bluff below shouted, "Don't jump! Wait until we put up some ladders!"

The fire department had raced their horse-drawn engines and hook and ladder rig to the site and were placing ladders against the side of the bluff, but the ladders were many feet too short.

By this time, flames were bursting out of the stairwell, and the heat, the fumes, the smoke made breathing almost impossible. The front of the building was ablaze. There was only one chance — the two men would have to jump out of the back windows facing south onto the river. It was a drop of eighty feet down the almost vertical sandstone bluff. If they stayed in the building, they knew they would be suffocated or burned to death. They hung by their fingertips to the window sills as long as they could. Then, one after the other, they dropped to the slopes below.

MIRACULOUSLY, they were not killed. However, they both were so severely injured that it was thought they would not survive. In the meantime, the wind had tossed huge, fiery streamers of burning straw and hay from the livery stable fire onto the houses of squatters who lived nearby along the edge of the Mississippi river, forcing them to evacuate their possessions. The injured men were

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mrs. George R. Becker, 514 Humbolt Avenue, St. Paul, is a long-time member of both the Ramsey County and St. Paul Historical Society and the Minnesota Historical Society. She told the story of the fire to George R. Rea, another member of the Ramsey County and St. Paul Historical Society, who collaborated with her in writing this account for Ramsey County History.*

placed on some mattresses which had been hastily discarded during the panic. Later they were taken by wagons to the home of their sister and brother-in-law at 45 Mississippi Street, about a mile away.

The heat from the fire had been so intense that windows were broken and paint blistered on buildings across the street. The building where the Mueller tailor shop was located was damaged so severely it had to be razed. After the fire was over, the body of Mrs. Ella Topley, a dressmaker who had her shop on the second floor of the building, was found. As she had no immediate relatives, she was buried in Oakland Cemetery in the family plot of George Siebert. My father pointed out her grave to me some years afterwards.

My father and my Uncle Charles were in such critical condition due to internal injuries, that they stayed at the home of their sister and brother-in-law all that summer.

The lives of both men were greatly affected by the injuries they sustained. Charles married Augusta and was able to return to tailoring, but he was always handicapped by poor health and he died in 1885.

August, my father, had suffered a broken arm during his fall, his right hand was crippled, and one elbow was stiff. He could not continue to work as a tailor. Late in 1870, he went to Chicago to see a bone specialist. His arm was re-set, but the operation did not relieve his disabilities.

FOR A WHILE, he ran a fruit and confectionery store on Jackson Street near Seventh in the hope of being able to recoup some of the heavy financial losses from the fire. Soon after his marriage to Louise Albrecht, they established a fancy goods store, aided by the advice and encouragement of Louise's brother, Ernst, who was the founder of Albrecht Furs. Louise was an accomplished needle woman and she took orders for knitting, crocheting, and embroidery work while August waited on trade and did the stamping.

The stamping of material — all done by hand — was used in the process of transferring patterns for embroidering on cloth. It left a light blue pattern on the fabric, similar to the machine-made stampings on

cloth today. After the patterns were made, the stampings were reproduced from them onto the cloth.

The Mueller Fancy Goods Store was first located on Jackson between Sixth and Seventh Streets. About 1880 it was moved to 191 East Seventh Street. There were living quarters above this store and this was one reason my parents decided to move. I was born above the second store in December of 1885.

My uncle, Ernst Albrecht, continued to give my parents invaluable assistance. Not only did he give them advice, but on his yearly trips to the world fur market in Leipzig, Germany, he bought goods which could be sold in the fancy work store. A music box in the form of a lady seated at a piano playing the "Blue Danube Waltz" was part of the first consignment of these imported toys ever to reach the Northwest. It is now at the Minnesota Historical Society and it still plays. German toys were much sought after and my parents' shop must have been a busy place, especially around Christmas. Without Uncle Ernst Albrecht's help, it is certain that my parents' store would not have succeeded as well as it did.

I REMEMBER our neighborhood vividly. On the corner of Sibley and Seventh Streets stood Collier's Drug Store, with tall red and green lamps in the window. Next door to the west, there was a tobacco shop run by a Mr. Tengler. Out in front of his store, instead of the usual cigar store wooden Indian, there stood a huge wooden, painted figure of Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders. Next to that was Schugard's wallpaper and picture framing store. Then came my parents' store, and above it, our home.

Behind us, on the corner of Eighth and Sibley, was Dr. Pomeroy's veterinarian barn and livery stable. On Seventh Street at the west end of the block, at Jackson, was Allen's Drug Store.

There was a great demand for "fancy work" materials at that time. Almost all the ladies of a household in those days were accustomed to working with colored silk, woolen knitting materials, or cotton

thread. They embroidered designs or monograms on tablecloths, luncheon tray cloths, napkins, pillow cases, and sheets. They knit all sorts of useful garments, especially woolen socks and stockings, caps and scarves. They tatted or crocheted antimacassars, tablecloths, bedspreads. They had a great deal of time on their hands, as most of the housework was done by maids. It was a poor household which did not have a "hired girl" who was paid about \$30 a month, plus room and board. They were on duty from morning to night, did the washing and cooking for the family, and had a holiday on Thursday afternoons and Sunday mornings. Thus, the ladies of the house, in order to keep busy, did a great deal of fancy work, the raw materials for which were supplied by my parents' shop, among others.

Another reason young women kept busy with fancy work was that in those days there were few occupations deemed appropriate for women. They generally had three choices — marriage, teaching, or nursing. Working as maids, waitresses, cooks, or as clerks in department stores was done only out of economic necessity. Very few girls worked in business offices; those who did usually were stenographers.

MOST OF THE entertaining for young people was done at home. The young man was invited to dinner several nights a week, if there was a prospect that an engagement might be forthcoming. The social customs of those days were strictly observed. For instance, it was considered undesirable for a young man to give a young lady, even if they were engaged, anything that might be considered "support," such as articles of clothing, fur coats or muffs, or gifts of food. Flowers, books, jewelry, and candy were the acceptable presents, giving rise to the saying, "First the watch and then the ring." The watch was usually given at Christmastime and the engagement ring around Valentine's Day, with the wedding planned for June. Boxes of candy, dried fruit, bananas, and oranges, such as my father sold in his fruit and confectionery store, were popular presents for young ladies.

A girl would be considered "fast," if she ate dinner at a public restaurant, such as Carling's Uptown. It was, however, thought proper for her to have an occasional meal

at a hotel dining room, such as at the Merchants or the Ryan Hotel, especially if she were travelling.

As department stores came into being, my parent's business diminished, and about 1900 they sold out and built a home on Dayton's Bluff.

I remember that it took a half hour to walk from our new home to the old Central High School at Minnesota and Tenth. I don't recall ever taking the cable. The standard school girl costume consisted of a winter-weight suit of woolen underwear, long black wool stockings, high-button shoes encased in sturdy four-buckle overshoes, and a black or dark blue woolen suit, the skirt having a "mud flounce" to protect the ankle-length skirt around the edges. Over this suit jacket, I wore a heavy woolen winter coat that reached to my calves, or an astrakan lamb finger-length jacket on more dressy occasions. My winter outfit was completed with the addition of a heavy knitted wool hat or beret-fashioned cap called a "Tam-O'-Shanter," and a woolen scarf which was long enough to wrap around my neck and then cross over for double protection under my coat. Thus warmly dressed, I walked back and forth to school every day. My good health in subsequent years undoubtedly was helped by these hourly walks during my early years.

My school books and homework papers were carried in a leather strap fastened with a brass buckle. I always had a nickel in one pocket for "rain money," so I could take the horse-car tram if necessary.

As our high school classes were over by 1:00 p.m., I didn't eat lunch at noon but waited until I returned home. Often, I carried a small sandwich and a piece of cake or fudge, wrapped in wax paper, to eat at the 10:30 recess.

As I look back over the years I can only surmise how our lives might have been different if there hadn't been that fire in 1870 with its near-tragic consequences. Yet, we still managed to make the most of life, despite circumstances.

### Note

*Much of the material for this article was assembled from the newspaper archives of the Minnesota Historical Society, as well as Mrs. Becker's own recollections. Thanks are also due to Dr. Harold E. Pomeroy, who supplied information relating to his father and his livery stable.*



### THE GIBBS HOUSE

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

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.

Headquarters of the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society are located in the Old Federal Courts Building in downtown St. Paul, an historic building of neo-Romanesque architecture which the Society, with other groups, fought to save from demolition. The Society also maintains a museum office in the basement of the schoolhouse on the Gibbs Farm property. The Society is active in identification of historic sites in the city and county, and conducts an educational program which includes the teaching and demonstration of old arts and crafts. It is one of the few county historical societies in the country to engage in an extensive publishing program in local history.