

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*Whistles, Crowds, Free Silver
Election Night – 1896*

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Fall, 1992

Volume 27, Number 3

The
Mexican-
Americans
and their
Roots in
St. Paul's
Past

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Growing Up
on The
East Side

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Mexican women attending a class in English presented by the St. Paul WPA's adult education department—April 23, 1936.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue of *Ramsey County History* matches in diversity the varied fall colors we now see all around us. Jane McClure writes in fascinating detail about the history of our Mexican American neighbors on the West Side of St. Paul. Tom Buckley reminds us that the presidential election of 1896, matching Republican McKinley with Democrat Bryan, involved in its day as much hoopla, politics and suspense as the election of 1992 appears to have so far.

Two of our regular features—Growing Up in St. Paul and the Historic Site essay—highlight the colorful East Side neighborhood. And finally we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church and its century of service to St. Paul's African American community in A Matter of Time for 1892. The Editorial Board hopes you will enjoy the richness of Ramsey County's history found in this issue.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

Polish Sausage and Trips on the Streetcar

DeAnne M. Cherry

As a young girl growing up in the 1940s, I spent a good share of my time at my grandparents' home. Frank and Catherine Sobkowiak lived at 915 Geranium in the Polish community on St. Paul's East Side. Although I had some interactions with my grandfather, most of my early memories are of my grandmother who was always there for both my brother Dennis and me.

Each Sunday my mother would send us off to the 9:30 a.m. mass at St. Casimir Catholic Church. I remember walking up Arcade Street and climbing on almost every snow bank. We must have been a sorry sight when we marched, sometimes late, into church. The 9:30 a.m. mass was certainly not any child's favorite pastime. It lasted an hour and a half, with all the readings, including the gospel and sermon, in both English and Polish. As we became more and more restless, we would kick each other under the pew. At that time we really believed that no one knew we were misbehaving. (*For more about St. Casimir's Church, see page 27.*)

After mass we had dinner at grandmother's house and most often she served homemade chicken soup. The meal ended with a delicious dessert from her walk-in pantry which always had a wonderful aroma of baked items that would tempt any child with a sweet tooth. Grandmother's pantry also was one of her hiding places for money. When she died, my grandfather found money in a jar on the top shelf. My mother knew grandmother was saving money to buy a mangle, a machine one could sit at to iron large pieces of cloth such as the linen tablecloths she used on Sundays.

Like today, grandmother had her daily soap operas. She would sit by the radio each afternoon and many times I joined her. While we listened to programs like "The Romance of Helen Trent," "Ma Per-



Catherine Sobkowiak in downtown St. Paul in the 1940s.

kins" and "Just Plain Bill," she would brush and braid my hair. The plots of those programs escape my memory, but the memory of my grandmother's closeness remains.

Dennis and I always looked forward to St. Casimir's Fall Festival, which was held in the church yard across the street from my grandparents' house. One year I saw Father Andrew Stojar drinking a beer with some men from the parish. I was shocked. I didn't think that a holy man would be allowed to drink alcohol, other than the wine in church. The smell of the food, the carnival games and the music were all so exciting. We would beg to stay longer but grandmother usually took us home around 9 o'clock.

I slept on the mohair davenport and my brother slept on two overstuffed chairs pushed together. Our stomachs were full of every imaginable treat and we were tired, yet we lay awake in the dark listening to the music and the sounds from across the street. We already were wishing it was next year so we could have this fun all over again.

My grandparents didn't have a car so we traveled a lot on the streetcar which we caught on Forest Street, half a block from their house. We would ride to downtown St. Paul and shop. The Woolworth dime-store was always one of our stops and grandmother would buy me a toy. However, there were times when I couldn't choose between two toys, so grandmother would buy me two gifts instead of one—things like plastic furniture for my doll house or play dishes.

Another streetcar trip took us to Calvary Cemetery to visit my great grandparents' graves. The trip always ended with ice cream at a drugstore on Front Street. Grandmother also took us to Como Park on the streetcar. There we would see the animals, visit the flower gardens and ride on the water bikes.

Half a block from her house was Hank's Grocery Store. When you entered the store, you could smell the freshly made Polish sausage. What intrigued me most was the Penny Candy Counter. Grandmother would give us money to spend on treats. Dennis, the financial saver, would never spend his money, but he always tagged along with me and, of course, I couldn't eat in front of my little brother.

My favorite candy was called "Buttons," which came in a long strip of white paper at only a penny a strip. We would sit on the curb outside of the store with our bare feet in the street eating those wonderful colored buttons. Sometimes we would buy little wax bottles filled with sweet

juice. After we drank the juice, we would chew the wax until it was soft and stuck to our teeth. When it was really hot, we would buy a bottle of grape pop, another favorite. In the end, Dennis had saved \$15 for a down payment on a new bike, and I received a second-hand bike from my older cousin.

Grandmother's basement had a fruit cellar full of her home canning. Next to it was the coal bin, which the men filled through a basement window. We loved to watch the coal come crashing down the chute from the open window. In the basement there was a wind up victrola. I would play one of the old records and roller skate around the basement.

Grandmother's attic was both fun and mysterious. I had a play area up there with my dolls and play furniture and I spent many happy hours there during the day. Yet at night, when I sometimes slept with grandmother, I covered my face with her feather tick because the door to the attic was in her bedroom. I wasn't sure what else might be in the attic and I never would have ventured up there at night.

About once a week the rag man came to grandmother's neighborhood with his horse and cart. A bell on his cart would jangle as this elderly man traveled down the alley crying out, "rags, rags, old rags, anyone." As a city child, the opportunity to see his horse was a great experience, but I often wondered what he did with all that junk piled up in his cart. One day grandfather was talking about what he should do after he retired from the Armour Meat Packing Plant, and with the innocence of a child I said, "Grandpa, you can be a rag man." He just sat there and laughed.

Christmas was a wonderful time of the year. Grandfather mounted the fresh tree on a wooden stand. Unlike today, the tree didn't sit in a container and you can imagine how dry it became without water by the end of the holiday season. We would trim the tree, and believe me, it would never have made the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*. What started as a neat arrangement of ornaments ended with us throwing the tinsel at the top of the tree.

On Christmas eve Santa came to my grandparents' house and gave us our presents. Dennis and I had to sing Christmas carols for him. We couldn't under-

Snapshots from a Family Album



Left: DeAnne Borndale Cherry, on the right, with her little brother, Dennis, and "Oswald" in their grandmother's back yard. Below: DeAnne and Dennis in the front yard of their grandparents' home at 915 E. Geranium. Bottom: The author with the dolls who lived in her grandmother's attic.



stand him because he spoke only Polish. The year my brother received a cork gun, my grandfather proved to be a sharpshooter. After imbibing some holiday spirits, grandfather used my parents' Christmas tree as a target. My brother and I cheered him on. By the time the fun was over, he had smashed about a dozen ornaments. My mother wasn't especially happy about this, and grandfather had to buy her a set of new ornaments.

Grandmother died at the age of sixty-one on February 20, 1951. Although grandfather kept the house for a few more years, it was never the same. Grandmother always seemed to put us first. I suppose today we would refer to that as our special bonding. After grandfather retired and I married and had children, we developed a special relationship of our own which lasted until he died at the age of ninety-four. However, that is another story.

DeAnne M. Cherry is College Center Coordinator of student activities for Lakewood Community College. Her hobby is family genealogy.





Saint Paul, Minn. Public Baths, Beach and Bathers, Harriet Island

The public baths, beaches and bathers at Harriet Island. Views of St. Paul's parks, as well as the city's vibrant downtown, were popular with postcard publishers, Robert J. Stumm observes in his article beginning on page 18.

R.C.H.S.
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