

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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A Field Engineer
And His Canadian
Travels

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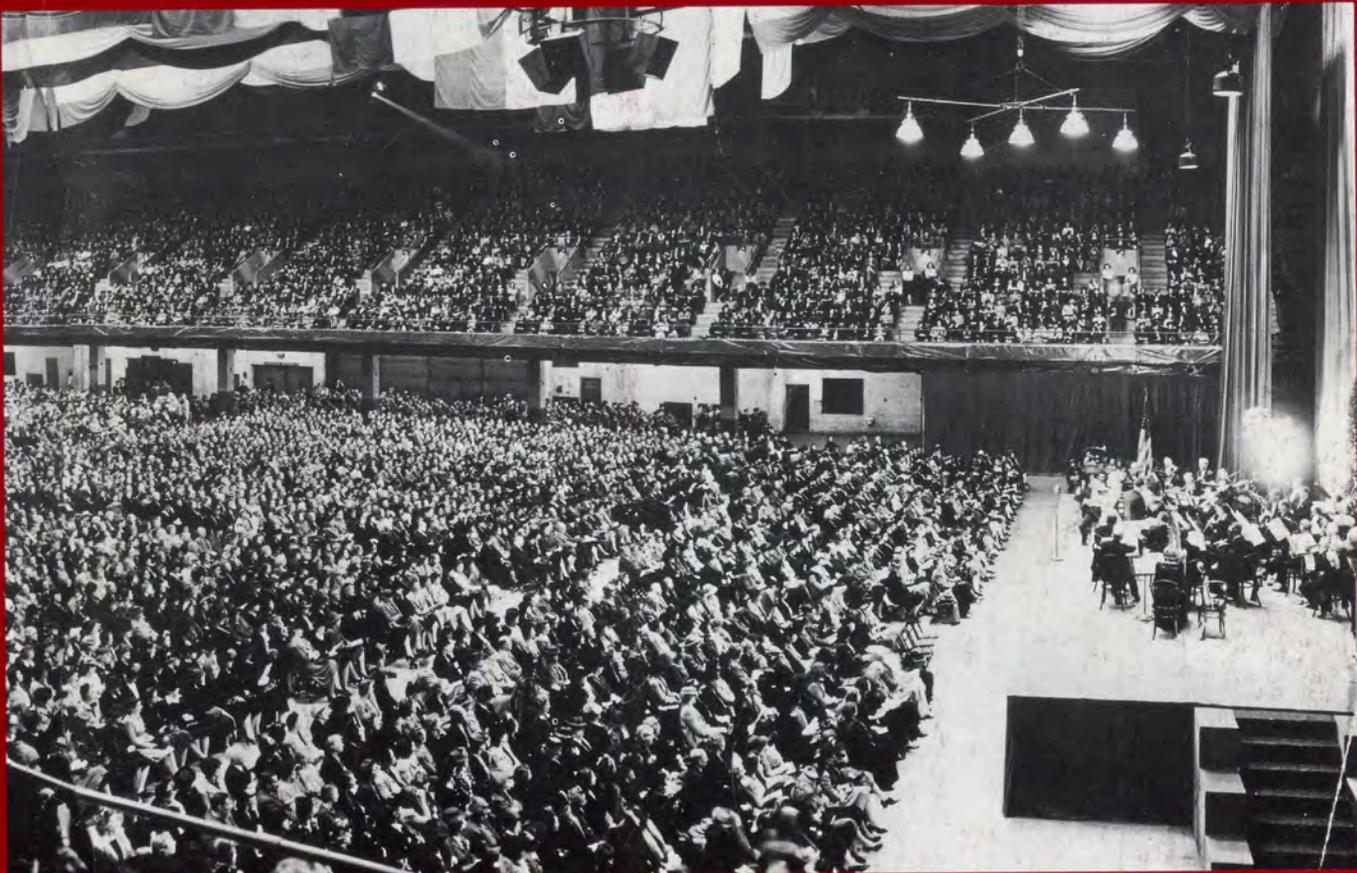
Fall, 1997

Volume 32, Number 3

The Women's Institute

And How It Revived Downtown St. Paul

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Orchestra and part of the crowd at a Women's Institute gathering in St. Paul in the early 1940s. Photo from the Women's Institute of St. Paul collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Few participants in the current discussion of how to rejuvenate downtown St. Paul are likely to know about or recall that a similar debate in 1939 served as the impetus for the founding of the Women's Institute. In the lead article in this issue of *Ramsey County History*, Kathleen Ridder explains how local women, who were leaders in the community launched the Women's Institute and initiated a program in cooperation with the city's political and business leaders that substantially revived downtown retail activity and promoted St. Paul's civic and cultural for thirty-two years.

This issue then moves to Robert Garland's account of his grandfather's experiences as a turn-of-the-century field engineer in western Canada for his St. Paul employer. Next, Rhoda Gilman takes us back to the first decades of this century to examine the role Emily Gilman Noyes played in the struggle for woman's suffrage. The Fall issue concludes with Muriel Mix Hawkins' bitter-sweet remembrance of growing up at St. Paul's Fish Hatchery in the 1920s and 1930s.

Although these articles span more than a century, and their subject matter ranges from politics, business, civic pride, and social reform to an intensely personal memory, each writer provides powerful evidence for the strength and vitality of the citizens of St. Paul and Ramsey County as they coped with the manifest changes that took place in their community during this time.

John M. Lindley, chair, Editorial Board

must have understood to be temporary, seemed to be wearing thin. He was missing family and friends. "I guess you have nearly forgotten me by this time, or have you been watching the depot for me returning. You see I am still under queen's protection and I am likely to be so for a while yet. If possible I will help you eat your Thanksgiving turkey at home, but I am not going to make any more promises. Now that the flies have all turned up their toes, the grub is a little more eatable[sic]."

The approach of winter, although positive as to the lack of flies, brought further difficulties. "Up to the first of this month, the street cars have stopped at 10 o'clock in the evening. Now they are running them to 11 o'clock, but they charge 10 cents from 10 to 11, -P.M. How is that for street car accommodations. Since I have been up here I have only bought a cap, a pair of mitts, a pair of rubbers and a suit of underwear—about 3 sizes too large."

All in all, the job of an 1890s field engineer was taking its toll. Finally, there must have been an ultimatum. "Mr. Waterous left for home today. I told Mr. Waterous before he left that he'll see me in St. Paul on the 15th (of December) or soon after and he must get someone to take my place before that or stand the consequence. He says he will have a man up here before that."

Rob's notes and letters end at this point. He continued with Waterous for a while, then performed similar work for the C. A. Stickney Company, another St. Paul gasoline engine manufacturer. However, he did not have long to live. After marrying in 1900, and starting one of St. Paul's early automobile dealerships, Rob died in December, 1905, of cerebral meningitis, leaving his widow and an infant son.

Robert F. Garland, a retired financial executive, is a lifelong resident of the Ramsey County area. His previous writings have appeared in various technical journals and in the Journal of Irreproducible Results. Derflinger, a novel, was published in 1978.

Life in 1937's 'Home of Tomorrow'

Brian McMahon

With its gabled roof line and vinyl siding, the house at 1345 East Minnehaha Street, St. Paul, fits in nicely with its neighbors. But when it was built in 1937 by Cemstone Products Company as a demonstration concrete house, it was described as "the most unusual home built in the Twin Cities this year." People lined up and paid 10 cents admission to see the "Home of Tomorrow." Sixty years ago the house had flat roofs, open decks, and a glass brick bay window, but a succession of owners and changing architectural styles have obscured the interesting history and appearance of this concept house.

Cemstone Products Company, Inc. was a small concrete block company founded by H. T. Becken in the garage of his home at 1603 Minnehaha Avenue. To promote the use of its products he designed and built this demonstration house, a popular means of educating the public about building innovations. Over the years, St. Paul has had a number of concept houses built by product manufacturers, including an "all steel" prefabricated house built in 1935, and a "New American Home" which grew out of a competition sponsored by General Electric, also built in 1935.

The Cemstone House, in a press release promoting the opening of the "Home of Tomorrow", described it as "... built entirely of concrete, ... patterned after a model shown at the Chicago Exposition (in 1934), and designed to show the superior features of cement as regards economy and practicability." It utilized "perfected cemstone building units" which were "... accurate in size and texture, and because of pressure in manufacture and the use of the latest and best machinery obtainable they are a harder and better unit with edges as smooth as cut stone."

Norma Entenmann was a young Cemstone employee in 1937 and was responsible for collecting the dimes from the approximately 200 people who lined up to see the house. "I was a secretary at Cemstone and had to work that Sunday. I

didn't get paid for it," she says, "but I did wind up with a husband." Vic Mohrlant stood in line and paid a dime to meet her, she recalls. After the opening, the building was occupied by the family of Mark English. Their son Earl remembers it as a "beautiful house which was very original in design." His parents had visited the Chicago Exposition of Progress, and had very "fashionable tastes." Because of ongoing problems with water leakage from the flat roofs, their occupancy was relatively short, and the house eventually was occupied by its builders from 1938 to 1945.

In the winter of that year, John Schulte was eight years old when his family bought the house. He fondly remembers his first holiday season and being able to plug in the lights of their first full size Christmas tree into an outlet in the fireplace mantle. Previously, John had been living with his parents and two older sisters in a refurbished garage in Maplewood.

The Schulte family history, with their determination to build for the future, reflected in many ways the forward looking nature of their new home. Before the family moved out of their garage home, they had managed to find the resources to send their oldest daughter Shirley to Macalaster College. In 1939, John's father, Clifford, took the bold step, during the depression years, of cashing in his life insurance policy to purchase the equipment needed to found the Modernistic Die Cutting Company. This family business is still thriving in St. Paul.

The Becken family also has prospered, as the third generation is now managing the family business. The company, which started in a garage, has now grown to over 700 employees, and is celebrating its seventieth anniversary. Becken and Schulte were hockey teammates from Harding High School.

Brian McMahon is an architectural historian, who recently organized the "Bungalows of the Twin Cities" exhibit sponsored by the Ramsey County Historical Society.



Logo of the Women's Institute of St. Paul, designed by Mrs. John S. Dalton. Photograph from the Women's Institute of St. Paul collection, Minnesota Historical Society.

R.C.H.S.
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