

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Volume 47, Number 3

*The Center of the Universe
for Car Buyers:
University Avenue Dominated
the Local Automotive Scene
for Fifty Years*

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Hands-On Historian:

Ethel Hall Stewart and Preserving the Gibbs Farm

Steven C. Trimble

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A 1970s postcard of the Gibbs Farm Museum, showing the east side of the Gibbs farmhouse at 2097 Larpenteur Avenue, alongside a photo of Ethel Hall Stewart from the 1950s. Photo of Ethel Hall Stewart from the Ramsey County Historical Society archives; Gibbs Farm Museum postcard courtesy of Steven C. Trimble.

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Until now, few people associated with the Ramsey County Historical Society knew much about the Society's origins. Some may have heard of Ethel Hall Stewart, but even they were not likely to know what role she played in the Society or how she was able to save the Gibbs Farm. Thanks to historian Steve Trimble, we know who Ethel Stewart was, the part she played in the creation of RCHS, and why she was so determined to preserve the Gibbs farm and turn it into a museum. From rural Ramsey County, we turn to University Avenue in the 1950s with Peter Myers's study of the auto and truck dealerships that once populated that busy thoroughfare. Joanne Englund then gives us an insightful memoir of growing up along University Avenue and how it's changed from her youth to a street that today bustles with all manner of new activity and questions centered on the impact of building light rail transportation there. In our concluding article, Mary Jo Richardson recounts how the alumnae of St. Joseph's Academy, which closed in 1971, keep the memory of their school alive and contributing to the health of our community.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

University Avenue: Then and Now

Joanne A. Englund

Standing on our windowed front porch in the warm afternoon winter sunshine, I was looking southwest when Grandma came up behind me wiping her hands on her multi-patched forever apron and said, “When we built this house in 1914, I could see from here all the way to the streetcar barns.” At almost age ten, this remark was like a lesson in ancient history to me. I looked around at the tall bare elms along the boulevard frozen in the snow and all the well-rooted older-than-me, two-story homes dotting both sides of the street at forty-foot intervals, and thought to myself, “They had to have been this way forever.” I could not imagine the flat, open vista Grandma had seen those twenty-five years earlier. The streetcar barns on Snelling and University Avenues were maybe a half-mile southwest of Grandma’s house. No way I could see them from here now. How could this be? What a primitive and long time ago that must have been, I thought.

I suppose it was primitive compared to today. I remember my dad saying to my mother, “Pa is going to have to stop driving before he has an accident. He can’t handle the wide streets and moves into the left lane to make a right turn on Snelling and University, the busiest intersection around.”

We knew about accidents on University Avenue. My mother’s fourteen-year-old cousin, Otilda Vang, exited the streetcar at the stop before her mother’s and was hit by a passing car and killed while her mother watched from the streetcar. And my uncle’s mother was also killed by a streetcar when he was thirteen. Uncle Fil once said to me, “I ran all the way from Temple Court to University; I couldn’t believe it. But it was too late.” She died in 1915; I don’t think he ever recovered. University Avenue and the streetcars took us where we wanted to go, and they also took some of us permanently away.

Even the April 9, 1915, *Milwaukee Sentinel* took note:

ST. PAUL, Minn., April 8 – Clarence J. Bush, engineer at the Hamline University on Thursday began serving an indeterminate sentence at the Stillwater prison, after being

found guilty of second degree murder. Last fall he drove an automobile past the right side of a street car as it stopped to unload passengers. He hit Otilda Vang, 14, and she died from the injuries. Several other persons have been killed in the same manner in the Twin Cities within a few months.

My dad joined the St. Paul Police Force in 1936, after the depression when all the

former politicians and police were replaced and the notorious gangster days were finally brought to an end. Among the many positions my dad held was the cop on the beat on Snelling and University Avenues. He worked the midnight shift, checking business doors to be sure they were locked and that no one had gained illegal entry.

Sometimes he would take me with him shopping on his time off during the day. He enjoyed greeting the store owners and introducing me. They always had a friendly comment and appreciated him. If we wanted to buy something, all the better. Dad knew I needed a pair of gloves and said to the owner, “Do you have any gloves that would fit Jo?” I got the nicest pair of leather gloves I ever owned at Hurley’s Men’s Store. My hands were too big for women’s gloves and these were a perfect fit.

Later, dad was promoted to a squad car, again in our neighborhood, and by the time I began Wilson High School in 1944, dad



Storefronts, including one for Lexington Drug (the former site of Desnick Bros. Drugstore) dominated the streetscape at University and Lexington Avenues in this January 1950 newspaper photo. St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



This photo from the 1940s of the marquee at the Prom Ballroom at 1190 University Avenue shows how popular it was, in part because it featured a different entertainer or musical group almost every night it was open for business. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

worked in the juvenile division. He knew a lot of the boys in my school by name, address, parents, siblings, and activities. I don't know how anyone could memorize so much. I'd mention a name and with a twinkle and a smile, he'd reply, "Yes, he lives at . . . and hangs around with . . ." filling in the blanks as he talked. Often, when I came up the steps at school, I'd hear someone from one end of the floor holler, "Does your dad work?" and someone from the other end reply, "Hell, no. He's a cop." I don't think I ever knew who spoke, but I figured that they knew my dad, maybe better than I did.

A group of kids often hung out at night at the Walgreen's and Snyder Brother's drug stores located on opposite corners of Snelling and University drinking Cokes and eating French fries. As we wandered around the corner from one store to the other, I'd often see Patrolman Turpin, who now walked the beat, and hear him say, "Hello, Joanne," as he walked by us. Nothing like standing out in a crowd. With mixed emotions of pride and embarrassment, I'd smile and quietly reply, "Hello." Often we wandered a few blocks north on Snelling on our way to Madelon's Ice Cream Shop. When some of the boys ran into the street and pulled the electric trolley arm from the over-

head wire, stopping the streetcar on the spot and requiring the conductor to come out and reconnect it, I was very glad that Patrolman Turpin was not around.

My Sunday school and confirmation classes were held at Bethlehem Lutheran Church about a block southwest of Snelling and University on the corner of Roy and Shields. I often walked alone to church and can still feel my childhood disappointment on a couple of Easter Sundays when I had to leave my new Easter dress,



University Avenue at the western edge of St. Paul. In case anyone wondered where the boundary between the two cities lay, a large illuminated sign, which is barely visible on the left, announced "SAINT PAUL CITY LIMITS" to travelers arriving from the east. St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

coat, shoes, and hat at home and wear my dismal winter garb a bit longer. Or I would stubbornly wear all my new spring clothes only to return home very cold, with wet feet and soggy new shoes. When it was time to be properly dressed for the confirmation ceremony, Mom and I walked to Midway Department Store on University just west of Snelling, and I got my first high-heeled shoes. Now, age thirteen with high heels underfoot, I was proud I could officially go in Walgreen's and buy and read *Thirteen* magazine, instead of pretending at age twelve.

We had a couple of movie theaters to choose from: the Hamline Theater, on University almost at Snelling, and the more modern and impressive Centre Theater, a mile east on University at Lexington Avenue. We stayed closer to home; many afternoons and evenings were spent at the Hamline Theater watching double features. I didn't like the newsreels about the war that preceded the movies and the cartoons that dehumanized the enemy. After the matinee, we'd stop at the corner café next door, put coins in the juke box, order something, and talk.

Some evenings I'd go to the theater with Grandma or Mom, sometimes the same day after the matinee. Grandma's journal says that on October 12, 1940, I went to the matinee and that night Grandma and I saw "The Boys from Syracuse" with Martha Raye and Rosemary Lane. Grandma had another mission as well as a movie on her mind. One-book-at-a-time was offered at a



This photo from 2011 shows a very different streetscape at the junction of Emerald and University Avenues. The old street-car wye is gone, but now tracks for light rail are being installed in their place and the former two- or three-story commercial buildings have been replaced by multi-story residential buildings. Photo by Joanne A. Englund. Photo courtesy of Joanne Englund.

discount with her ticket. By going weekly she completed her sets of the *Standard American Encyclopedia* and the *Book of Knowledge* at the discounted incentive price. These were some of my favorite childhood books as well as her *Harvard Classics* that she purchased the same year.

Along with the Centre Theater, Lexington and University also had Desnick Bros. Drug Store with its gleaming row of chrome-trimmed swivel stools along the counter, and Woolworth's spacious five and dime. Both of these impressive stores seemed pretty upscale to me. The southeast corner also once had a very popular baseball park that I never attended and a roller-skating rink that I thought was lots of fun. Earlier, it had been the lively Coliseum Pavilion dance hall. I wonder if my mother ever went there. By the time I was finishing high school, the elegant Prom Ballroom featuring the big bands had opened to the west. Although it didn't happen often, I loved looking my best and being escorted to the Prom Ballroom by my husband-to-be.

Central High School was around the corner with its very own football field. On cool fall evenings, while dried leaves burned in the backyards of the neighboring homes for blocks around and the smoke hung in the crisp air, we kids from surrounding high schools gathered there, made new friends, talked, watched football games, and cheered on our favorite players. For me, the walk home enclosed a magical space where people outdoors watched their dying fires, and my friends and I strolled through the chilled, hazy air and smell of leaves smoldering as darkness came and the night seeped in.

When I graduated from high school and started at the University of Minnesota, I lived at home. I often walked two miles west on University until I reached the city limits and then I took the streetcar the remaining half of the way. I'd reverse the process on the way home. The fare was ten cents, or one token, from either direction to the city limits—so I saved a dime each time I walked half way. Today, many of the substantial brick buildings that I passed then are still in use although with different operations within them. Much of the heavy industrial and warehouse use has changed to residential or social

service and educational programs. For me, Nash Coffee, Griggs Cooper, Louis F. Dow, Mack Truck, and International Harvester still haunt those bricks that now are home to other interests.

For a while in 1953, St. Paul operated busses and Minneapolis still used streetcars. Passengers had to transfer from one mode to the other at Emerald, the city limits, which is the corner west of my condo now. A wye track at this corner allowed

ally their used car lots moved to the suburbs. Manufacturing firms like Quality Envelope and Brown and Bigelow left, soon followed by Montgomery Ward and Old Home Cottage Cheese. In some of these empty spaces, new ventures showed up along with their own new buildings. Midway Bank built a new facility across the corner. A Perkins and a mini-mall replaced the streetcar barns. Another shopping center replaced Montgomery Wards.



To expedite delivery of a customer's order, whether for shipment elsewhere in the U.S. or to the customer-service desk at Montgomery Ward's mammoth building on University Avenue, the company fitted its clerks with roller skates so that little time was lost in transit between the warehouse and the internal sorting stations. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

the streetcars to turn onto Emerald, back up, and reverse directions. Eventually, all the streetcars were removed and replaced with busses. Traffic patterns were changed to favor automobiles, center islands and turn lanes were created instead of tracks. Year after year, paving bricks were covered with new layers of asphalt. And some traffic learned to pace its speed to match the changing stop lights.

That University Avenue is gone now. Much of the property used for streetcar barns stood vacant as it changed over to bus garages. Car and truck dealers that had lined University Avenue with their large glass display windows and floors, their maintenance garages, and eventu-

To my dismay, it was a pathetic substitution for the elegant original Wards with its tower and all the treasures it held and families it supported. Some lots still stand strangely vacant, waiting for an entrepreneur's new vision and opportunity. And, although unseen now, it is probably coming.

Now a new cycle is evolving. Installation of the new light rail transit system began in April 2011, in front of my condo. Since March first and even earlier, preparation work has been underway moving traffic signals, street lights, power lines, and communications connections to make way for the heavy-duty street removal and replacement. That is being followed by laying of the new rail



Baseball fans crowd into Lexington Park at the southwest corner of Lexington and University Avenues in this 1949 photo. In the background left, a streetcar heads east on University just in front of the Hassberder-Jones auto dealership on the north side of the street. Today the Hoa Bien Vietnamese Restaurant is at that location. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



Recent construction work for the installation of light rail on University Avenue uncovered these remnants of the streetcar tracks that once ran the length of this important roadway between St. Paul and Minneapolis. Photo by Joanne A. Englund. Photo courtesy of Joanne Englund.

tracks down the center of the street after both sides have been rebuilt and surfaced. My view of the changes blurs with past memories mixed with the new. And I wondered, “Were there still streetcar rails in that same center lane that had to be removed to install light rail?”

One day while walking along University, I crossed the city limits intersection at Emerald Street and noticed a curved silver line shining from under the scarified asphalt. The top of a streetcar rail gleamed like new as it wound slightly around the corner barely uncovered, but still there.

Part of the old wye turn-around I expect—to me, a view of two worlds in one.

In March, the sidewalk by my condo was divided by a six-foot-high cyclone fence, and a slow-moving semi divided the street by setting a row of large concrete barriers down the center. The traffic moved to the north while the south side was redeveloped. Much of the snow along the edges had been removed and the rest has melted away, leaving a desolate look to the construction site.



This photo from September 2011 looks east from 2650 University Avenue, just east of Berry, toward the Capitol. It shows how far the installation of light rail and a station platform has proceeded and also how much remains to be done before the system is fully operational in 2014. Photo by Joanne A. Englund. Photo courtesy of Joanne Englund.

By May, the two south lanes were totally gone. Asphalt, bricks, and soil were removed and, yes, piles of old streetcar rails have been hauled away, too. A deep valley was dug and new base material was added and rolled in preparation for a new surface to be installed. Spring arrived and the work continued. Fallen pink and white fruit-blossom petals decorated the ragged edges of the demolition—an odd touch of beauty to the harsh and rough exposures.

In the mid-1960s—when I-94 was built between the Cities a short distance south of University—it split the Rondo Street corridor and with it, the black community. Some of the black community relocated north of University and is now again feeling split in two. In the late 1900s, Vietnamese and Hmong immigrants opened shops and restaurants along University, replacing the previous businesses that had closed or moved to the suburbs. Now again, some businesses have shut their doors for a while or are leaving for new locations. Others are staying open, hoping that their customers will endure through the congestion and confusion. I will hold judgment about the value of this monumental change.

University Avenue has been a primary connection between our two cities—St. Paul and Minneapolis—for long over a century. Light rail will speed travel between these two centers. We will have to wait to learn what it will do to the row of small businesses and local communities that adjoin it all along its path, and to the drivers, bikers, and walkers who travel by and to them.

The next two years of construction will change the face of the street I know as home, but in many ways I think it will still be the same and will hold the energy of an ongoing and resourceful community in much the same way it has in the past. And to my grandchildren and their children, I expect that these changes will all seem to be just the way it always was.

This is Joanne A. Englund's fourth Growing Up in St. Paul in this magazine. A resident of the city who prior to her retirement worked in local government administration, she is also a past president of the Society and is currently a member of its board of directors.

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Summer nights at Porky's were a University Avenue tradition for nearly six decades. Ray Truelson opened the restaurant in 1953, and his future bride, Nora, began working there a few years later. For anyone who loved cars, cruising the avenue, and stopping at Porky's was the perfect way to spend an evening. The Truelson family sold the property in 2011 to Episcopal Homes, which is planning an expansion of its senior housing campus. Photo courtesy of Nora Truelson. For a nostalgic look at University Avenue as the center of the universe for car buyers for fifty years, see Peter B. Myers's article on page 13.