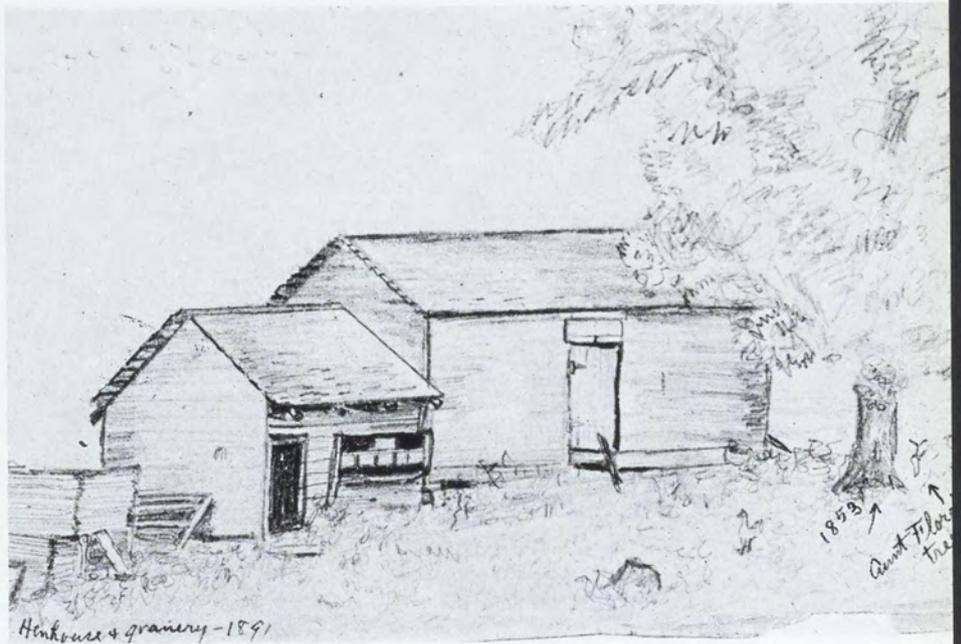
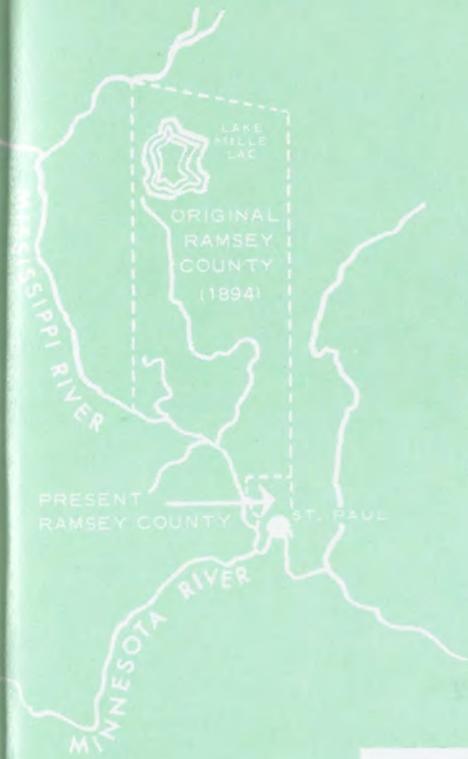


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tions. All articles and other editorial material
submitted will be carefully read and pub-
lished, if accepted, as space permits.

ON THE COVER: The old henhouse and granary which once stood behind the Gibbs farm house are long since gone but they are recaptured here in one of a series of charming pencil sketches made during the 1890s by Lillie Gibbs LeVesconte, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Heman Gibbs. Sometime during that decade, Lillie accompanied her mother on a trip back to Mrs. Gibbs' childhood home near Batavia, N. Y. In the days before cameras, Lillie LeVesconte, like so many other men and women of her era, took along her little sketchbook and produced her own pictorial record of the trip. More of her sketches accompany the story beginning on the opposite page. They are reproduced from the original sketchbook which now is owned by the Ramsey County Historical Society.



First home of Heman and Jane Gibbs was this claim cabin which was partially underground.

Sod Shanty on the Prairie

Story of a Pioneer Farmer

By WILLIAM L. CAVERT

THE GIBBS FARM HOUSE at 2097 Larpeur Avenue West is one of the few early Ramsey county farm houses that still is standing. Today it is maintained as a museum by the Ramsey County Historical Society.

The land upon which the museum stands was a part of 160 acres for which Heman R. Gibbs filed in 1849. The original document which granted the transfer of the land from the United States government to Gibbs is on display in the museum. It was signed by President Millard Fillmore and dated November 2, 1852.

It might be said that Gibbs was an early recipient of what we know today as "G.I.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: William L. Cavert grew up on a farm in Saratoga County, N. Y., and graduated from Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y., in 1912. He received his master's degree from the University of Minnesota in 1914 and his doctorate from the University in 1929. He was an instructor in farm management at the University from 1912 to 1914, and a farm management specialist in the University's Agricultural Extension Service from 1914 to 1934. From 1934 until his retirement in 1957, he was director of research for the Farm Credit Banks of St. Paul. He is a past president of the Ramsey County Historical Society and a member of its board of directors.

benefits." Although not a veteran himself, he acquired his land under an act of Congress, dated February 11, 1847, which provided that a soldier who had volunteered for the Mexican War was to be given his choice of a warrant for 160 acres of public lands or treasury scrip for \$100, drawing 6 per cent interest, until such time as the scrip might be redeemed by the government.

These warrants for land were transferable and the document at the museum indicates that the warrant issued to Henry Cosmitz of the First Pennsylvania Regiment had come into Gibbs' possession. There is no record now as to what Gibbs paid for the warrant but it likely was not more than \$1.25 per acre, since at that time any settler could buy up to 160 acres of government land, under the pre-emption act, at \$1.25 per acre. Pre-emption, which preceded the Homestead law of 1862, was a system under which settlers might buy not more than 160 acres of public lands after residing upon and improving them for at least six months.

The filing, by Gibbs, for his 160 acres of land was one of four made in Rose township in 1849. The other filings were by S. P. Folson, Lorenzo Hoyt (for whom Hoyt Avenue is named) and W. B. Quinn. The first three filings in the area already had

been made in 1843 by Isaac Rose, for whom the township is named; Stephen Denoyer and L. S. Furnell. A fourth filing was made in 1846 by Lewis Bryson. It is surprising that only one claim was filed in the township between 1843 and 1849.¹

The story of the early experience of Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs gives a picture of pioneer life in Ramsey County.

Heman R. Gibbs and Jane DeBow Stevens were married in Galena, Ill., in November, 1848. The question with them was, "Where are we going to live?" As the California gold rush was on, there was some thought of going to California. But Mrs. Gibbs had lived with a missionary family in Minnesota and liked that area. So they engaged passage to St. Paul on the steamship *War Eagle*. When they arrived in St. Paul in April of 1849, they had \$15 in cash.

They went at once to a hotel called the Temperance House (so-called because it had no saloon attached). The proprietor of the hotel was a man named Moffat who had kept a hotel in southwest Wisconsin. Gibbs had boarded with him while he worked in the lead mines there. Mrs. Gibbs worked in the hotel while Gibbs selected his claim and erected a claim shanty.² The shanty was eight feet by 12 feet and was largely underground. The roof was of sod. They undoubtedly were a bit crowded.

Gibbs built a wooden chimney so they could have a fire. One stormy day the chimney caught fire. Fortunately, they succeeded in knocking the chimney off the shanty and were able to put out the fire. Then, as it was not available in St. Paul or St. Anthony, Gibbs walked to Stillwater, about 17 miles away, to get a joint-and-a-half of stovepipe so they could be warm through the winter.

They lived in this small shanty until 1854-55 when a one-room house, built partly of tamarack logs cut in a nearby swamp, replaced the log cabin. This second house became the kitchen of the present Gibbs house which was built during the years 1867-69. The tamarack logs still can be seen in the ceiling of the kitchen.²

Gibbs' bride, Jane DeBow Stevens, was admirably suited to the life of the pioneer.

She had been raised by the Rev. and Mrs. J. D. Stevens, missionaries to the Sioux Indians at Lake Harriet, but she had been born in the vicinity of Batavia, N. Y., where her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Peter DeBow, kept the "Checkered Tavern."

She was brought west with the family of Mr. Stevens, a Presbyterian missionary, in the fall of 1834, when she was a child of six or seven years.

The Stevens family made the journey west to Chicago by covered wagon and thence by boat to Mackinac where they passed the winter. In the spring of 1835, they arrived at Fort Snelling and early in the summer took possession of the mission house that had been built for them on the shore of Lake Harriet. They were welcomed there by the Pond brothers, Samuel W. and Gideon H.³

An account of her life at the mission follows in part:

"She early became acquainted with the skin lodge or tepee, the sound of the paddle on the lake, the orgies of the feast on the return of the hunters in the spring, the death song, the war whoop and the sight of the painted, half-naked warrior. . . ."

"In the fall, the squaws and children harvested the corn, gathered nuts and rice, made their skin lodges snug for the winter, the men, in the meantime, being absent on the hunt. In the spring, they made a little dark colored maple sugar."⁴

Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs' own home also is described:

"The Gibbs place was on the trail between Lake Harriet and the other lakes, hunting grounds and marshes of the North, the fort [Fort Snelling] and the Indian agency to the Southeast. Mrs. Gibbs' knowledge of the Sioux language, her old acquaintance with the Indians and the attractions of the melon patch and turnip fields brought the Indians to the house frequently and in great numbers. She says she often counted as many as a hundred of them on the premises at one time. Returning from St. Paul, they were frequently the worse for liquor. . . ."

As Mrs. Gibbs was childless during the

first six years of her married life, she had leisure to be out-of-doors a good deal. She was a good marksman, which her husband was not, so she supplied the table with game in the way of prairie chickens, wild ducks and geese. Fish were so easily obtained that, as she put it, "It might have been fish, first, last and always."⁴

The extent of the wide open spaces in Minnesota at the time that Gibbs filed for his claim in 1849 may be appreciated by the fact that, as reported in the 1850 United States census, the total acreage of land in farms in Minnesota was only 28,881, or the equivalent of about one and one-quarter townships with the usual 36 sections or 36 square miles per township. And of this small acreage, less than one-fifth was classified as improved. Thus, most of the land that was included in farms hardly had been touched by the hand of man.

Another picture of the extent of the wide open spaces is afforded by the fact that while farming and transportation (except by steamboat, canoe or walking) were entirely dependent on horses and oxen, there were in Minnesota, according to the census, only 860 horses and 655 working oxen. Milch cows totaled only 740. The total production of corn, wheat, oats and barley in 1849 was 50,000 bushels, but by 1860 this had increased to 7.3 million bushels.

There is little recorded as to the early development of the Gibbs farm. Frank Gibbs, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Heman Gibbs, once recalled that when he was eight to 10 years old in 1870-72, cattle still were allowed to run at large in the area and it was his job to round up the Gibbs' cattle in the evening with an old horse named Bill.⁵

He remembered that in his youth there were wheat fields in what is now the St. Anthony Park section of St. Paul, fronting on Cleveland avenue and running to Commonwealth and Chelmsford, and that he helped with the harvesting.⁵ A chicken house and granary were not built on the Gibbs farm until the late 1870s, so perhaps there was not much need for grain storage up to that time.⁵

The perils of pioneer life were tragically illustrated by the loss of Willie Gibbs, the 11-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs,



The Checkered Tavern kept by Mrs. Gibbs' parents at Batavia was famed throughout the surrounding countryside for its checkerboard pattern, only partly sketched in here.

who died from exhaustion after fighting a prairie fire in one of the low-lying areas near the farm.⁶

The story of the Gibbs family and of other pioneer families offers quite a contrast to the affluent circumstances in which nearly all of us live today. But their lives also underscore the fact that acquiring land from the government by pre-emption or homesteading or a soldier's warrant was not an easy road to wealth, even when good land was secured within six miles of what was to become the state capital.

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THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue W., St. Paul, Minn.

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 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.

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.