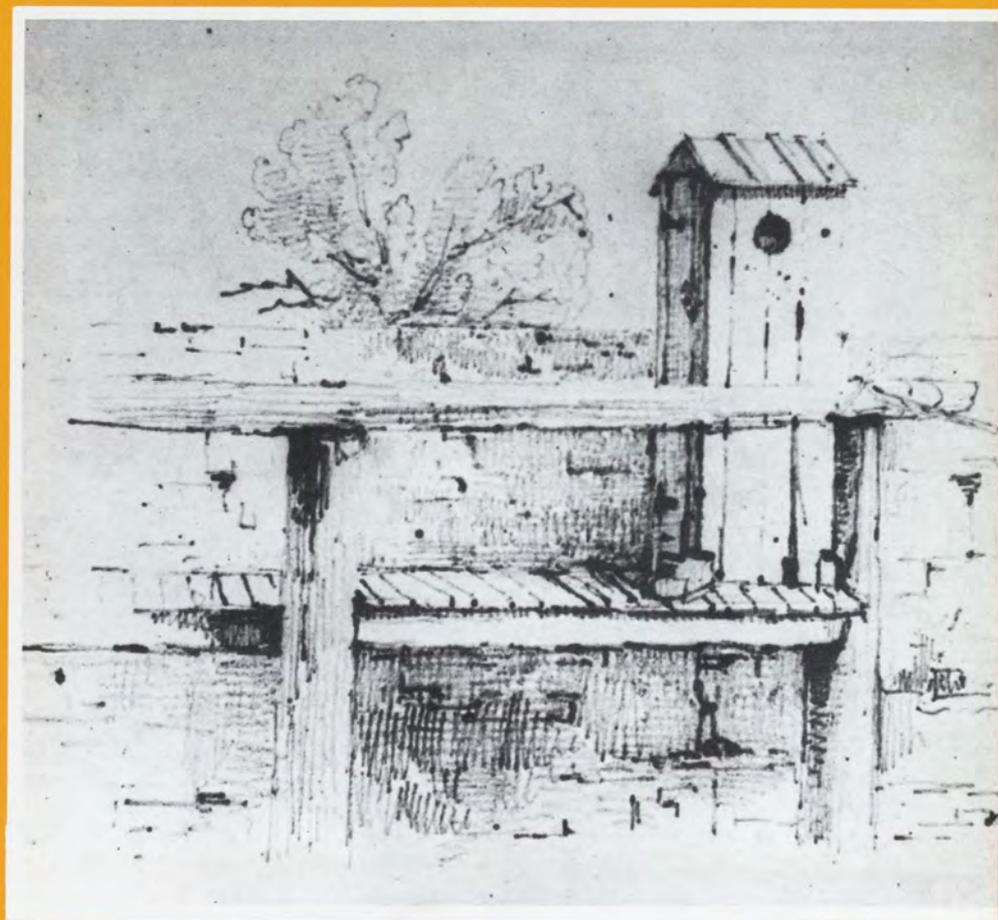


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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ON THE COVER: This sketch by Seth Eastman shows a sentry box at Fort Snelling. Eastman is known today as one of the great painters of the old Northwest and particularly the Mississippi river valley. What is not so well known is that he was an army officer who served four stints as commandant of Fort Snelling, then became a brigadier general after the outbreak of the Civil War.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Unless otherwise indicated, pictures in this issue are from the Picture Department of the Minnesota Historical Society. The editor is indebted to Eugene Becker and Dorothy Gimmestad for their help.

In this reminiscence left to the Ramsey County Historical Society, Lillie Gibbs LeVesconte recalls childhood years in her old home which now is the Society's Gibbs Farm Museum. She is shown at right with her brother, Frank, in a photograph taken during the late 1870's. They were the children of Mr. and Mrs. Heman Gibbs, who settled on the land and established their farm there in 1849.



*Summer Evenings,
A Smudge Kettle,
Tallow Candles -
And Farm Life Recalled*

By Lillie Gibbs LeVesconte

LIFE may have been strenuous back in the 1870's, but perhaps not for a light-hearted little sun-bonneted country girl who roamed the woods and the meadows with a barefoot boy, her brother.

What were summer evenings like? I remember our house, a large box-like house before the porch was built. Perhaps the dim light of a tallow candle flickered in the kitchen, but the light of our one kerosene lamp was extinguished soon after the last indoor work was finished. Lights would bring mosquitos into the house. Screens were unknown. Mosquito-netting draped one bedstead, a four-poster, but children had to "slap 'em."

Those were happy evenings; we gathered outside the house where the center of attraction was the smudge kettle. What is a smudge kettle? Any old kettle filled with dry sticks and cobs. After the fire was burning "smartly," some turf and green grass were thrown in to create the smudge or thick

smoke. Our parents would draw up their chairs, or old boxes that were used for chairs, and one could have a choice — sit in the smoke or switch the mosquitoes away with a leafy switch. I thought it great fun to jump through the smoke and sometimes over the kettle, while the hired man played mournful tunes on his accordion.

A few bats would wing their way mosquito-catching and the night hawks made a weird booming sound as they swooped low toward the ground. There was the far away sound of the whippoorwill; sometimes it wasn't so far away, but I never could see one. Lightning bugs were plentiful and so easily carried about for awhile.

It was exciting to have a storm at night — one with thunder and lightning. Our family would scurry about closing windows, bringing in milkpans and caring for little chickens that might drown. How well I remember the night the lightning struck our house. Bang! and a great ball of fire and



smoke came through the window and rolled past my bed.

"Did somebody shoot a gun?" I whimpered. "Children, are you all right?" That was my father's voice. Assured of our safety he wondered about "fire in the garret." The hired man had leaped from his bed; now he made another leap toward the ceiling where a square opening led to the garret. Somehow he caught and held on and drew himself up.

"No fire up here," he reported. So we trotted about assessing the damages, all the while looking funny in very short night shirts.

"My pretty white curtains are all soot now," exclaimed my sister, Abbie.

"It's broken my yeast jar and I was going to mix bread in the morning," said my mother, looking in dismay at her "rising" streaming over the floor.

The lightning had followed the stovepipe, and entered the cellar where it cut a groove along one of the joists and knocked out a foundation stone. The events of that night brought visitors to see and to hear the story. Lightning agents came, too, tacked strips of

In the late 1870's when this picture was taken, the Gibbs' farm house was surrounded by open prairie and farm land. Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs are seated at right. The author's sister, Abby, is seated at left, with Frank and Lillie behind her. This photograph is from the picture collection of the Ramsey County Historical Society. On the opposite page is the Gibbs House as it appears today.

copper flat against the house, and, with other contraptions, assured us they had made us safe from lightning.

I like to think of winter evenings. Our sitting room was heated by a little stove that somehow reminded me of the front of a church. We burned grubs. Land was being cleared of trees in those days. The part of a tree stump that must be dug out of the ground was called a grub. Our stove would hold four or five small grubs, dropped in from the top. Whoever filled the stove had to be followed by someone with a broom and dustpan — the only way to keep a floor clean, when grubs were being used for fuel.

As the days grew longer and snow banks settled, Mother would say, "It's time to steep the herbs and make root beer." Herbs stored during the summer months would be brought out and steeped; yellowdock, blackroot, dandelion-root and cherry-bark, with parched corn to "give it body." I gave but little attention to the process of making the bitter drink and always asked, "Why? It's like medicine and there's nobody sick."

Mother's face would show determination and she would say, "Everyone needs to have a cleansing out in the spring." While we made faces, we dutifully took our medicine.

One event each April which always interested children was the night chosen to "burn around." We listened with interest while the grownups discussed the direction of the wind or the fact of no wind. "Burning around" consisted of creating a blackened strip between our field and the poplar grove, now the University of Minnesota's golf course. A pail of water had to be carried, along with several wet burlap sacks. It was a joy to watch the racing flames in the surrounding darkness. I felt regret when the last flickering flame was beaten out.

Every little pond on the home farm had a name. We had Water Lake, Mud Lake, and Swimming Lake. The rise of ground above Swimming Lake was called Snake Hill, though I never saw a snake there. How well we knew the Indian Trail! I liked to draw on my imagination, repeating to myself "Once an Indian walked here swinging his gun this way."

Narrow and deep indentations could be traced on either side of the trail; that was where the ridgepoles dragged from the sides of the Indian ponies. At that time, less than 15 years had passed since the Indians had

left their land to the encroaching whites. I remember stories of the Sioux Outbreak of 1862. A red brick house at the southeast corner of Lake Como was to have been used as a fort if the Indians attacked St. Paul.

Quite clear in my memory are some of the events of the summer of 1876. I recall the gravity and anxiety in my father's face as he told someone, "No news from Custer." Then there was the dismay when the word came, "All wiped out." There followed many discussions about Custer and his leadership and I would hear, "He should have waited for Benteen."

I witnessed a closing event connected with that tragic trouble with the Indians. Early in the spring of 1877, while visiting a friend whose home was near University Avenue, someone opened the door and called, "The ponies are coming." Evidently something exciting was expected, for we all ran to see. We raced through short underbrush and came out on an elevation that gave us an unobstructed view of University Avenue and (to me) a most astonishing sight. The road, as far as one could see, was filled with Indian ponies with, here and there a blanketed Indian. The cavalcade, which had come from Montana, moved on toward St. Paul.

The sight was a novelty and one not seen before or since on University Avenue. After the Custer massacre, the government punished the Indians by taking away their ponies. Let history record that — I only write of the Indians and the ponies that passed by on that day in 1877.

OVERLEAF: The old Indian trail superimposed on a modern map of the area, with directions for following it. By Edward J. Lettermann, curator, Gibbs Farm Museum.





THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.

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. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

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.