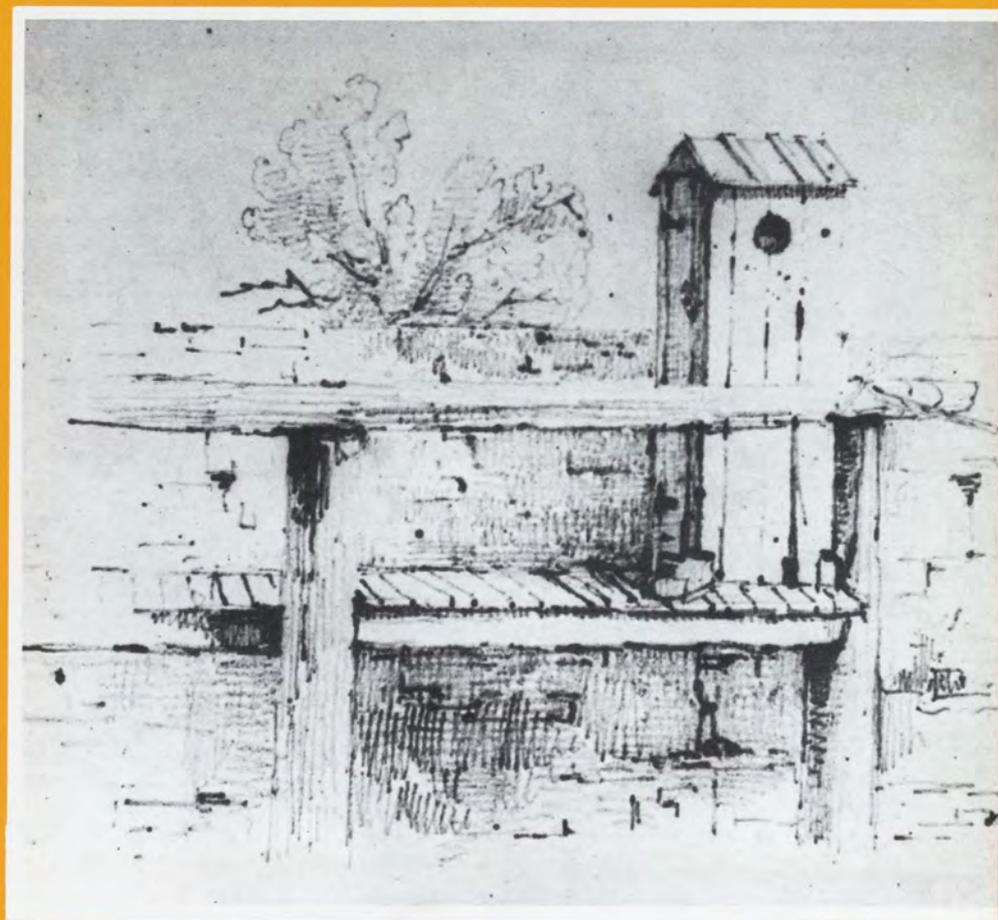


# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Spring

1969

Volume 6

Number 1

# Ramsey County History

*Published by the* RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

	Fort Snelling — 'Hardship Post'	Page 3
Spring	Colonel Snelling's Journal	Page 9
1969	Picturesque St. Paul	Pages 12-13
Volume 6	The Old Lake Como Road	Page 14
Number 1	Forgotten Pioneers . . . VII	Page 17
	A Farm Home Recalled	Page 19
	Indian Trail Map	Page 22

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY is published semi-annually and copyrighted, 1969, by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota. Membership in the Society carries with it a subscription to Ramsey County History. Single issues sell for \$1.00. Correspondence concerning contributions should be addressed to the editor. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Manuscripts and other editorial material are welcomed but, since the Society is an eleemosynary institution, no payment can be made for contributions. All articles and other editorial material submitted will be carefully read and published, if accepted, as space permits.

*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.



*EDITOR'S NOTE: As early as the 1850's, Lake Como was one of the beauty spots of Ramsey County sought out both by St. Paul residents and visitors to the growing city. A canny pioneer, Henry McKenty, realized the possibilities the lovely lake offered as a resort area and as a place, not too far out of town, where residents might build summer homes. The following story is another of the Junior Pioneer Association's fascinating collection of monographs concerning the history of St. Paul and Ramsey County. McKenty's own house on Lake Como is shown at left after it had become the home of John X. Davidson. It is Davidson and his family who are shown on the spacious lawn.*

## The Enterprising Salesman And The Old Road to Lake Como

**R**EAL ESTATE MEN, as a rule, are energetic salesmen, and Henry McKenty was without doubt one of the greatest. Arriving in St. Paul about 1853, just in time for the first real estate boom, he bought and sold land at a fast pace, and became wealthy. He foresaw that, in time, there would be a demand for lake homes, so he acquired most of the land around Lake Como and laid out several plats on the east end of the lake.

There was no road to the lake at that time, so without bothering about formalities, McKenty, at his own expense, hired contractor John Bell to build a road. The road started at Rice and Rondo and followed a slightly zigzag course in a northwesterly direction, crossing approximately what is now Thomas and Western, and running about 100 feet north of Dale and Minnehaha. It continued to about a line with St. Albans, then turned almost directly north on a line close to the present east boundary of Calvary Cemetery, circling east and north of Weber's Pond (a mudhole most

oldtimers will remember, between Como and Front, about a block west of Dale) and then to the east end of the lake.

An alley behind the houses from 730 Como to 800 Como and the stub of Como Place which crosses the railroad tracks, marked the remnants of the old Como Road. It was finished in September, 1857, the same year the old brick hotel was built at the east end of the lake. In a few years there were two more hotels. McKenty provided some boats, including two which were classed as "yachts," and stocked the lake with fish. A 20-pound pickerel was caught at Lake Como in 1866.

BY 1863, J. C. Burbank was running an omnibus to the lake three evenings a week during the summer for the public. The round trip was 50 cents. Later, livery men had a hack stand near the road. On one occasion the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* complained that the boys in charge of the rigs were indulging in races on the road when business was slack. Shooting matches, rowing regattas and other festivities also were held at the lake.

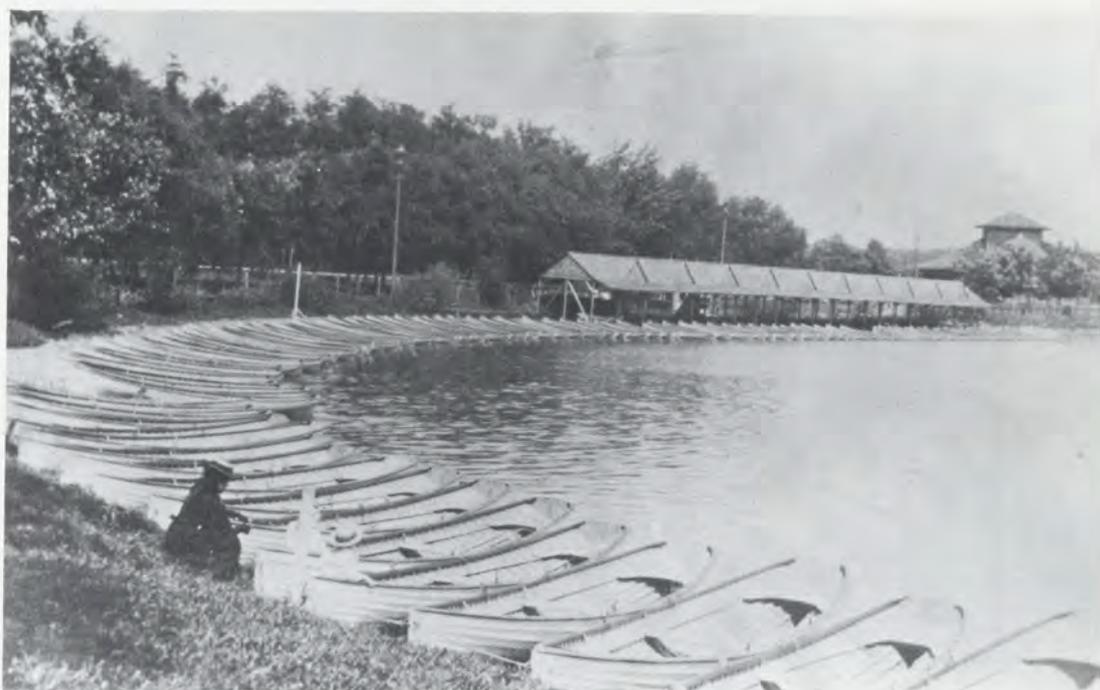


The newspapers frequently mentioned the traffic congestion on the road. Train service started on what is now the Great Northern Railway on June 28, 1862, and just a little more than a year later the first crossing fatality in Minnesota took place on the Como Road crossing. On July 3, 1863, Captain Bennet drove his wagon onto the track at 6 a.m.,

**The road around Lake Como looked like this during the 1880's. At left, a sailboat is about to leave its dock on the lake. That was an era when both sailors and spectators (male persuasion) apparently were customarily top-hatted.**

just in time to be struck by the train, and was killed. There had been some talk of building a bridge at this point, and Bennet, who lived near the crossing, had been one of the opponents. A bridge was built about 1868.

McKENTY DID NOT own the land which the road traversed, but everyone wanted roads, and apparently the owners of the land did not object. Before long the road was accepted as a county road and homes were built. The 1870 St. Paul Directory listed the address of many persons as "Como Road"; however, no house numbers were used, so it would be difficult to find them now. In the 1870's, streets were cut through west from Rice, and the area laid



Dozens of boats lining Lake Como's shore testify to the fact that an opportunity to get out on the lake was one of the great attractions of Lake Como during the 1870's. At left, a young girl looks pensively out across the lake from a row boat while behind her is one of a number of resort hotels which were built on the lake after the Civil War.

out in lots. The new owners fenced off their property where the road went through it, and defied the city authorities to do anything about it. The battle lasted for several years, and finally the city conceded it had no legal right to the land.

By 1877, all traces of the road between Rondo and University Avenue had disappeared. The houses had been torn down or moved to new locations, except for three at Ravoux and St. Anthony, and three at Cathedral Place and Fuller. These remained standing "on the bias" until 1954, when they

were torn down for the Western Redevelopment project.

The rest of the road was in poor condition, and by the late 1870s, the public was demanding that something be done. J. S. Sewell, city engineer, wanted to repair the old road from University to Lake Como. The Chamber of Commerce derisively termed the road the "Swamp Route," and suggested a new road on the line of the present Como Avenue from Rice Street to the lake. The council adopted this plan on February 21, 1878.

McKenty, in poor health and despondent, had committed suicide on August 10, 1869, but the county belatedly voted his widow \$5,000 in bonds as a repayment for his expenditures on the road. A street in the Como district was named for McKenty, but in 1940 the name was changed to West Jessamine.



### 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.