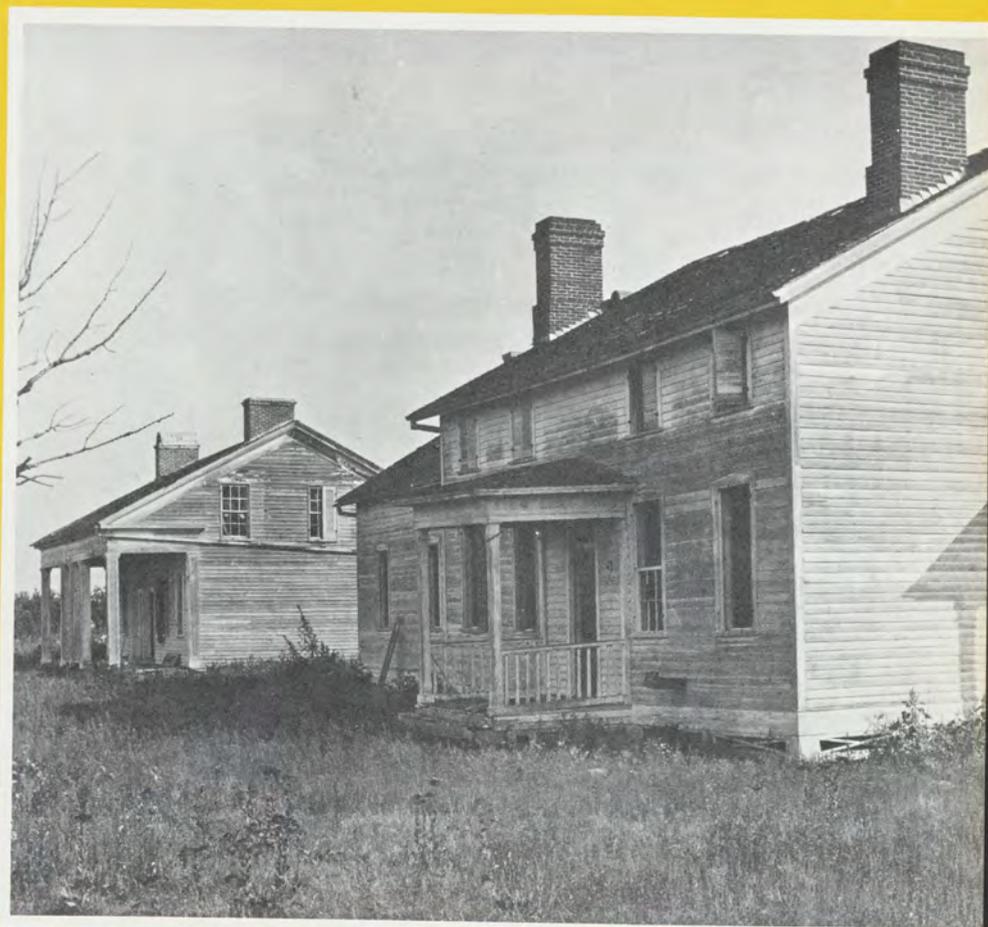


RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Spring

1971

Volume 8

Number 1

Ramsey County History

Published by the RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Editor: Virginia Brainard Kunz

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ON THE COVER: The officers quarters at Fort Ripley had long since been deserted when Edward A. Bromley, the Minneapolis photographer and collector published this brooding picture of the old fort in 1906. He may have taken the picture himself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Unless otherwise indicated, pictures used in this issue are from the audiovisual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The editor is indebted to Eugene Becker and Dorothy Gimmestad, of the state historical society's audiovisual staff, for their help.

Social Calls Without a Bonnet!

Park Residents Set Their Own Rules

BY DOROTHY HOZZA

IRVINE PARK today is a square block of untrimmed trees, scraggly bushes and worn down grass surrounded by deteriorating houses, small industries and grain elevators. The little park virtually has been forgotten.

But almost 100 years ago, the park, one of the three oldest parks in St. Paul, was the center of a residential area which rivaled Summit Avenue in gracious living, spacious homes, wide, tree-shaded lawns, and a cluster of residents whose names still are important in the history of the county and the state — Ramsey, Bigelow, Langford.

The public square was donated to the young village of St. Paul in 1849 by John R. Irvine, one of St. Paul's earliest land speculators. Irvine's land was near what is now Seven Corners and south of today's West Seventh Street — the road linking St. Paul with Fort Snelling. The park stood on the bluff above the now-vanished Upper Landing at the foot of Chestnut Street. The park and the homes surrounding it once overlooked the Mississippi River the West Side, a view now blocked by the grain elevators.

FOR THE next decade, there were few homes in the Irvine Park area bounded now by Eagle, Wilkin, West Seventh Street and the river bluff. At that time, most families clustered around the Upper and Lower Landings, the two steamboat docking areas for river traffic. St. Paul was still small, and during the 1850's the land west of St. Peter Street, including that surrounding the park, had just been incorporated into the city limits. But the city was expanding rapidly and a rivalry began between "lower town" and the Irvine Park and Seven Corners area.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dorothy Hozza is studying for a master's degree in urban journalism at the University of Minnesota. A graduate of Carleton College, where she majored in history, she received a master's degree in Russian history from the University of North Carolina. She also has been a technical writer.

The first drygoods store was built on Eagle Street near Irvine Park, and John Irvine ran a lumber mill nearby, in the upper part of the town. But eventually, "lower town," around Jackson and Fourth Street, attracted more business because the Lower Landing became the principle steamboat landing, especially for the major river traffic up and down the Mississippi. By 1860, the commercial center of St. Paul was established where it still is today.¹

Within a few years, the area around Irvine Park had become a lovely residential area where some of St. Paul's most prosperous men built their homes. Henry L. Moss, a young lawyer from Stillwater, was typical of the men who moved with their families into the area. In 1850, he brought his new wife, a teacher and missionary, from Stillwater to St. Paul. They built a house on Exchange where they lived for 50 years.

ANOTHER EARLY settler was Abram Elfelt who, with his three brothers, owned the first drygoods store. The first Jewish family in St. Paul, they had come west from Philadelphia. In 1851, they built a new store at Third and Exchange, and Abram built a home for his bride on the west side of Irvine Park. Abram organized the original St. Paul Board of Trade.²

Horace Bigelow, a prosperous lawyer; Joseph Forepaugh, a drygoods merchant, and William Spencer, a lawyer and real estate broker, were other early residents of the area. Only Spencer's house remains today.

By the 1870's, development of the Irvine Park area was complete. St. Paul was growing rapidly and many new houses were built near the park where life was peaceful and gracious, almost suburban in character. No road passed through the park itself, and thus it was protected from the city surrounding it.

"THE FAMILIES who lived there made their own laws, socially speaking, and established their own social customs," recalled

Alice Monfort Dunn, a frequent visitor in the area during the 1880's. "It was well understood that within the park precincts, no lady need put on her bonnet to make a friendly call. She might, if she chose, even wear her sewing apron. Without fear of censure or disapproving glances, she could tie up her head in a kerchief when she sat in the park or visited across the nearest back fence."³

The young men who had built their homes around Irvine Park when the park was on the outskirts of town were older and well-established by the time the city had grown up around their homes. In addition, other prosperous men had moved into the area. Governor Ramsey built his Mansion House, as he called it, on Exchange, and the older house which stood on that site was moved across the street to become part of the Bigelow mansion.

The houses were large and comfortable. Most of them were two-and-a-half stories high. Third stories had dormer windows that looked out over the city and the river. The park itself was, and is, small, but many trees and shrubs were planted there. In the center was a large fountain similar to those in other city parks during the last decades of the nineteenth century. (Not one of these fountains remains today.)

ACROSS FROM the Ramsey House was the Forepaugh home which had large gardens all around it. Two new houses built on

St. Paul in 1857, looking west from Third Street toward Irvine Park. This view is typical of the growing city, with its half-finished buildings, piles of lumber and dirt streets.



the edge of the park were the Wright-Prendergast house and the home of Henry J. Horn. Both houses still are standing today on the south side of the park near the bluff.

Many of the residents were the down-to-earth kind of men and women one might expect to be pioneers in a new town. Two of them were newspapermen — Henry Carver, owner of the *Pioneer*, and Frederick Driscoll, business manager of the *Press*. The two papers were political rivals but eventually merged, to become the *Pioneer Press*, a Republican paper.

"Harry" Horn was another one of Irvine Park's contingent of lawyers. He belonged "to the old school of lawyers of common sense, and not to [the group that favored] the glittering generalities of the new-fangled modern devotees of Blackstone," wrote T. M. Newson.⁴

A clergyman lived there, also — Dr. David Riddle Breed. From 1870 to 1885, he lived beside the park and across the street from the Bigelow mansion. Dr. Breed was a Presbyterian minister and pastor of the House of Hope church.

The most colorful resident of the area was Nathaniel Pitt Langford. He is credited with having discovered the Yellowstone geysers in 1870 during the Washburn expedition into the park area. He then served for five years as the first superintendent of Yellowstone National Park. In that time he guarded Yellowstone against exploitation by land speculators and helped establish its permanent status as a national possession.



The Wright-Prendergast House, just off Irvine Park, built in 1864 by Isaac P. Wright, and added on to in 1905 by James J. Prendergast.

EARLIER IN his career, Langford had served as a revenue collector in Montana during the territory's years of wide-open mining towns. Much of his time was spent protecting gold transports from bandits.

Around 1875, Langford built a home near Irvine Park and retired to a less exciting life. He entertained younger residents with tales of his adventures.

"His descriptions of holdups and his stories of foiling villains were far more fascinating than any movie thriller," Mrs. Dunn recalled.⁵

After the turn of the century, most of the original Irvine Park families moved to other parts of the city. Only the older residents remained. Some of the younger generation moved to the more fashionable neighborhoods, such as Summit Avenue.

In the 1880's some apartment buildings and duplexes were built on the east side of the park. These buildings remain today but are delapidated. Many of the other buildings still there date from the 1860's and 1870's, but the area has been deserted by the more prosperous and the houses divided up for boarders. The fountain has disappeared from the park and the trees and shrubs no longer are trimmed.

THE VIEW of the Mississippi is blocked by grain elevators, and a roofing company occupies one side of the park. Another light industry occupies the site of the Bigelow and Moss homes on Exchange. The wrought iron fences and the steps into the park all have disappeared.

Still, Irvine Park retains some of its former grandeur. For an area so close to downtown, it has the charm of an old, secluded residential neighborhood. Paint is peeling from many of the houses but they remain as relics of one of the boom eras of St. Paul.

Today Irvine Park is threatened by encroaching industry, demolition for urban renewal, and neglect — as many other parts of St. Paul have been before it. As long ago as 1915, St. Paul residents such as Mrs. Rebecca Marshall Cathcart were regretting the destruction of old buildings in the name of progress.

She wrote then: "It is sad for us pioneers to see building after building demolished which rendered such service in the early days."⁶

Footnotes

1. Henry S. Fairchild, "Sketches of the Early History of Real Estate in St. Paul." *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1904, Volume X, pages 434-436.
2. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Jews in Minnesota*. New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1959, page 12.
3. Alice Monfort Dunn, "Peoples and Places in Old St. Paul." *Minnesota History*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, Spring, 1952, Volume 33, Number 1, pages 3-4.
4. Thomas M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minn.* St. Paul, 1886, page 512.
5. Alice Monfort Dunn, *op. cit.*
6. Rebecca Marshall Cathcart, "A Sheaf of Remembrances." *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, Spring, 1915, Volume XV, page 543.

Cut-glass chandeliers, ornate clock and carved mirror in the Wright-Prendergast house.





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.