



# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



Spring

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# Ramsey County History

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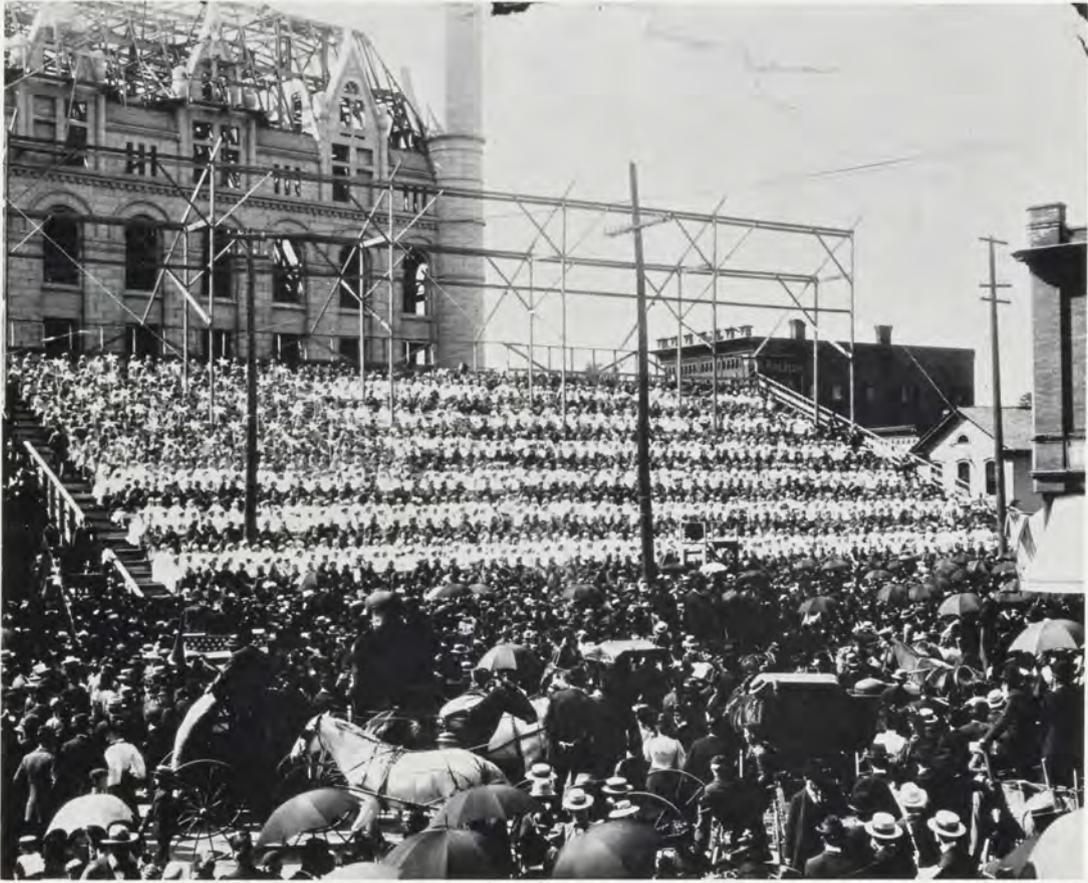
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*ON THE COVER: He swings — and misses — in practice at Lexington Park, home of the St. Paul Saints from 1910 to 1956.*

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The Markoe coat of arms on page 3 and the picture of Abraham Markoe on page 4 are from an article by F. W. Leach, "Old Philadelphia Families — XVI: Markoe," September 22, 1907, North American, published in Philadelphia. All other pictures in this issue are from the audio-visual department of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.*



St. Paul youngsters form a "living flag" against a backdrop of the Old Federal Courts Building, still under construction.

## *The First "Living Flag"*

By MRS. GEORGE R. BECKER  
with GEORGE REA

The city of St. Paul, Minnesota, it is believed, was the first in the United States to make use of a living flag.

The recent acquisition of the Old Federal Courts Building by the city has recalled to mind an incident in which the building was used for the setting for such a living flag.

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mrs. George R. Becker, 514 Humbolt Avenue, St. Paul, is a long-time member of both the Ramsey County Historical Society and the Minnesota Historical Society. She told the story of the living flag to another Ramsey County Historical Society member, George R. Rea, who collaborated with her in writing this account for Ramsey County History.*

even before the building was completed.

In August and September, 1896, there was held in St. Paul a national encampment of the veterans of the War Between the States — the Grand Army of the Republic, or, the G.A.R. It was arranged that the veterans would parade in front of the living flag as part of the celebration.

At that time, only the exterior of the Old Federal Courts Building was completed and work was continuing on the interior. The veterans marched down Sixth Street (from west to east) and passed by the living flag

during the course of the parade.

This living flag consisted of a group of public school children who were dressed in costume, and who sang marching songs which were well-known to the Union

soldiers. The school children sat on a large wooden plank platform of 26 steps, two for each stripe of the flag. The red and white stripes of the flag were formed by the colors of the uniforms of schoolgirls dressed in white or red bunting. They sat in two horizontal rows of alternate red and white costumes. The uniforms were skirts which extended to their calves, and capes which covered the girls' arms and extended from their necks to their knees. Each girl also wore a Liberty cap of the same color and material as her costume.

THE BLUE BACKGROUND of the stars was composed of school boys dressed in blue capes and caps. The 45 stars, which represented the number of states in 1896, were made of heavy cardboard and painted with silver paint. These stars were quite large, at least three feet in height and width, and were nailed to uprights properly placed.

Professor C. H. Congdon, who was supervisor of music for the St. Paul Public Schools at the time, took charge of the singing. For several months before the parade, he had the school children practice the songs, which included "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," "Tenting Tonight," and "Columbia, The Gem of the Ocean," and similar songs.

To show the pupils how to sing in time with the marching, Professor Congdon used to march up and down in front of the classes at the various schools, waving his hands and keeping time, with his right foot stamping the downbeat. His enthusiasm was infectious and the songs were performed with great spirit. He undoubtedly wanted to have the children sing as loudly as they could, because the volume of the music would be less in the open air than it was in the enclosed space of a school hall.

After the parade, the living flag was disbanded and never used again, although smaller groups of the singers sometimes gave recitals under the direction of Profes-

sor Congdon. This select group of singers from the schools on several occasions sang at the St. Paul Auditorium, then located between Robert and Minnesota, and Eighth

and Ninth Streets. The outside of this Auditorium was made of rough wood boards and the exterior walls were thin enough to allow the alarm calls of the Central Fire Station next door to be heard. The station had a call board of bells which sounded whenever a call was made to any of the other local fire stations throughout the city.

On one occasion this central alarm system almost caused a disaster. Professor Congdon was leading a group of the school children in a concert when the bells rang in the Central Fire Station. A boy, who was seated in the audience, exclaimed, "Fire!!" Immediately there was the start of a panic in the auditorium. People jumped up and started scrambling toward the exits.

Fortunately, Professor Congdon quickly turned around and shouted, "Sit down! Sit down! There is no fire!" and his prompt action stopped what otherwise might have turned into a catastrophe. The audience returned to the seats and the concert was resumed.

Undoubtedly when the veterans who had been in the parade returned to their homes, they described the living flag, and it was copied in various places, not only in Minnesota, but throughout the United States.

It is not known who paid for the lumber for the platform, or the bunting for the dresses or capes worn by the girls and boys, but these expenses were probably included in the general budget for the parade arrangements. Perhaps some of the expense was borne by the Womans' Relief Corps. Also, the mothers of the children most likely sewed the garments and Liberty caps, as almost all women were adept in the use of the needle because at that time, most dressmaking was done at home.

In view of the 200th anniversary of the United States, in 1976, some committees who are in charge of local arrangements for celebrating the event might want to make use of the living flag during the celebration.



### 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.