

RAMSEY COUNTY
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The 'Fighting Saint' —
The *U.S.S. St. Paul* and Its Minnesota Connection *Page 4*



Women from the Yokosuka, Japan, Folk Dance Association perform Japanese folk dances for U. S. S. St. Paul crewmembers as the heavy cruiser prepares to leave Yokosuka for the United States on July 6, 1962. See article beginning on page 4.

D-Day Remembered By Seven Who Were There

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RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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A Message from the Editorial Board

The Ramsey County Historical Society recently lost a loyal and long-time supporter when Lester B. LeVesconte, a grandson of Heman and Jane Gibbs, died in Illinois. In 1849 the Gibbs family established the pioneer farmstead that today we know as the Gibbs Farm Museum. Lester LeVesconte, whose mother was the Gibbs's daughter, Lillie, was instrumental in working out in 1949 the arrangements by which the Gibbs farm became a museum under the auspices of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

The Society's debt to Lester LeVesconte extends beyond the Gibbs Farm Museum because over many years Mr. LeVesconte actively promoted the publication of historical material about the Gibbs family and Ramsey County. Thus he helped support financially the Society's publication of his mother's book, *Little Bird That Was Caught*, about Jane Gibbs's experiences as a young pioneer in the wilderness that became Minnesota. His advocacy of the publication of Ram-



Lester LeVesconte

sey County history extended to the Society's broader plans, which included this quarterly magazine, *Ramsey County History*.

We honor Lester LeVesconte's memory and his many contributions to the Ramsey County Historical Society. We are inspired by his example and his vision for history.

—John M. Lindley, chairman,
Editorial Board

The Harlem Renaissance

'An Age of Miracles, Excess, Satire'

John S. Wright

The 1920s were the years of the Manhattan Black Renaissance, Langston Hughes, the famed African American writer, reminisced in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*.

It had begun, he recalled, "with 'Shuffle Along,' 'Running Wild' and the Charleston. Perhaps some people would even say with *The Emperor Jones*, Charles Gilpin and the tom-toms at the Provincetown. But certainly it was the musical revue, 'Shuffle Along,' that gave a scintillating send-off to that Negro vogue in Manhattan which reached its peak just before the crash of 1929, the crash that sent Negroes, white folks and all rolling down the hill toward the Works Progress Administration."

"Shuffle Along" was a veritable showcase of African American artistic talent at the outset of the Roaring Twenties, culled from nearly every region of the country and from nearly all the performing arts. The show had migrated north to New York City after its opening runs at the Howard Theatre in Washington, D. C., and at the Paul Laurence Dunbar in Philadelphia, bringing with it a cast of migrating artists whose origins in states scattered across the South, West and Midwest made it an energetic metaphor for the regional spread of the black population and simultaneously for the magnetic pull of the new culture capital in Manhattan.

Ex-Baltimorean and ragtime pianist supreme, Eubie Blake, had teamed up with the Indiana-born drum major and one-time seminarian, Noble Sissle, to write the music for the show. Tennessean Flournoy Miller and Mississippi-born Aubrey Lules, once Fisk University alums and touring vaudevillians, created the plot for "Shuffle Along" from two of their earlier comedy acts on the B. F. Keith Vaudeville Circuit. Washingtonian Florence Mills, who had performed since the age of four with the likes of Bob Cole, George Walker

and Bert Williams, replaced Gertrude Saunders as the show's Broadway star and "skyrocketed to fame" on her skills as a pantomimist and singing, dancing comedienne. Georgia emigre, Trixie Smith, one of the era's ubiquitous blues-singing but unrelated Smith "sisters," counterpointed the show's famous "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Gypsy Blues" with "He May Be Your Man But He Comes to See Me Sometimes."

North Carolinian, Caterina Jarboro, en route to an operatic career in Milan and Brussels, under-studied the female leads in the show. And a young Josephine Baker, who had run away from St. Louis at thirteen and later followed "Shuffle Along" north from Philadelphia, broke into the chorus with hilarious antics that foreshadowed the international celebrity status awaiting her in Paris.

No less riveting at the time was Florence Mills's husband, Ulysses "Slow Kid" Thompson, an Arizona-born carnival and medicine show performer who had invented a unique style of slow motion dancing and undulated mesmerically in front of the "Shuffle Along" chorus. Georgia-bred violinist Hall Johnson, who would eventually lead the Negro String Quartet to Carnegie Hall and the Hall Johnson Choir of spiritual singers to concert, theater and radio fame, stood duty in the orchestra pit.

In the orchestra pit, also, at oboe was Mississippian William Grant Still, preparing a career as the most prolific and eclectic composer of his generation. And on stage, substituting for the bass with the Four Harmony Kings while still in law school, was the New Jersey minister's son, Paul Robeson, whose manifold talents as All-American football player, Phi Beta Kappa scholar, linguist, folksinger, actor, activist and film-star-to-be would ultimately make him the nearest thing to a Renaissance Man that this era of the up-

surging "New Negro" could conceive.

No wonder "Shuffle Along" drew Langston Hughes himself to Harlem. No wonder he thought that it had given "just the proper push—a pre-Charleston kick—to that Negro vogue of the 1920s that spread to books, African sculpture, music and dancing."

Hughes's reminiscence clearly shows the wisdom and the wryness of hindsight. The vogueish hill that "Negroes, white folks and all" rolled metaphorically down at the end of the Black Renaissance had been, a decade and a half earlier, the majestic mountain that a young, bristling Langston Hughes had pictured himself and his generation struggling to climb in his brash manifesto essay of 1926, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."

The road for "the serious black artist who would produce a racial art," he had written then, "is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high." But despite the indifference of an over-assimilated "Nordicized" black intelligensia, "and the desires of some white editors," an honest African American literature was, he thought, already with us; and the future in all the other arts seemed bright.

What Hughes called the "Black Renaissance," others called the "Negro Renaissance" or "New Negro Movement" or "Negro Awakening" or, eventually, the "Harlem Renaissance." But all were names for the first fully self-conscious cultural movement among African Americans, which straddled the years between the end of the Great War and the bottom of the Great Depression.

From a perspective across the color line, but one that nevertheless underscored the cultural impact African Americans had on the times, F. Scott Fitzgerald called the era "the Jazz Age." In his reminiscences,

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Morrow, daughter of Dwight Morrow, the American ambassador to Mexico, or the famous kidnapping of their two-year-old son in 1932, or Lindbergh's isolationist views of the late 1930s. None of this is part of *The Spirit of St. Louis*; yet few readers today can totally disassociate the twenty-five-year-old Army captain of 1927 from the celebrity he became after his trans-Atlantic crossing.

Lindbergh was no Horatio Alger whose hard work in combination with the good chance of being in the right place at the right time inevitably won him success, wealth and fame. In this sense, Charles Lindbergh was a true descendant of those Midwestern pioneers who carved out their futures in a new land by dint of their inner drive and self-confidence in their ability to endure hardship while gaining success in the world.

John M. Lindley is chairman of the Editorial Board for Ramsey County History and has written and published in the field of aviation. He is manager of the College and General Publications Department at West Publishing Company, St. Paul.

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"it was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire" that, in the wake of the failed politics that had produced World War I, echoed in the youthful spirit of the Big Party, the Carnival and the Orgy.

Looking to New York as eagerly as fellow Midwesterner Langston Hughes, a cadre of young black Minnesotans found themselves caught up at various levels in the social and creative whirl of the time. Anna Arnold Hedgeman, reared in Anoka but ultimately Harlem-bound herself, had graduated from high school in 1918 and become Hamline University's first African American student when she heard W. E. B. DuBois, on an NAACP speaking tour, lecture at a St. Paul church. She was enthralled with his account of international black leaders at the first Pan-African Congress he had helped orchestrate recently in Paris.

Homer Smith, a journalism graduate of the University of Minnesota, would find himself drawn East and then abroad with Langston Hughes, Dorothy West, Henry

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some of the split pea soup being served from a big round black iron pot located in the center of the very little open space on the deck. I'm not sure I should blame the cooks, but not many of us were willing to try the open-pot menu after the first hour of pitching around on the choppy Channel.

We had started out in good faith, planning to land in Normandy on June 5, after joining other landing craft, when suddenly new instructions came that the landings had been postponed and our boat would be held in the pattern for an extra day. Ours not to question why. Ours to follow orders. There were planes overhead, but so high that we could only tell that they were, not

Moon, Taylor Gordon and other young renaissance exponents on a 1932 film-making venture to Soviet Russia. Smith would subsequently live an expatriate life there for fourteen years.

Ethel Ray Nance, born in Duluth and matured by jobs for the Minnesota State Relief Commission and the Minnesota House of Representatives, went to work for the National Urban League in the mid-1920s and became one of *Opportunity* magazine editor Charles S. Johnson's closest aides. She helped him develop the literary contests and social gatherings that provided the central facets of the Harlem Renaissance milieu.

And Taylor Gordon, a Montana-born concert singer and gadfly who had spent some of his early years as a St. Paul chauffeur and railroad car attendant, went on to tour internationally with J. Rosamund Johnson. Gordon published in 1929—before going on the Russian journey with Hughes and Company—one of the most colorful autobiographies of the renaissance era, *Born to Be*.

Dr. John S. Wright is a professor in the University of Minnesota's Department of Afro-American & African Studies and in the University's English Department.

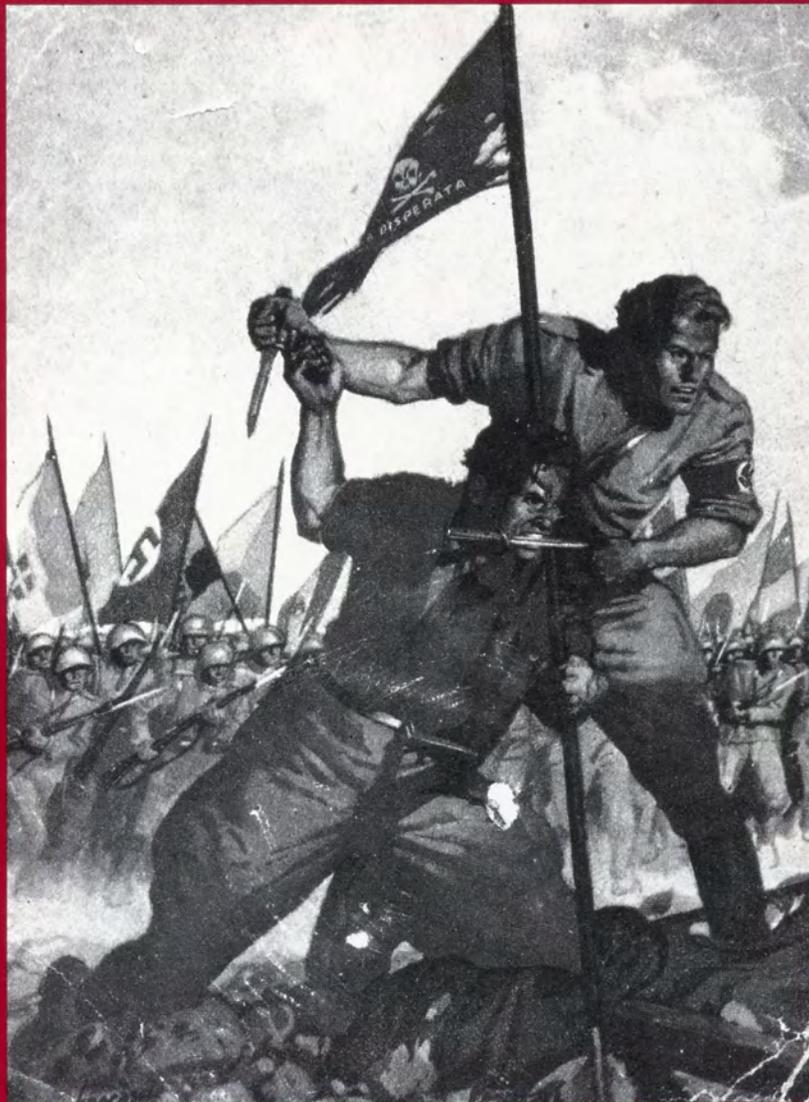
whose they were. We were surprised that no bombs were on the day's program.

About 6:30 p.m. we found out what the words "ready reserve" meant in Army jargon. These "ready reserves" (including us) were to be available to be thrown in at any point of the action where it was felt we could move things along faster. We were all to go ashore as quickly as possible and



Arlo H. Knowles in uniform and recently.





A German propaganda card given to Russell W. Anderson by a German soldier taken prisoner during the Normandy landings. "He was a nice guy," Anderson remembers. See the article beginning on Page 9: "D-Day Remembered by Seven Who Were There."

R.C.H.S.
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