

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Mystic Caverns  
And Their Short-lived  
Days of Glory

Page 21

Spring, 2000

Volume 35, Number 1

*The Two Worlds of Jane Gibbs*  
The Gibbs Farm and the Santee Dakota

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*"Guarding the Corn Fields," a watercolor by Seth Eastman, ca. 1850. This would have been a familiar scene for the young Jane De Bow Gibbs. Corn was a staple for the Dakota people. As a child, she lived near Cloud Man's village at Lake Calhoun in what is now south Minneapolis. Reprinted by permission from Seth Eastman: A Portfolio of North American Indians, Afton Historical Society Press. See article beginning on page 4.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

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## Message from Editorial Board

Most of this issue of *Ramsey County History* focuses on the Gibbs Farm Museum, which the Ramsey County Historical Society owns in Falcon Heights. Over the past several years, the Society has expanded its interpretation of the Gibbs Farm to encompass both the white culture of the original owners, Jane and Heman Gibbs, and the Native American culture of the young Jane's friends, the Santee Dakota, in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Historian Julie Humann begins her article with an analysis of how Jane and the Dakota came to know and understand each other, beginning in 1835 when as a little girl, she lived near the village of the Dakota chief, Cloud Man, in today's south Minneapolis. A key part of their mutually supportive relationship depended upon the genuine reciprocity that these representatives of the two cultures had for each other.

Writer Janet Cass complements Humann's descriptions of Dakota culture with an examination of Dakota gardening at the farm Jane and her husband, Heman Gibbs, later established. Cass writes of the plant species the Dakota commonly used, their gardening techniques, and the relationship their gardening had to other aspects of their culture. Lastly, she explains how the Dakota garden at the farm's site fits in with the museum's expanded interpretation. The Society welcomes any additional information that readers of this magazine can supply about these aspects of Dakota material culture.

This issue next moves to the world of commercial agriculture practiced by the Gibbs family and other Minnesota farmers from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. Retired University of Minnesota agronomist William R. Hueg, Jr., explains how the University acquired the rich farmland that once belonged to the Gibbs family and other early residents of Rose Township and built a world-renowned agricultural experiment station.

*John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board*

## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

# Mystic Caverns and Their Short-lived Glory Days

### *Ray Barton*

It is strange how the past is brought alive by the most unlikely set of circumstances. For example, while re-browsing though Paul Maccabee's book, *John Dillinger Slept Here*, I came upon a description of Mystic Caverns, a night club built into the caves on the lower West Side of St. Paul. It recounted the days in the 1930s when gangsters and other colorful characters made Mystic Caverns a hangout for illegal whiskey and gambling activities.

According to the book, Mystic Caverns was outfitted with roulette wheels and blackjack tables, and featured the fan dances of famed stripper Sally Rand. The gambling was bankrolled and supervised by well-known, underworld characters, and the property was owned by two brothers, one of whom was the director of the St. Paul police band. The daughter of one of the owners claimed that the cave had "a monstrous chandelier, with lights flashing all different colors, hanging two stories above the polished wooden dance floors."

People would come from miles around to Mystic Caverns, Maccabee recalled. It boasted a full kitchen, a restaurant and an outdoor penthouse on the side of the hill for underworld business meetings. But its glory days were short-lived, for in 1934, only two years after it opened its doors, the proprietors were convicted of illegal gambling activities and the club was closed; its brief colorful past thereafter was concealed by looters, hobos and others who found new uses for the dark recesses of the caves.

In 1940 our family moved to Dodd Road and Delaware Avenue, near the Cherokee Park bluffs, where I met a whole new set of friends. Among our escapades, we would climb down the steep bluffs and scout the territory between the High Bridge and the brickyards below. We found fossilized fish and other arti-



*Ray Barton at about six years of age. Photo from the author.*

facts under the High Bridge, and even climbed the bridge girders above the river occasionally, a practice I highly discourage today's youngsters from trying. There were a dozen or so houses strung along Water Street, but other than the railroad tracks between the street and the river, there wasn't much else to brag about.

### **The Mushroom Caves**

Sometimes on hot summer days we swam in Pickerel Lake, a backwash of the Mississippi. A railroad trestle crossed the narrow part of the lake, and a few of the more adventuresome boys would stand on the bridge while a train bore down on them, and at the last moment dive off the trestle into the lake.

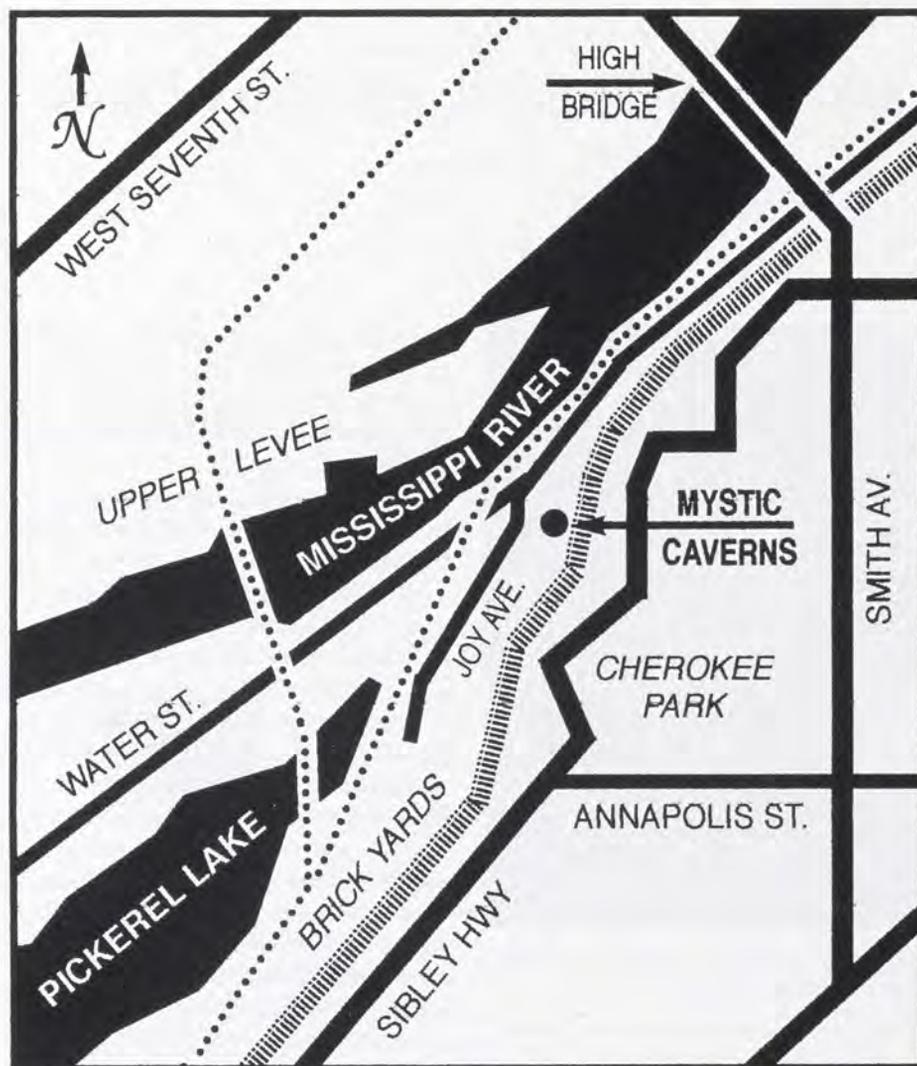
Nearby was Twin City Brick Company and down Joy Avenue and Water Street toward the High Bridge were scattered small caves where some of the residents grew mushrooms. Then there was

the large abandoned cave known as Mystic Caverns that we frequented. We never bothered to question the origin of its name; it was always just Mystic Caverns, and we let it go at that.

But after coming across the reference to the speakeasy called "Mystic Caverns" in Maccabee's book, I became curious. Could they be the same caves I explored as a kid? Checking the address of the abandoned night club in old city directories, I discovered that what we believed to be mushroom caves was indeed the old Mystic Caverns gambling casino described in the book. Further research left me a bit puzzled about its reputation as a St. Paul gangster hangout, however, for during its brief existence it was listed in the city directory as a "restaurant," which disappointed me until I realized the owners weren't likely to list their business as a "casino" or "speakeasy." Nevertheless, a Ramsey County grand jury must have had doubts about its modest claim of being a legitimate dining establishment, because they brought the proprietors to trial and locked the doors after its brief brush with history.

When I first discovered the caves, there was no hint of their past; no two-story chandelier or furniture, no dance floor. They looked like any of the other caves I have seen, only much larger. We never used flashlights when we explored the caves, or we might have seen evidence of electrical cables or mechanical devices. The interior was so dark that we wouldn't know such things were there unless we accidentally bumped against them. I remember the remains of a small building on the side of the hill above the caves, however, that I now assume was the penthouse mentioned in the book.

The opening to the caves fronted on 676 Joy Avenue, just off Water Street,



Cherokee Park Bluffs around 1940, and showing the site of Mystic Caverns. Map by the author.

and inside the entrance was an enormous main cave with passages leading to rooms beyond. The main room was illuminated only faintly by the light from outside, and as you wandered into the tunnels it suddenly became totally dark, so absolutely black you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. It was an adventure to see how far back into the recesses you could go, and sometimes the only way to find your way out was to yell to your buddies and follow the sound of their voices. It was an unspoken understanding among us to never visit the caves alone or we might never find our way out.

Unlike the Hamm's caves in Swede Hollow, Mystic Caverns didn't seem to have an orderly room arrangement that

one could memorize to know where you were; in fact I doubt whether I ever explored all the cave's recesses.

### Colorful Pictures

Later in life I became friends with a man whose father was the superintendent of the brickyard, and who consequently spent a lot of his growing-up days in the neighborhood around Mystic Caverns. Although he was too young to be a customer, he recalls the crowds he saw entering and leaving the place. After it closed, he and his pals spent time exploring the caves, and he remembers the immense room just inside the main entrance which must have served as the restaurant, bar, and dance floor. Shining their flashlights at the ceiling and walls, he said,

they saw colorful designs and pictures that had been spray-painted on the sandstone. The tunnels and rooms, he said, were probably off-base to the general public, and served as the kitchen, offices, and gambling casino.

In his book, Maccabee mentions the white sand that seeped down from the ceilings during the days that the caves functioned as a casino, and the constant maintenance of hauling out the sand. In fact, sand still trickled down from the ceiling during those days when my friends and I explored the abandoned caves. As the years went by, the caves became more unstable from the erosion, until one day the ceiling in the main room collapsed, and that was the end of Mystic Caverns.

I took a drive down Water Street recently, to see how the neighborhood had changed. The houses are all gone, some of them replaced by a landfill against the side of the cliffs, and it appeared that except for a run-down maintenance shack, that was about the extent of civilization along that stretch of road south of the High Bridge. I had difficulty locating the Joy Avenue intersection because the street signs were gone, and there were no houses or other landmarks to identify its former life as a neighborhood. In fact, Joy Avenue was only a short dead-end street ending in a cul-de-sac with a fence that blocked the road, and a rusty old metal sign pointing the way to the long-closed brickyard beyond.

But try as I might, I could find no trace of the magnificent night club that Maccabee describes in his book, nor the large sinister cave entrance that I remembered as a kid. Like most of the many other caves along the Mississippi bluffs, the city long ago bulldozed the entrance to Mystic Caverns, and today there is not a clue that it ever existed.

*Ray Barton is a freelance artist and writer who retired as an advertising art instructor from Hennepin Technical College in Brooklyn Park. He has been a volunteer researcher for the Ramsey County Historical Society. His article about growing up on Payne Avenue during the Great Depression appeared in the spring, 1996, issue of Ramsey County History.*



"Sioux Indians," an 1851 watercolor by Johann Baptist Wengler, Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum, Linz, Austria. Wengler painted this at a time of transition for the Dakota people. The dress of the man suggests a ceremonial costume and the lance probably was for parade use, but the women's dress reflects their gradual adoption of the clothing of the white community. Photo by F. Gangl and reproduced by permission of the museum. See article beginning on page 4

**R.C.H.S.**  
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