

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*The St. Paul Volunteer
Fireman and the Battle
of Gettysburg*

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Spring, 2003

Volume 38, Number 1

An 'Attempt' on His Life?

Sitting Bull's 1884 Visit to St. Paul

—Page 4



Sitting Bull around 1880, just before his 1884 visit to St. Paul. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See article beginning on page 4 on Sitting Bull's visit and an alleged attempt on his life. Minnesota Historical Society photograph.

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The Society regrets an omission from the 2002 Donor Recognition Roll in the Winter issue of *Ramsey County History*. The list of supporters should have included the name of Albert W. Lindeke, Jr., a generous and loyal supporter. We apologize for this omission.

A Message from the Editorial Board

In 1884 the Lakota Indian leader Sitting Bull visited St. Paul. Our feature article in this issue focuses on the circumstances of his two brief stays in the city that year and whether during the latter visit there was an attempt to assassinate the man who embodied so much of the conflict between the white settlers and the native inhabitants of the American West. This issue also includes Civil War historian Patrick Hill's account of Wilson B. Farrell, a St. Paul volunteer fireman, who gave his life as a member of the First Minnesota Regiment in the Battle of Gettysburg and a brief salute to the sesquicentennial of the founding of St. Paul's Oakland Cemetery, where Farrell is now buried. This issue concludes with Helen Miller Dickison's history of today's Fairmount Methodist Church, Minnesota's first German Methodist church, which celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2002.

Readers of *Ramsey County History* and anyone interested in the history of Ramsey County and St. Paul now have a new resource for history searches: the Society's web site at www.rchs.com. On the site's home page, the researcher can click on several links that are of value. One is "Ask the Historian," which provides questions and answers about the area's history that recently have come to Society staff members. Another briefly profiles the histories of some of St. Paul's neighborhoods. All the information on this link comes from the Society's *Ramsey County Historic Site Survey Report*, a major resource in the RCHS library. The final link on the Society web page connects the user to information on the contents of the most recent issues of *Ramsey County History* and ties to a complete listing of articles published in the magazine since its initial publication in 1964. We hope this new link will get many hits from users and increase awareness of the richness of the content of our magazine's back issues.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

‘Homer Van Meter, a Member of the Karpis Gang, Was Shot Across the Street from Our House’

Bernice Fisher

Mickey Mouse made his debut in 1928, and so did I. My parents, Joseph Rousseau and Lillian St. Aubin Rousseau, were born in the United States, but their parents were born in Quebec.

I grew up at 193 West University Avenue, a brown and white bungalow on the north side of University between Rice and Marion streets. In 2002, it is the site of Ron Saxon’s car lot,

St. Paul in the 1920s was a swinging town, a haven for bootleggers and criminals. John Dillinger, “Public Enemy Number 1,” and the Karpis gang hung out in local bars and rented a summer cabin on Bald Eagle Lake

A member of the Karpis gang was shot and killed across the street from our house. Homer Van Meter tried to escape from the police by running down a dead end alley on the south side of University. I stood on the front porch and watched policemen jump out of squad cars and run up the alley. Van Meter was gunned down by St. Paul Police Chief Frank B. Cullen, former Chief Thomas A. Brown, and detectives Thomas McMahon and Jeff Dittrich.

The Great Depression changed everyone’s life, but as a child, I was only dimly aware of its effects. The steady stream of shabby men who walked up and down University looking for jobs was, for me, the most visible sign of the depression. Unshaven and downcast, they walked from one business to another asking for work, then stopped at our house for food and a place to sit down and rest. They ate the bowls of French onion soup my mother gave them, thanked her and left.

The boarding house two doors east of us was a product of the depression, and its people were part of my life. A large white house which must have seen better days, it now sheltered a motley group of



Bernice Rousseau (Fisher) with her doll and doll buggy at the age of five. All photographs with this article are from the author.

people whose fortunes had been diminished by the vagaries of Wall Street. Behind the flaking white boards and fading splendor, a stream of unfortunates came and went—people who rented a room by the week or the month and got their meals from Mrs. Lingane, a sweet-faced woman who served them in a dining room with massive oak furniture and fad-

ing wallpaper. A few of Mrs. Lingane’s boarders did odd jobs around our house; they painted the trim, hung storm windows, or repaired anything which needed repair, since my father had no talent or interest in repairing anything.

By 1931, University Avenue had been widened to accommodate two lanes of traffic, with a center lane for streetcars.

But progress had its price. Our house was moved back about thirty feet, while other houses were demolished. For the first time, our house had a basement.

Our basement was, to me, a frightening place. A black pit yawned beneath the house, a crawl space Dad wriggled through with a hot iron to thaw frozen water pipes when the temperature fell below zero. I never knew what nameless horrors this space might hold, but nothing would ever induce me to go down in the basement after nightfall. Even opening the basement door and getting something from a shelf in the pantry was daunting. I avoided looking down into the inky blackness beyond the steps, fearing eye contact with some nameless horror. Even as an adult, the basement gave me a queasy feeling.

Two miles west of us, Lexington Ball Park, home of the St. Paul Saints baseball team, hosted games between the Saints and the Minneapolis Millers which my father attended on Sunday afternoons.

By 1931 there were just four houses left on our block: the boarding house two doors east of us, and our next door neighbors on the west, the Newells. The only house left standing across the street was owned by a family named Wettschreck. Mr. Wettschreck was a locksmith with a shop in a remodeled porch on the front of his house. East of him was the Eagle Laundry.

Down our block to the west, the Reisinger brothers had a shop as unique as the brothers themselves. A pair of German-born cobblers with heavy accents and handlebar mustaches, they made shoes for people with deformed feet. A row of dust-covered plaster feet and some dusty shoes were lined up in their front window. Had they been real feet, they couldn't have disturbed me more. Each time I walked past the shop, I stopped to stare at these deformed monstrosities.

The Newells, an Irish family whose men worked for the Great Northern Railroad, lived next door to us in a beige house painted with gray trim. Grandma Newell had both a gas and a wood stove in her kitchen. A wall telephone hung on the wall, and next to it, a Great Northern Railroad calendar with a big swirling



Bernice photographed at the age of five or six by an itinerant photographer who owned the pony.



On a rented bike near Lake Phalen, aged ten.



Bernice with Mrs. Pothen who rented a room in their house.

black and red logo. The room next to the kitchen had a stove. I was always fascinated by the glass-distorted tongues of fire glowing through the isinglass door.

Grandma Newell was an ancient lady with white hair and a "pug." Every Saturday she made soup, which she started cooking early in the morning and left to simmer on her wood stove for the entire day. During the summer, when our windows were always open, I could smell the soup cooking. If anyone at our house was ill, Grandma sent over a jar of soup with a piece of wax paper fastened to the mouth with a rubber band.

I don't think the Newells understood my pressing need to use their bathroom whenever I could, but I had never seen anything so elegant before. It had a tan marble sink and a raised bathtub bordered in tan marble. The floor was an intricate pattern of hexagon tiles.

My playmates in the early days all lived on Sherburne Avenue, which ran parallel to University one block north. In good weather, the ragman came down Sherburne Avenue with his horse-drawn cart. The only other horse I had ever seen was the itinerant photographer who put a cowboy hat on my head and a red scarf

around my neck, then put me on his horse and took my picture.

The most important places in my life as a child were the corner drug store and the hamburger shop. The Capital Drug Store at the corner of Rice and University was, for me, an enchanted world. Al Malmrose, one of the owners, was a tall, good looking man with graying hair who annoyed me by calling me "Ducky-walky," a nickname I had brought on myself by some childhood speech indiscretion. My parents often sent me to the drug

store for a quart of ice cream as a special treat on warm summer nights. The drug store had a lunch counter, presided over by Ida, a tall lady in a rust-colored cotton uniform.

The hamburger shop on Rice Street between Sherburne and University Avenues was a special place where the odor of fried onion and hamburger enticed passers-by. On special summer days, our mothers would let us buy hamburgers for lunch, a major culinary treat, since we rarely ate out.

We had many visits by strangers—the Fuller Brush man, the insurance agent who collected fifty cents a week on our insurance policy, and the Jewel Tea man, who delivered coffee, spices and vanilla. After Mom had collected enough coupons, she got a bonus. The one I remember best was a set of mixing bowls with red poppies. Only one remains, and the red poppies have been worn off by the dishwasher.

Most people we knew had ice boxes. An ice box had a compartment at the top for a block of ice. Three days a week, the ice delivery truck stopped in front of our house, signaled by a cardboard sign on the front porch. The ice man, his shoulders protected by a heavy rubber cape, carried the chunk of ice slung across his shoulder and held steady with a huge pair of tongs, and put it in our icebox on our closed-in back porch. Sometimes we chipped ice off the block with a pick and put it in our cold drinks. The ice melted into a pan beneath the icebox, and it was my job to empty the pan every day so it wouldn't spill over and ruin the floor.

When an ice house opened for business on Galtier and University, my mother decided it would be cheaper to haul our own ice. We took one of the row of ice carts they provided, hauled the ice home, put it in the ice box, then returned the cart. When I was eight or so, returning the cart was my chore.

Since my father's Essex went to work with him, my mother and I went everywhere by streetcar during the day—to Minneapolis, where we spent time near Lake Harriet, or to visit distant relatives. Sometimes we walked downtown, about a mile away. My mother enjoyed shopping in downtown St. Paul at Bannon's

Department Store, and occasionally at the Emporium and The Golden Rule, which later became Donaldson's. Afterwards, we went to W. T. Grant's on Seventh and Cedar for lunch, which was usually a roast beef sandwich soaked in gravy.

If the weather was good, we walked downtown on Sunday afternoons to see a movie. In the Thirties and Forties, downtown St. Paul had eight theaters. My mother's favorite was the Lyceum, on Wabasha between Eighth and Ninth Streets. Besides a film, the Lyceum had a vaudeville show with hypnotists, jugglers, and magicians who could make rabbits disappear.

My dad's favorite theater was the Tower, on Wabasha between Seventh and Sixth Streets. It showed what were called "B" movies, all in double features. Sometimes we went to the Garrick on Sixth and St. Peter Streets. All three theaters had cheaper admissions than the Paramount or the Orpheum, the "first run" theaters, showing top-rated films. The World Theater, now the Fitzgerald, on Ninth and Wabasha, was off limits, because films condemned by the Legion of Decency were often shown there. The other two theaters were the Riviera, on Wabasha, and the Strand, across the street.

Every summer we went to the Como Park Zoo, where giraffes were my favorite animals, and where I acquired a life-long dislike for monkeys because of my parents' insistence that they were "so cute." A visit to the Conservatory was always part of our agenda.

Religion was important in our lives. My mother and I walked downtown to St. Louis Church every Sunday, home for dinner, usually stewed chicken or roast pork, and back in the afternoon for Vespers. We attended High Mass, where the sermons were always in French.

The Saint Aubins and the Vandelacs had come to America in the 1850s, so by the time I was born, many of my relatives had married Irishmen, Germans or Swedes and were proud of their assimilation into the mainstream culture, but I grew up bilingual, since French persisted as the language of choice among my mother and our relatives.

I went to kindergarten and first grade at the local public school, Scheffer, a big brownstone building on Thomas and Marion Streets. I can still smell the odor of chalk dust and old wood.

Learning to read was one of my childhood's first adventures, and discovering the library was another. I remember my introduction to a public library. The first book I signed out of the branch library at Scheffer playground was *The Arabian Nights*, which I read from beginning to end in a few hours. Reading became my great escape to more interesting worlds than the dull one I inhabited.

In 1934 the Dionne Quintuplets were born in Ontario. Besides being the first single-sex quints ever to survive, they were a source of great pride for the French-Canadian community. My parents read and discussed the many newspaper articles about them. Dad cut their colored photograph out of the Sunday *Pioneer Press* magazine section and hung it in the kitchen. Charlie Ward, the president of Brown & Bigelow, brought the quints to St. Paul so they could ride on the company's float in the St. Paul Winter Carnival Parade, and he published calendars with their pictures.

The Great Depression ended with the Second World War, which brought jobs to the jobless in ammunition plants in Rosemount and New Brighton. These were the years that brought women into the work force in large numbers and changed the social structure of American life.

When I started kindergarten in September, 1933, America was in the throes of the depression, and Franklin D. Roosevelt was president of the United States. Hitler was coming into power and would soon march into Poland and Czechoslovakia. By 1942, when I graduated from the eighth grade, my generation was fighting a war that would end with the dawn of the Atomic Age.

Bernice (Rousseau) Fisher attended Mechanic Arts High School in St. Paul from 1942 to 1946. After graduating from the College of St. Catherine, she taught high school English in schools in Minnesota, including a twenty-four year stint at Hill-Murray High School in Maplewood.



"Little Sure Shot," Annie Oakley. Photograph from the Annie Oakley Foundation Collection, Greenville, Ohio. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.

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