

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

**Spring 2006**

Volume 41, Number 1

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The Cave Under  
the Castle*

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Mary Hill's Lowertown, 1867–1891

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*Mary Mehegan Hill (1867). This painting is from a wedding photograph. The date of the painting and the artist are not known. In 1956 a member of the Hill family gave this painting to the James J. Hill Reference Library. Reproduced by permission of the James J. Hill Reference Library, St. Paul, Minnesota. Photograph by Maureen McGinn.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 41, Number 1

Spring 2006

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect,  
preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public,  
recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make  
available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major  
responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

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and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

## A Message from the Editorial Board

Our Spring issue leads with dual articles presenting a vibrant portrait of old Lowertown, which now remains only as a fragment of a neighborhood tucked within a spaghetti-like web of freeway lanes. Eileen McCormack describes the social and economic framework that nourished Jim and Mary Hill from 1867 until 1891, when they moved to their Summit Avenue mansion. And David Riehle portrays the homes and businesses of working-class St. Paul citizens in the same neighborhood. Greg Brick leads a reader's tour underneath the streets in the West Seventh area, through thirty miles of corridors leading to caves that once cooled German-style lager beer brewed by the Stahlmann, and later Schmidt, breweries. Bernice Fisher provides an evocative remembrance of attending St. Adalbert's Catholic school in a Polish neighborhood full of traditions. Finally, many treasures await readers who sample our reviewers' picks marking, among others, Minnesota's state capitol building, the career of a recent riverboat legend, and the story of a gifted educator who grew up on a farm supplying butter and meat to city dwellers. We are proud of the last, *Pearl and the Howling Hound Farm*, which is one of our own recent publications, available through RCHS. Happy reading!

Anne Cowie, Chair, Editorial Board

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## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

# Stranger in a Strange Land: A Culture That for a Child Was Foreign and Alien

*Bernice M. Fisher*

I started kindergarten at Scheffer School in St. Paul, Minnesota, in September 1933. America was in the throes of the Great Depression, and Franklin D. Roosevelt had been president of the United States for less than a year. When I was ready to enter the second grade, my parents enrolled me in the nearest Catholic school, St. Adalbert's, three blocks from my house on University Avenue. Their decision changed my life in ways they had never anticipated.

The waves of immigrants who came to the Twin Cities from Europe in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries wanted churches and schools that would help them preserve their customs and languages. We had three ethnic churches in our neighborhood: St. Adalbert's was the Polish church, St. Agnes, the German church, and St. Vincent's, the Irish. People of the same nationality tended to settle within walking distance of their parish churches, since few city people could afford cars during the Depression.

The Polish people's determination to practice their old-country traditions and speak the language of their ancestors was a concept my parents neither understood nor admired. As the children of French Canadian immigrants, they wholeheartedly embraced de Crevecoeur's melting pot theory as expressed in his essay "What Is an American?" (in *Letters from an American Farmer* [1782]):

He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.

\* \* \*

St. Adalbert's school was a square brick building on Charles Avenue and Galtier Street, hemmed in on two sides by a wrought-iron fence, a house on the west, and by the church and rectory on the south. Grades one through four were on the first floor, grades five through eight, on the second.

The sisters who staffed the school were Felicians, a branch of the Franciscan order dedicated to the education of the children of the Polish immigrants. Most of the sisters were immigrants or first generation Americans and spoke Polish among themselves. They wore starched wimples and black cotton veils, and we always wondered if they had hair. One sister taught every subject in her grade, and each one tried diligently to create an attractive classroom.

All of our classrooms had six rows of desks with wrought-iron sides and legs and an opening for books and notebooks. Stands with lush-looking ferns that decorated the altar on Sundays stood near the east windows. Every classroom had a crucifix on the front wall, an American flag, a blackboard across the front and on one side, and a cloakroom with hooks where we hung our coats. A framed portrait of George Washington shared a wall with lithographs of the famous Poles who fought in the Revolution, Thaddeus Kosciuszko and Casimir Pulaski, who wore exotic headgear with curly feathers.

Through the seven years I spent at St. Adalbert's, some things never changed. The school day began with

mass at eight o'clock and classes at eight-thirty. When the sister entered our classroom in the morning, we stood beside our desks and greeted her in Polish: "Praise be to Jesus Christ, good morning, Sister." Then we recited the Pledge of Allegiance and sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee." I often wondered where Tisathee was located, but I was too shy to ask.

Education was a segregated affair, with girls seated in the first three rows on the right, and the boys in the three rows to our left. At recess, we girls played ball on the east side of the building, and the boys played on the west. We had spelling bees with girls against boys. In church, the boys sat on one side of the aisle and the girls on the other.



*St. Adalbert's Church, St. Paul, Minnesota.*

We had about thirty students in our class through all eight grades with few additions or dropouts. The pecking order was established early on by the honor roll bulletin board, where our names were listed in a vertical row with stars pasted beside our names to correspond to the latest test—gold for excellent, red for good, blue for fair. Some students had no stars at all.

A statue of Mary stood on a pedestal at the front of the room. One year, the sister assigned each of us a day to bring flowers to fill the vase beside Mary's statue. When my turn came, morality took a back seat to fear; on my "flower" day early in May, when virtually nothing was blooming in our neighborhood, I was relieved to see some bleeding hearts growing in a front yard that I passed on my way to school. My guilt feelings about picking them were nothing compared to what I imagined would happen to me if I came to school empty-handed.

Education was a serious business. In Poland, only the wealthy were educated, so for the Polish immigrants, the educa-

tion of their children was a great privilege, and they supported the sisters in every way they could. The nuns had an "I'm here to teach you, and you're here to learn" philosophy augmented by firm discipline. A recalcitrant student had to kneel for half an hour in front of Mary's statue and, hopefully, repent his transgressions. Sometimes we were punished by having to write something hundreds of times for homework or after school, usually some statement preceded by "I will not." We never wrote the entire sentence out at once, so the lesson was lost on us; it was easier to write a hundred I's, then a hundred will's, and so on. One of our more daring classmates used carbon paper on one occasion and had her punishment doubled.

We prayed for everyone on the planet in Polish, a required subject. Exemptions were granted to the three of us who were not Polish, and one who was. After a few months in the second grade, I could say the Our Father and the Hail Mary in Polish, an accomplishment

that greatly impressed my mother. She stood me up in front of visiting relatives and smiled proudly as I recited the Our Father and the Hail Mary in French and in Polish.

Our curriculum consisted of basics with no frivolities: arithmetic, English, social studies, Bible History or religion, science, geography and Polish. During the weekly art class on Friday afternoon, we cut something out of construction paper and pasted it on another sheet of construction paper in a different color.

Our musical training was mostly dedicated to rehearsing hymns for Sunday mass with Mrs. Sepion, the parish's choir director. She always wore a hat, and her dresses often had big flowers.

Every Wednesday morning at nine o'clock we assembled in grumbling rows in the upstairs hall where Mrs. Sepion waited for us at the piano. It was a standing-room-only arrangement, and we practiced singing Polish hymns. I didn't like to sing, so I faked it most



Front to back: Row 1—Rose Mazur, Eleanor Neudauer, Catherine Matczynski, Delores Sandusky, Helen Glinka, Dorothy Nestaval, Betty Tix  
 Row 2—Marie Koslowski, Bernice Rousseau, Shirley Chartier, Dolores Ryllicki, Lily Juneski, Barbara Cameron  
 Row 3—Charles DeNet, Thomas Zarembinski, Raymond Koslowski, Howard Zarembinski, Joseph Navalany, David Dickinson  
 Row 4—Francis Filipczak, Casimir Prokop, Richard Schlaeger, Donald Matysik, Frank Nechuta, Jerome Kotefka  
 Row 5—Edward Pawlak, David Koslowski, John Rongitsch

of the time. Occasionally, Mrs. Sepion pounded the piano in a frenzied fortissimo to get our attention or express her dissatisfaction if we sang off key. Sometimes she terrified me by leaping off the piano bench and walking up and down the rows, stopping beside us to listen for false notes.

\* \* \*

Good handwriting was a major objective. Alphabets written in white on black cardboard were tacked above the blackboards as examples of what we could do if we really tried. Fountain pens were outlawed, because the sisters believed we could write best with pens dipped in ink from the inkwells on our desks. Through all of my grade school years, I had a calloused, ink-stained middle finger, caused by clutching a pen too tightly and writing innumerable pages of ovals and push-pulls to learn proficiency in the Palmer Method.

English grammar was also an area of major concentration. We spent many hours at the blackboard diagramming sentences and identifying parts of speech. We rarely wrote stories, and compositions were sometimes assigned for punishment.

Regimentation was the order of the day. We gathered in groups near the school door every morning and walked into the building single file, out of our classrooms single file for recess, and marched back up the double stairway single file to our classrooms—boys up the left stairway, and girls on the right. We went home in ranks, two by two, led by a school police boy with a stop sign he held in the street as we crossed. On Sundays, we were compelled, under threat of dire consequences, to assemble in the playground for the children's mass at 9:15, when we sang the hymns we had rehearsed with Mrs. Sepion.

In those pre-uniform days, girls wore dresses, usually homemade, with long cotton stockings. Tennis shoes were not allowed. Makeup and nail polish were strictly forbidden.

One day, an uninformed girl from a public school enrolled in our eighth grade. Sister Hortensia didn't believe her when she said the dark red nail polish she was

wearing wouldn't wash off—at least, not until they both emerged from the lavatory, the girl smiling and still wearing her nail polish, the sister red-faced and angry.

\* \* \*

Most of our learning was by rote. We memorized everything—multiplication tables, historical dates, like the fall of Constantinople, the Norman Conquest, and the arrival of the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock. We memorized the answers to questions in our catechism and in our history books. We memorized the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, the commandments of the Church, the cardinal virtues, the seven capital sins, using the acronym “pale gas,” and the President's cabinet, which remained mostly the same from the second grade through the first half of my senior year in high school.

We memorized reams of poetry--Whitman's “O Captain, My Captain,” and a sixty-six-line poem consisting of rhymed couplets naming all the American presidents from Washington through FDR. We memorized the first stanza of *Evangeline*, the first stanza of *Snow-Bound*, and the whole of “Paul Revere's Ride.” The students who sat in the end rows had the greatest advantage. After listening to twenty-nine students recite a poem, how could they go wrong?

Most of the poetry we memorized created problems for me because I was afraid to ask questions and reveal my stupidity, so I never asked questions. Why, for example, should I feel sorry for Whitman's bloody captain? “The Barefoot Boy” by John Greenleaf Whittier was just as problematical:

Blessings on thee, little man,  
Barefoot boy with cheek of tan,  
With thy turned-up pantaloons,  
And thy merry whistled tunes.

It was years before I found out what a pantaloon was, or learned that this boy did, indeed, have two cheeks.

We never spoke extemporaneously. Lessons were taught mainly by question and answer, especially history or social studies with topics defined by dark ink in the textbook. The sister either started with the first student in the first row or the

first student in the last row. Some typical questions: “Why did Washington cross the Delaware, and how long did it take?” or “What British general was waiting for him, and what did he say to General Washington?” If the first student couldn't answer the question, the second person in the row stood up and gave the question his best shot. We kept our textbooks open, counted down to the topic we were likely to get, and prayed that no one ahead of us missed an answer.

We were never asked to express our opinions on any subject at any time, either orally or in writing. I was told quite often, both by my parents and by the sisters, that my opinions didn't matter, because I didn't know enough about anything to express an intelligent opinion.

Sending notes during class was a popular and often hazardous diversion. We passed notes with earth-shaking messages, like “What are you doing after school today?” or “Don't you think Chuck is cute?” Getting caught resulted in having to write “I will not pass notes in class,” a couple of hundred times, or having the note read aloud, which could be embarrassing.

Once a year, the Coca-Cola truck came to our school, and everyone in every class from the fifth grade up received a bottle of Coca-Cola, a ruler and a red pencil with the words “I love Coca-Cola” emblazoned in gold letters. Doubtless the Coca-Cola Company was trying to expand its customer base, but it left me with a lifetime aversion to that popular beverage. I weighed only about sixty pounds, and I couldn't consume a bottle of anything that strong in the fifteen minutes the sister allotted.

\* \* \*

The Polish people tried to preserve the religious traditions of their homeland—church dinners with ethnic foods and Polish dance groups. But it was the elaborately choreographed processions at the Forty Hours celebration, on Easter Sunday, and at the midnight mass on Christmas Eve that my mother most admired. The parish priests, wrapped in colorful vestments and clouds of incense, walked slowly toward an altar banked high with flowers and blazing with candles. They



Row 1, seated: Marie Koslowski, Bernice Rousseau, Rose Mazur, Dolores Rylicki, Dorothy Nestaval, Lois Wiley, Eleanor Neudauer, Caterine Matczynski, Shirley Chartier  
 Row 2: Edward Pawlak, Francis Filipczak, Casimir Prokop, Charles DeNet, John Rongitsch, Donald Matysik, David Koslowski, Richard Schlaeger, Raymond Koslowski, Thomas Zarembinski  
 Row 3: Lily Juneski, Howard Zarembinski, Betty Tix, David Dickinson, Delores Sandusky, Jerome Kotefka, Barbara Cameron, Joseph Novalany, Helen Glinka, Frank Nechuta

were followed by a dozen pairs of altar boys with lace surplices and big red bows, little girls in identical dresses, and the year's First Communicants in white.

\*\*\*

Some major social changes occurred when I was in the eighth grade. Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, marked the United States' entry in World War II. But more important to us was the fact that we were allowed to use fountain pens for the first time in class.

One of the most radical changes that occurred as a result of my attendance at St. Adalbert's was my parents' opinions of the Polish and their customs. My mother admired the processions and never missed one at the Forty Hours' devotion, Christmas midnight mass, or Easter. She also began to understand that

the Polish, unlike the French Canadians, had left their country to escape the brutality of their everyday lives. She was shocked when I told her the stories I had heard from my classmates about the oppression their parents and grandparents had suffered in Poland—the horrendous brutality of the Cossacks, the concentration camps, the starvation and poverty, the destruction of homes and villages, all traumas some of the immigrants took a lifetime to overcome, if they ever did.

The famous Polish author, Henryk Sienkiewicz, gave the Polish immigrants a mandate when he said that Poland is where the Polish people are. That was the mantra they brought with them to the New World, the commandment to preserve their language and their culture at all costs.

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St. Adalbert's School closed in the 1980s, due to a changing demographic. The building still stands, looking much the same as it did in when it was built, but now, it is occupied by a charter school. The children of the Polish immigrants have prospered and found homes in newer neighborhoods, and their old homes are occupied by new immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The painting of Bishop St. Adalbert on the altar is the only visible remnant of a unique past.

*Bernice Fisher taught English in several different Minnesota schools for twenty-four years. This is her third contribution to our Growing Up in St. Paul series.*



*The Stahlmann Cave Brewery as depicted on the company letterhead. Courtesy of Paul Clifford Larson. See article beginning on page 12.*

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