

RAMSEY COUNTY
History

A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

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FOR HER HONOR'S SAKE.

There are cases where a brother must interfere in his sister's affairs.

An acid commentary on the Great Census War of 1890 and the rivalries which have colored the history of St. Paul and Minneapolis. See page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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On the cover: The United States census of 1890 sparked virtual warfare in the unceasing rivalry between Minneapolis and St. Paul. This cartoon was published in the *St. Paul News* for June 28, 1890.

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A MESSAGE TO OUR READERS

In May, 1988, the Board of Directors of the Ramsey County Historical society decided that they should develop a plan to broaden the appeal of *Ramsey County History*, redesign it, expand its coverage of the history of the county, and publish the magazine four times each year.

In bringing change to the look of *Ramsey County History*, the Editorial Board has tried to make sure that the strengths in content and features of its predecessors have not been abandoned. Thus we have the good fortune to be able to publish carefully researched and well written articles on a wide range of topics associated with the colorful history of Ramsey County. And we have added new features, such as "A Matter of Time" and "What's Historic About This Site?".

Throughout this process, the goal always has remained to produce the best possible magazine on the history of Ramsey County with the widest appeal within the resources available. The Editorial Board believes this new format meets those objectives. We hope you agree.

—John L. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

Thrill Show and Midway professional waterski show as well as other attractions.

The 1987 RiverFest drew more than 300,000 people to Harriet Island in ten days. If measured in terms of the number of visitors, size, reputation of performers and budget, the festival clearly has been a success. But at what cost?

The West Siders, the original movers behind the erstwhile Riverfront Days, are no longer involved in the planning and implementation of the professional festival. According to the present organizers, Festival Events, Inc., the event has simply outgrown the neighborhood. It is now a regional event.

But with the increase in size and popularity of RiverFest, complaints have increased each year. These are directed almost exclusively at the sound generated by the primary attractions, the rock bands and performers. The 1987 festival tried to address these complaints by starting and ending the concerts earlier in the evening, but the complaints continued.

RiverFest also attracted another problem. On July 13, 1988, the *Pioneer Press Dispatch* reported that "two youths made off with a sizable souvenir Sunday at RiverFest—several thousand dollars snatched from the ticket gate at Wabasha Street and Nagasaki Road." A footnote to this particular story is that the youths were captured before they were able to leave Harriet Island.

The Mississippi riverfront, then, is enjoying a renaissance as a center for recreation in St. Paul. The city government is developing plans for both banks of the river in the downtown area. The goal is to renovate and beautify the former industrial parts of the riverfront, develop a residential area, make parts of the riverfront more recreationally attractive and accessible to the public, and at the same time, encourage other types of economic development. A tall order.

Thomas B. Mega, a former Ramsey County Historical Society staff member, is assistant professor of history at St. Thomas College, St. Paul. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota where he received his bachelors, masters and doctorate degrees in American history. He is a member of the Society's Board of Directors and its Editorial Board.

Lillie and Ida at the Fair

We are safe in our room at last—have just arrived and oh so tired . . .," wrote Lillie Gibbs to her sister, Abbie, on June 6, 1893.

Lillie and her other sister, Ida, had just arrived in Chicago after a long train ride from St. Paul. Tired as she was, Lillie began that evening to chronicle their adventures as they attended the great World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the new world.

The two women were witnessing one of the major events of 19th century America, an exhibition that rivalled the 1876 American Centennial celebration in Philadelphia. Chicago had transformed more than 600 swampy acres along its downtown waterfront into a sparkling White City of lagoons, gondeliers, and buildings whose neoclassical style would influence American architecture for the next fifty years.

Seventy-seven nations participated; Buffalo Bill performed at the nearby Coliseum; George Washington Ferris erected a huge wheel and the marvels of electricity were demonstrated to the more than 27 million people who crowded into the grounds.

Among them were Lillie and Ida. Almost every day for a week, Lillie sent Abbie postcards crammed with the details of their adventure. For an adventure it was. For two weeks they traveled unescorted, at a time when most women, married or unmarried, did not travel frequently and especially not alone.

Both were unmarried (although Lillie married in September of that year), but they were neither young nor naive. Ida was a spinster of 41 and had spent most of her life as a hardworking farm woman on the family's farm in Ramsey County, north-east of St. Paul.

Lillie, my great grandmother, was 27. She was a portrait artist in St. Paul but she also had been busy helping her mother,

Jane Gibbs, and her brother, Frank, run the family marketing gardening business. Their home is now the Gibbs Farm Museum.

On June 7, Lillie sent the following postcard:

Dear Sister:

We started to the Fair at 8:30 this morning—it does not open til 9 AM . . . we first went to the Minn. Building and registered then went into the Woman's Building as it was the nearest. Saw so much to interest us we did not get out of it till noon. Then we went to the Fishery building and that was fine too. But they are all a marvel to look at on the outside even . . .

Lillie and Ida were both well-educated and reared in a household in which newspapers, concerts and lectures were important parts of the family life. Yet, they were dazzled by seeing "more flowers and fruit than we will see the rest of our lives . . ." in the Horticulture Building, and the exhibits in the Manufactures Building held them for an entire day.

One of the highlights of their trip was bravely staying up late one night to see the grounds lighted up. As she wrote to Abbie,

We stayed till after dark tonight to see the fountains & the Electricity Bldg. looks best then and it is perfectly safe for us to come home. The Grounds look like fairy land in the evening. And there is music in some direction all day and concerts around the electric fountain in the evening.

The excitement Lillie and Ida must have felt as they gazed at the electric wonderland is perhaps difficult for us to capture today, surrounded as we are with modern technology that seems to hold few surprises. But for Lillie and Ida, the World's Columbian Exposition opened their eyes to new people, places and things.

At few other times during the rest of their lives would they again "see their eyes out" or experience the carefree vacation of 1893.

—Karen Bluhm



The Minnesota Boat Club below the Wabasha Street bridge around 1890. The old clubhouse was replaced just before World War I and the island, once known as Raspberry Island, is now Navy Island. See story on Page 9.

R.C.H.S.
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