

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Geological Forces
That Shaped
St. Paul

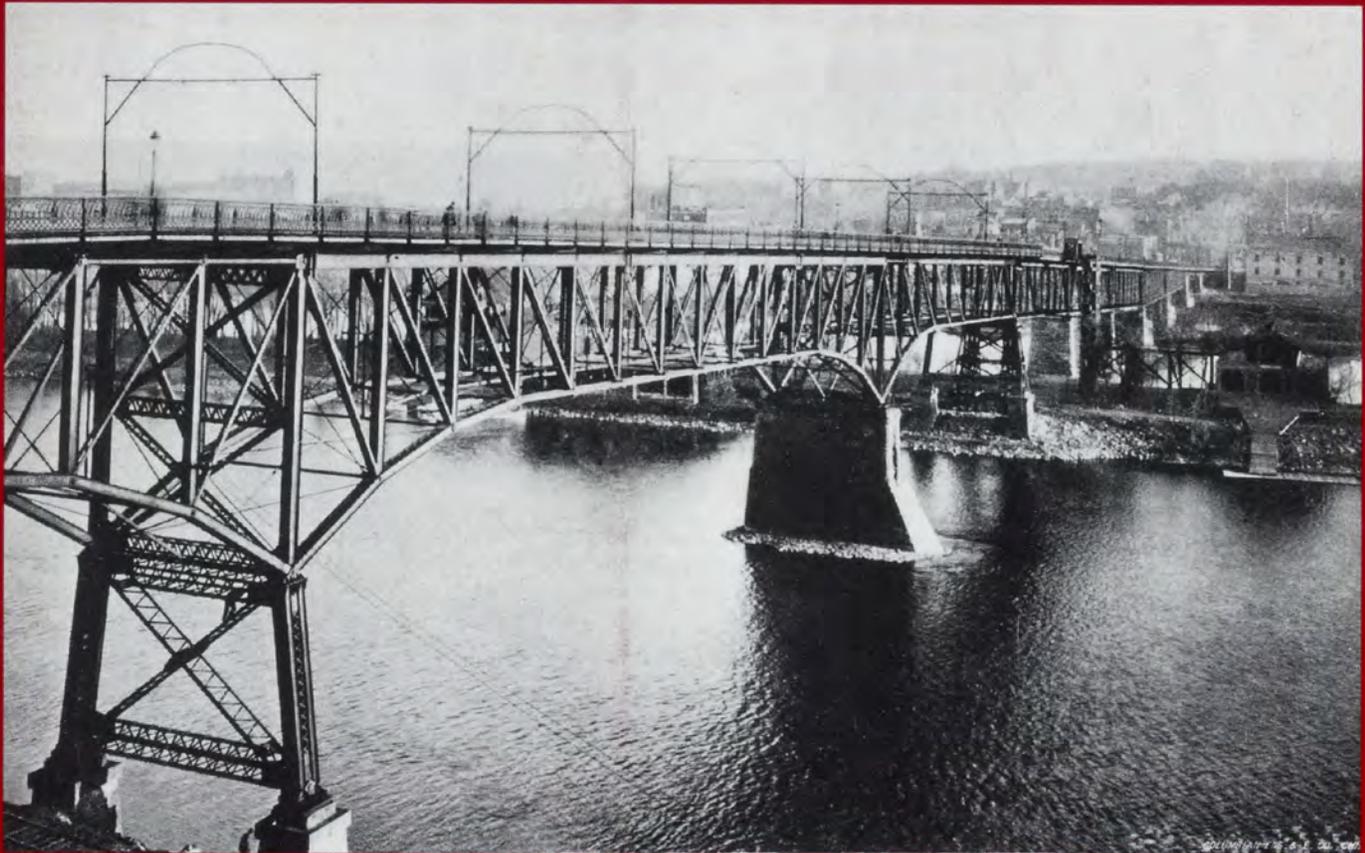
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Summer, 1997

Volume 32, Number 2

Last of Its Kind in Minnesota
The 1888–89 Wabasha Street Bridge

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The Wabasha Street Bridge, constructed between 1888 and 1889. Minnesota Historical Society photo. See article beginning on page 4.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Ramsey County History returns to the area's beginnings in this summer issue. In his article on the Wabasha Street Bridge, author Demian J. Hess not only provides a detailed history of this well-known, now-vanished landmark, but also establishes its centrality to the growth of the city of St. Paul in the second half of the nineteenth century. A companion article by Edmund C. Bray tells the geological story of the mighty natural forces that created the Mississippi river, which the Wabasha Street Bridge eventually would span.

Returning to the era before the bridge was built, Norma Sommerdorf chronicles the arrival of Harriet Bishop in St. Paul a century-and-a-half ago and describes Bishop's many contributions to the educational, moral and religious development of St. Paul's young people over a thirty-six year period. Finally, Emily Panushka Erickson recalls her years of growing up in St. Paul's West Seventh Street neighborhood. Although this issue of our magazine spans in time the Ice Ages to the present-day replacement of the Wabasha Street Bridge, its focus is squarely on how St. Paul and Ramsey County have grown and changed over time, whether measured in geological ages or human years.

John M. Lindley, chair, Editorial Board

Janet Erickson Remembers The Society in Her Will



Janet L. Erickson

Janet L. Erickson was born in St. Paul, went to school there and retired there, but a love of travel, an abiding interest in history and genealogy, and a fascination with exotic places and people, led her to live many of her years in Africa, East Asia, and India.

Born in 1920 into a family with Swedish and Norwegian ancestry, she graduated from the University of Minnesota's School of Nursing in 1941 on the brink of the United States' entry into World War II. For the next four years, she served with the army's 26th General Hospital through the North African campaigns, the landing at Anzio, and the fighting in Italy. She ended the war as a first lieutenant, then returned to the University of Minnesota to earn a master's degree in nursing in 1947. During the next few years, she taught at Syracuse University and the University of California at San Francisco, but far places beckoned.

In the mid-1960s, she joined the Agency for International Development and served in Sierra Leone for three years before joining the World Health Organization and a post first in Ahmedabad, India, and next in Bangkok, Thailand. In 1974, she was ordered to Delhi to fill a vacant Regional Nursing Advisor position, an assignment that took her back to Thailand, but also to Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. In her many letters to family and friends, she vividly described some of her experiences:

"...I saw the mountains which ring

the Annapurna range when in Pokhara and flying from Delhi to Kathmandu and back, the whole Himalaya range was visible. I have seen the mountains of Nepal at last and they are very beautiful. [At Corbett Park] we saw a herd of wild elephants, deer, crocodiles and best of all, from the back of an elephant we saw a tiger."

In 1979 Janet Erickson reached mandatory retirement age and returned home to settle into a "quiet and leisurely life" in the big old Erickson family home on Prospect Boulevard in West St. Paul. Leisurely, however, her retirement apparently was not. Travel, history, and genealogy continued to enthral her. She began to research her family history, a project that took her on prolonged trips to Norway, where she traced that side of her family back to the 1500s, and to Sweden, where she visited a farm near Orebro where her grandfather Erickson was born. She explored the Upper Midwest on "On the Trail of History" tours organized by the Ramsey County Historical Society, and she became a tour guide at the James H. Hill house.

"I am also helping out as a guide at the Alexander Ramsey house," she wrote a friend. "... I wear either a Victorian maid's costume, if I work in the kitchen, or a fancier dress with hoop if stationed elsewhere. I find these historical activities fascinating. ..."

The Far East, however, drew her back for visits with friends. On her way home in March, 1993, she was passing through Frankfurt when she died suddenly and without warning in the airport after getting off a twelve-hour flight from Bangkok. She was seventy-three years old. In her will, she left a greatly appreciated bequest of \$25,000 to the Ramsey County Historical Society.

V.B.K.

Letters to the Editor

Ignatius Donnelly

I was interested in the brief description of Ignatius Donnelly in the Oppenheimer Wolff & Donnelly article in the spring issue. I thought he lived in Hastings, not St. Paul.

Larry Edwards, Hastings.

Actually, he lived nearby in the vanished village of Nininger, which he and a group of newly-arrived entrepreneurs founded in the hope it would become a great city. The panic of 1857 put an end to those dreams. His house at Nininger, however, was torn down in 1948.

St. Peter and Seventh

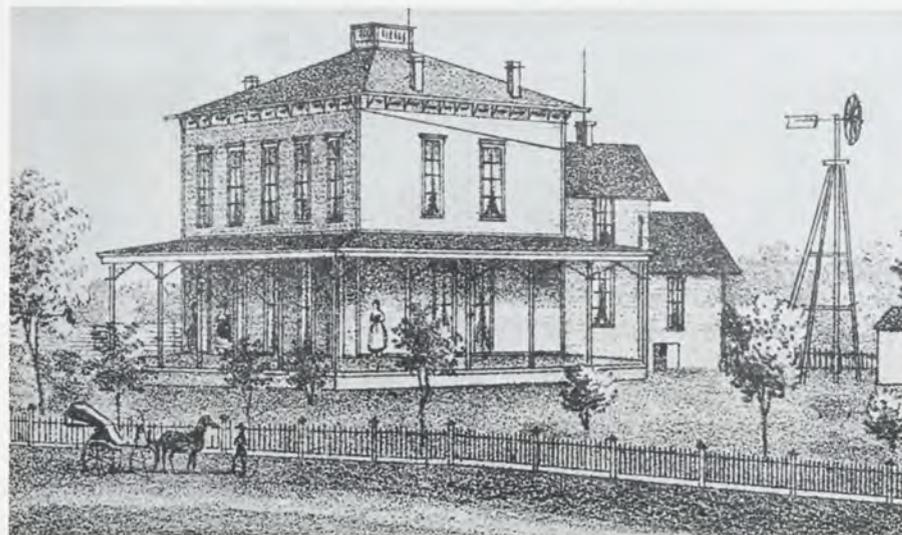
The article, "Untold Stories of the Old St. Francis Hotel," in last winter's issue was great. The hotel itself is not familiar to me, but the corner of St. Peter and Seventh Street is. I caught the St. Clair-Payne-Phalen streetcar home from the dentist there. On Saturdays, this spot was a kind of hang out for me, friends, and dates as a teenager. We saw movies at the RKO Orpheum and Paramount, sometimes seeing one feature in one theater, then going across the street to see the feature at the other. "Growing Up in St. Paul During the Great Depression" in the same issue also stirred memories for me, and I was very pleased with how my own "Growing Up" piece looked and read in the winter issue.

Brenda Raudenbush,
Stockbridge, Georgia.

Food for the Hungry

Someone told me that food for homeless people once was stored in caves around St. Paul. Is that true?

Lise Evans, Roseville.



Ignatius Donnelly's house at Nininger, as it appeared in the 1874 Andreas Atlas. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

You might be thinking of a depression-era incident described in an article in the spring, 1991, issue of Ramsey County History. A. A. Heckman, who at the time was head of United Charities in St. Paul, remembered that concern for the needy led Louis W. Hill, Sr., to secretly and independently purchase a trainload of food to distribute to the poor. Hill took Heckman "down Eagle Street to some caves in the bluff where the civic parking ramp stands now. Hill opened the door to one of the caves and back in there were potatoes, rutabagas and other vegetables, all packed nicely and covered with straw." Hill turned them over to Heckman, along with bags of rice and beans Hill had stored elsewhere, and Heckman had the food distributed to needy families.

Phalen Beach Parties

Some of the current news reports of boisterous behavior at city beaches reminded me of stories my mother told me about how residents living near Lake Phalen once protested against immorality, obscenity and drunkenness at the Phalen beach. They even presented a petition to the mayor charging that their property values were depreciating as a result. That must have been some scandal.

Lise Molton, Minneapolis.

That was in the mid-1930s. The newspapers described the residents' accounts of "obscene auto-bathing parties" at all hours or the night that attracted "thieves, hoodlums and loafers." They demanded vigilant police supervision and asked for establishment of a second beach at the north end of the lake. Apparently no one lived there then.



Another view of the 1888-89 Wabasha street bridge. Minnesota Historical Society photo. See article starting on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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