

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

A Roof Over Their Heads:  
The Ramsey County Home

*Page 13*

**Summer, 2000**

Volume 35, Number 2

*Dilettante, Renaissance Man, Intelligence Officer*  
Jerome Hill and His 'Dearest Mother' Letters

*—Page 4*



James J. Hill, II (Jerome Hill) in Air Corps uniform, photographed around 1942, probably at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. See article beginning on Page 4.

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Executive Director

Priscilla Farnham

Editor

Virginia Brainard Kunz

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Laurie A. Zenner

Chair

Howard M. Guthmann

President

James Russell

First Vice President

Anne Cowie Wilson

Second Vice President

Richard A. Wilhoit

Secretary

Ronald J. Zweber

Treasurer

W. Andrew Boss, Peter K. Butler, Charlotte H. Drake, Mark G. Eisenschenk, Joanne A. Englund, Robert F. Garland, John M. Harens, Judith Frost Lewis, John M. Lindley, George A. Mairs, Marlene Marschall, Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Linda Owen, Marvin J. Pertzik, Vicenta D. Scarlett, Glenn Wiessner.

### EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chair; James B. Bell, Thomas H. Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Pat Hart, Virginia Brainard Kunz, Thomas J. Kelley, Tom Mega, Laurie Murphy, Vicenta Scarlett, G. Richard Slade, Laurie Zenner.

### HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

Elmer L. Andersen, Olivia I. Dodge, Charlton Dietz, William Finney, William Fallon, Otis Godfrey, Jr., Robert S. Hess, D. W. "Don" Larson, George Latimer, Frank Marzitelli, Joseph S. Micallef, Robert Mirick, Samuel Morgan, Marvin J. Pertzik, J. Jerome Plunkett, James Reagan, Rosalie E. Wahl, Donald D. Wozniak.

### RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Rafael Ortega, chairman  
Commissioner Susan Haigh  
Commissioner Tony Bennett  
Commissioner Dino Guerin  
Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt  
Commissioner Janice Rettman  
Commissioner Jan Wiessner

Paul Kirkwold, manager, Ramsey County

*Ramsey County History* is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 2000, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Fax 651-223-8539; e-mail address admin@rchs.com.; web site address www.rchs.com

# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 35, Number 2

Summer, 2000

## CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 Dilettante, Renaissance Man, Intelligence Officer  
Jerome Hill and His World War II Letters from  
France to His 'Dearest Mother'  
*G. Richard Slade*
- 13 A Roof Over Their Heads  
The History of the Old Ramsey County 'Poor Farm'  
*Pete Boulay*
- 20 Plans for Preserving 'Potters' Field'—Heritage of the  
Public Welfare System  
*Robert C. Vogel*
- 22 Recounting the 1962 Recount  
The Closest Race for Governor in Minnesota's History  
*Thomas J. Kelley*
- 24 Growing Up in St. Paul  
After Fifty Years, You Can Go Home Again  
*Penny Payte McLeaish*
- 26 Books, Etc.

Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

## Message from the Editorial Board

Because the more recent issues of *Ramsey County History* have concentrated on the mid-nineteenth century and the area's pioneer heritage, this issue shifts to the mid-twentieth century with the wartime experiences of Jerome Hill, grandson and namesake of the Empire Builder, James J. Hill. Historian and author G. Richard Slade uses Jerome Hill's letters to his mother while Hill was serving as an Army Air Forces intelligence officer in France in the summer of 1944 as a window on southern France and Paris immediately following liberation by the Allies. Jerome Hill's reports of what he saw allow the reader to glimpse Paris through the eyes of an observer who knew it well before the German army overran it in 1940. We then turn to a subject close at hand—the story of the Ramsey County "Poor Farm" and its adjacent cemetery in Maplewood. Authors Pete Boulay and Robert C. Vogel both make a strong case for the value and usefulness of local history in current policy-making decisions. Rounding out this issue is Tom Kelley's account of the 1962 gubernatorial election recount. Although the recount itself is a familiar story in Minnesota politics, Kelley provides the perspective of an insider who participated in the process as the state's first Election Procedures Advisor. His reminiscences remind us that balloting in elections is a serious business that is sometimes overlooked in the heat of a campaign.

*John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board*

## Books, Etc.

### *John O. Johnson, From Norway to White Bear Lake*

John W. Johnson  
John W. Johnson, White Bear Lake,  
1999

197 pages, \$19.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Mary Jane LaVigne

Every age has its inventor heroes, tinkering minds engaged in figuring out what can be done with new tools. Today they thrive in a cyber realm, but a century ago they were in barns and bike shops, solving more fundamental technical questions like internal combustion and aviation. Just such a life is detailed in a new biography, *John O. Johnson, From Norway to White Bear Lake*. Johnson (1875 to 1963) founded Johnson Boat Works, which for 102 years built sailboats on the west shore of White Bear Lake.

More than a boat builder, Johnson was a keen observer of his environment, a process that yielded innovations in several areas. His experiments in aviation led to the first powered flight in Minnesota. The rotary snowplow he patented in the early 1920s was the origin of a mechanism used in modern snowplows. But Johnson is best remembered for his revolutionary "scow" yacht design. Models of the flat-hulled craft have earned inclusion in the Smithsonian. The accomplishments detailed in this book justify local pride and merit broader interest.

True to his type, Johnson had little formal education. On his own at an early age, he hired on to vessels sailing the coast of his native Norway. He credited time spent watching the prow of a whaling ship for his insights on airplane wings and boat hulls.

Author John W. Johnson has written an account of his grandfather that is both personal and well-researched. The author's decade-long pursuit of genealogy enriches the book with detail, but it's the stories passed through



Boat-builders John O. Johnson, left; and Gus Amundson, right, with an unidentified winner, circa 1910. All photos with this review are from the author.

the family that reveal what made the man tick.

One tale seems particularly emblematic. As a teenager, Johnson became the ward of a retired sea captain. There was talk of a future position on a fine sailing ship, but Johnson's sharp tongue ruined it. "As he sent Johan away, he pointed to a great ship in the harbor. It was the sailing ship he had been waiting for, but now the opportunity was lost because of the argument with the old man's wife." Sailboats would be knotted with opportunity throughout Johnson's life.

That life took a new tack when the young man met White Bear boat builder Gus Amundson, who had returned to Norway to visit family. "If you come to America, you can work for me building boats," Amundson told the fourteen-year-old. It took Johnson four years to earn the passage.

In 1893, John O. Johnson arrived in White Bear Lake and took up both em-

ployment and residence with Amundson. The author uses reminiscences to give the reader a sense of time and place. Gus Amundson's son remembered the early gasoline engine that powered boat works tools. It had a "six-foot diameter fly-wheel. At the start of the day, my father would stand on the spokes of the fly-wheel to get the engine to turn over and start. When I walked to school, I could hear that engine going chug-chug-chug."

That was the era when the quest for yachting honors led St. Paul's elite into fierce competition for the fastest sailboats and the most nimble crew. The young Johnson's skill with a sail soon made him a popular extra hand for the Saturday races. Not content to be mere ballast, Johnson conceived design changes he was convinced would make the boats go faster. Apparently, neither language barriers nor class differences made the immigrant shy in sharing his ideas. When grocery heir Chauncey Milton Griggs

agreed to put Johnson's theory to the test, his altered boat came in first.

The next few years brought innovations that are still essential elements of modern racing yachts. The "Weirdling" built by Johnson in 1898 pioneered the use of bilge boards in place of center boards. Then in 1900 Griggs financed Johnson's radical new flat-bottomed sloop. Striking off on his own in 1896, Johnson had lost access to Amundson's workspace and power tools. Johnson built the first scow with hand tools in the winter-shuttered lunchroom owned by his mother-in-law. The author gives a thorough description of the prototype's construction, offering specifics to satisfy the knowledgeable reader and vivid images to keep others engaged.

The scow matched Johnson's claims for speed. Before long he established his own backyard boat works just across the railroad tracks from the lake and next door to his mentor, Amundson. But Johnson didn't limit himself to building boats for the wealthy. The sky was the next limit he tested.

It was just six years after the Wright brothers' historic flight that Johnson pulled his "giant dragonfly" of an airship onto the frozen surface of White Bear Lake. In January of 1910, the *St. Paul Dispatch* reported that "in an areoplane which he constructed himself along original lines, Mr. Johnson made a flight of 200 feet at the lake yesterday." Characteristically, the pilot described the crash landing as "my first success."

Author Johnson records more than the momentous events in his grandfather's life. There are small particulars of family, friends, and neighbors. There are glimpses into the families of prominent summer denizens, Lucius Ordway and C. M. Griggs. If extra cargo was carried back from Canadian regattas during prohibition, a distance of seventy-five years makes the story amusing, rather than embarrassing.

In writing primarily for his own family, the author includes material tangential to the boat works story. For instance, there is an extensive genealogy, as well as love letters between the inventor's sister and her seaman husband. Since these are included in a separate chapter, they are easily skipped by the uninterested. Or



*J. O. Johnson's early snowplow attached to a caterpillar-type tractor.*



*Scale model of the "Minnezitka" at the Smithsonian Institution.*

they can be read like a yellowed stack of envelopes found in an old dresser drawer. Readers will forgive the extra family stories when the author captures his grandfather so fully. His is a snapshot not only of an interesting man but of a time and place as well.

The book is available from Lake County Booksellers, 4766 Washington Square, White Bear Lake, MN, 55110.

*Mary Jane LaVigne is the editor of the Lake Area Preserver, a publication of the White Bear Lake Area Historical Society.*



*Dairy herd at the Ramsey County Home in Maplewood in 1923. Minnesota Historical Society photograph. See Pete Boulay's history of the Ramsey County "Poor Farm" beginning on page 13.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society  
323 Landmark Center  
75 West Fifth Street  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

Address Service Requested

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage  
PAID  
St. Paul, MN  
Permit #3989