

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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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.

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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.

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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

Growing Up in St. Paul

After Fifty Years, You Can Go Home Again

Penny Payte McLeaish

Thomas Wolfe was wrong. You *can* go home again—if home is St. Paul, Minnesota. I left St. Paul in 1946 as a child of eleven to move with my parents and younger sister to the Rio Grande valley of Texas on the Mexican border. I went back for summer visits into the early 1950s but then married and was busy raising children and teaching school and didn't return except for two brief trips, until 1995 when my aunt became seriously ill.

As I prepared myself emotionally for this trip, I told myself that everything would have changed, that most of the places of my childhood would no longer be there. The Rio Grande valley is a new and rapidly growing area where change is constant. The house where I raised my children there is gone, replaced by an apartment building. The church that I attended through junior high and high school is gone, replaced by a larger one. The high school where I taught for many years is gone, replaced by a new one. So, I was completely unprepared to find virtually nothing had changed in St. Paul.

As I drove around Midway area in the beautiful city of my childhood, looking for landmarks, they were all there. I thought that the neighborhood theaters were a thing of the past, replaced by mega-theater complexes, but there they were: the Grandview and the Highland. Seeing them brought back memories of Saturday afternoon movies. Strangely enough, I don't remember any specific movies, but I do remember the newsreels of the war years. One particularly strong picture in my mind is of John L. Lewis and his huge bushy eyebrows, leading the coal miners on strikes.

A few landmarks had changed. The St. Clair Theatre is now a health club, and Jerry's Drug store on the corner of St. Clair and Hamline had become a second-



"This is a picture of my grandmother's house (and my aunt's) at 1727 Portland." Both photographs are from the author.

hand clothing store. During World War II, Jerry would post a sign in the window notifying the neighborhood children when he received a shipment of bubble gum, a rare treat because of the shortage of chicle. We would then line up for our ration—two pieces each at a penny a piece. At my grade school, Randolph Heights, there was a thriving black market. Anyone willing to part with his treasure could easily sell it for a nickel a piece.

As I made my pilgrimage to my old haunts, I found my grade school of more than fifty years ago. This was where I filled books with stamps that we all purchased for a dime each. When the book was filled, we were to receive a "War Bond." I don't think I ever got mine filled, but I remember the rallies in the

school auditorium where we were urged to "do our part." My main contribution to the war effort was to don a red and white striped skirt and a blue blouse with white stars on it that my grandmother had made and go around to all the classes, collecting tinfoil from my fellow students. Exactly what this accomplished, I don't know, but I felt very important.

There were signs, of course, as I drove around, that this was not the St. Paul of the 1940s. Obviously, the streetcars that used to run by our house on St. Clair are long gone. The vacant lot across the alley from our house, where the neighborhood had a communal "victory garden" during the war, now has a house on it. Along Grand Avenue, where my aunt spent her last years after selling the family home on Portland Avenue, I found a vibrant, eclectic mix of new and old. Coexisting alongside elegant old apartment houses (one which still carries the name Malloy, my great, great, aunt) are trendy shops, sidewalk cafes, Starbucks, Blockbuster, Pier One. It is a graceful coexistence, the new complementing the old.

In the same location it has occupied since 1935 on Grand Avenue, there was The Lexington, better known simply as "The Lex." While this legendary restaurant has gone through several transformations, it apparently remains a popular spot. As I drove by, I could almost hear my parents saying, as they often did to friends in the 1940s, "Meet us at The Lex." And then on to 1727 Portland and the most poignant landmark of all, my grandmother's house with its wonderful attic filled with treasures that included a trunk with old clothes (I particularly remember a black velvet opera cloak) and furniture which my sister and I arranged and rearranged endlessly. The house is still there, of course, but it seemed smaller as I drove past.

My sister and I made several pilgrimages to St. Paul between the spring of 1995, when our aunt became ill, and January of 1998 when she died. I was struck by many emotions during those trips home. Mostly, of course, I was grief-stricken to see a beloved aunt who had been such a dominant influence in my life sinking into dementia. This was a woman who had helped found the first women's investment club in St. Paul, who had been the supervisor of operations for the whole Minnesota State Parks system and who, into her early 80s, still enrolled in classes at nearby St. Thomas College. Now she could not remember the names of her health care providers. But I was also struck by a surprising sense of re-discovery of family. We had maintained a close relationship with our aunt because she visited us in Texas regularly, usually at Christmas, although she never really got used to having tamales, instead of oyster stew, on Christmas Eve. However, we had not stayed in close touch with the rest of the family. Many of the relatives of her generation had died, of course, but I was surprised at how close I felt to those who were still here. I had not felt that sense of connectedness and of family since I was a child.

It grieved me to know that having re-discovered a family I had almost forgotten I had, I would soon lose them again. Once she was gone, there would be no real reason to return. I also was struck by a strong sense of continuity that is rare in this increasingly mobile society. Most of my family still live in the lovely old Midway area of St. Paul where I had lived. There is a sense of "place" that seems unique to me in St. Paul. Even the aisles in Kowalski's Grocery Store on Grand are named for the streets in that part of St. Paul—those streets of my childhood that are etched indelibly in my mind: Portland, Summit, Osceola, Fairmount, Ashland. My aunt's friends still belong to The Kildysart Club of which my grandmother was a charter member in 1922. It was formed for the purpose of educating priests in Ireland and named after a school in Ireland. One of my childhood memories is of my grandmother polishing the silver because she was having a Kildysart meeting that week. And appar-



"Left to right is my sister Ginny, my mother, me, and my aunt. I think it was taken in 1947 or '48."

ently, on Portland and Summit and Grand, women are still polishing their silver when they are having "Kildysart."

In January of 1998 my aunt passed away. Her funeral mass was held at St. Mark's where her mother's and father's funerals had been held. After mass, we drove down Summit Avenue to the College Club for a brunch. Summit Avenue is surely one of the most beautiful streets in America. It set a standard for me in my childhood that no place has been quite able to equal, with its vast boulevard studded with magnificent old trees and lined on each side with turn-of-the-century-mansions, stretching from the bluffs of the Mississippi to the majestic Cathedral overlooking downtown and the state Capitol. On the way to the College Club, in the old Archer home next door to the Governor's mansion, we passed the house where Scott Fitzgerald had once lived, and I was reminded of a funny story my aunt had told me. A friend of hers lived in the house many years later. One day when she came home from work, a neighbor told her that a young man had come by to see her. He said he just wanted to stand in her bedroom. Somewhat taken aback, she waited for him to come back and explain. When he returned later that evening, he said he was a college student writing a paper on Fitzgerald and just wanted to stand in the room where Fitzgerald had written and soak up the aura.

During these visits throughout my aunt's final illness, I was struck by the feeling, here in the city of my childhood, of being a child again, or at any rate of being much younger than I now am. At home in Texas I am a grandmother, but in St. Paul, our relatives referred to my sister and me as "the girls," and strangely enough I felt the role. Perhaps Eliza Doolittle was right when she observed that the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not so much how she acts as how she's treated. One of my aunt's caregivers, who seemed to view my sister and me as a threat, commented, rather snidely, "How does it feel, at your age, to be referred to as 'the girls'?" Her comment, though hostile, was perceptive, and the answer is that it felt good. It felt like home.

Penny Payte McLeaish, a retired high school teacher of English, American government and history, lives in McAllen, Texas, with her husband, an attorney. She is the daughter of Peter and Virginia Farrell Payte and the granddaughter of Jean Gavin Payte, who worked for many years at Frank Murphy's clothing store in downtown St. Paul. Her brother, Frank Gavin, was at one time president of the Great Northern Railroad. The author's aunt, Dorothy Farrell, of whom she writes here, was her mother's sister.



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.
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