

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*Harvest of Victims:
St. Paul's Smallpox
Epidemic of 1924*

Page 10

Summer, 2003

Volume 38, Number 2

Fog and a Dark October Night

**The Fabled Wreck of the 'Ten Spot'
In Its Plunge to the River Below**

—Page 4



The wreck of Terminal Railway's No. 10 on October 15, 1912 when the 145,000-pound locomotive, tender, and eight cars plunged off the railroad's swing bridge into the Mississippi twenty-five feet below. Photograph from the Davis, Kellogg and Severance Case Files at the Minnesota Historical Society collections. See article beginning on page 4.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue of *Ramsey County History* returns to the first decades of the twentieth century with two compelling accounts of losses of life: the wreck of the locomotive "Ten Spot" on a foggy night in 1912 and the virulent smallpox epidemic in St. Paul and Minneapolis in 1924–25. In our lead article, labor historian Dave Riehle recounts what happened on the Terminal Railway swing bridge across the Mississippi River on the border of Ramsey and Dakota counties in South St. Paul and how the accident killed the locomotive's engineer. Paul Nelson then tells us how smallpox spread through the Twin Cities, killing many more in Minneapolis than in St. Paul, over a fourteen-month period and how vitally effective vaccination was against that dread disease. In light of current public debate over the need for vaccination of large numbers of the populace against smallpox, Nelson's research provides a cautionary episode from Minnesota's public health records.

Moving from problems in industrial safety and the efforts of public health officials in the prevention of a highly communicable disease, this issue finishes with two charming and nostalgic articles. The first, written by Paul Johnson, is about the enigmatic Minnie Dassel (1852–1925), a long-time St. Paul resident who was well-connected but fell on hard times and yet was always willing to help others in need. This issue concludes with Carleton Vang's recollections of summer swimming holes and the State Fair neighborhood of his carefree youth in the 1930s while growing up in St. Paul's Midway area.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

The Story of Minnie Dassel—Was She a Mysterious ‘Countess’ Who Settled in St. Paul?

Paul Johnson

This is the story, shrouded somewhat in mystery, of a young woman who worked in St. Paul for fifty-five years during the late years of the nineteenth century, a time when women were just emerging into the wage-earning force.

Her name was Minnie Dassel. Whispers surrounded her that she was a German countess, that her parents had given up their titles “for political reasons” and settled in New York state. Minnie never acknowledged the rumors and the truth died with her years later. What is known, however, is that three children were born to the Dassels; that Minnie herself was born in Ohio on December 3, 1852; and that she came to St. Paul with her older brother, Bernhard, sometime around 1870. Bernhard, for whom the town of Dassel, Minnesota, is named, was at that time a clerk with the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad and lived at 214 East Eighth Street with Herman Trott, the railroad’s land commissioner and treasurer. In 1875 Dassel became secretary of the railroad’s Land Department and established a residence in the Forepaugh block. Both Dassel and Trott lost their jobs during the bankruptcy of the St. Paul and Pacific and James J. Hill’s takeover of the line, and Dassel seems to have disappeared from history.

His sister Minnie did not. Her extraordinary life, with its threads of romance, was described at the time of her death on October 19, 1925, in a long article published in the October 20 issue of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. Although she was born in the United States, Minnie Dassel apparently “received her schooling in the old country, where she was looked after and given every social advantage by an aunt. She spoke French fluently, but was

taught nothing of business life,” not unusual for her time and station in life but an omission that would present a challenge when she grew up.

She was said to “have money” and she moved in a St. Paul social circle that “included such well-known citizens as Governor and Mrs. William M. Merriam, General and Mrs. M. R. Morgan, and Mr. and Mrs. Henry Wedelstaedt. She knew the Merriams so well that she lived at one time in their home back of the state Capitol, and after Governor Merriam’s death she often visited Mrs. Merriam there.” She moved also in “the army set at the military post of forty and fifty years ago” (the 1880s and 1890s).

Her younger brother handled the investment of Minnie’s money but, shortly before his death, he lost it all, including his own patrimony, perhaps in the frequent financial crises of the time. It was then that Minnie Dassel faced the problem of making her own way in the world. She mastered shorthand and began to teach it. She held a clerical job at the World’s Fair in Chicago. Back in St. Paul, she taught shorthand for Jennie D. Hess, founder of the Hess Business College, and continued there after the school was bought by D. S. Coffey—all told some twenty-five or thirty years. When M. E. Nichols bought the school and consolidated it with the Nichols Expert School, she taught there for another two or three years.

Friends told the *Pioneer Press* at the time of her death that her deep interest in charity and her “tireless ‘doing’ for others left her always poor. . . .” She lived from hand to mouth because of the help she continued to give to others. At Christmas she sent candy and as much money as she could to every resident of

the Home for the Friendless and she was a frequent visitor at Bethesda Hospital where she visited and read to patients who had no friends or relatives. Mrs. Merriam left her \$500 but it went to her friends.” When a small annuity from her aunt in Germany proved to be not enough to meet Minnie Dassel’s living expenses, her personal charities were more important to her than her personal needs, so she continued to teach pupils in her then-fashionable apartment in the Portland block on Broadway. She taught evenings until a few days before her death at the age of seventy-three.

A thread of romance that touched two continents colored her life. As a school girl in Germany, she met George Muller, a German army officer. He too emigrated to America and the attachment between them was lifelong. For some reason they never married. Muller, who also was alone in the world, became a judge of probate court in Willmar, Minnesota, and when he died, also in 1925 at the age of eighty-five, he left his home and other property to Minnie Dassel. It was enough to enable her to end her night classes and to buy a cemetery lot for two in Willmar. She was buried there next to him.

Researcher Paul Johnson from Elk River, Minnesota, is puzzled that the story of Minnie Dassel seems to have escaped St. Paul historians.

THESE KIDS WON'T HAVE SMALLPOX

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Hundreds Take Advantage of School Holiday to Get Vaccinated at City Hall



Photograph from the St. Paul Daily News for November 5, 1924. Minnesota Historical Society, Collections. See article beginning on page 10.

R.C.H.S.

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