

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Crex Carpet
Company Revisited

Page 18

Summer 2006

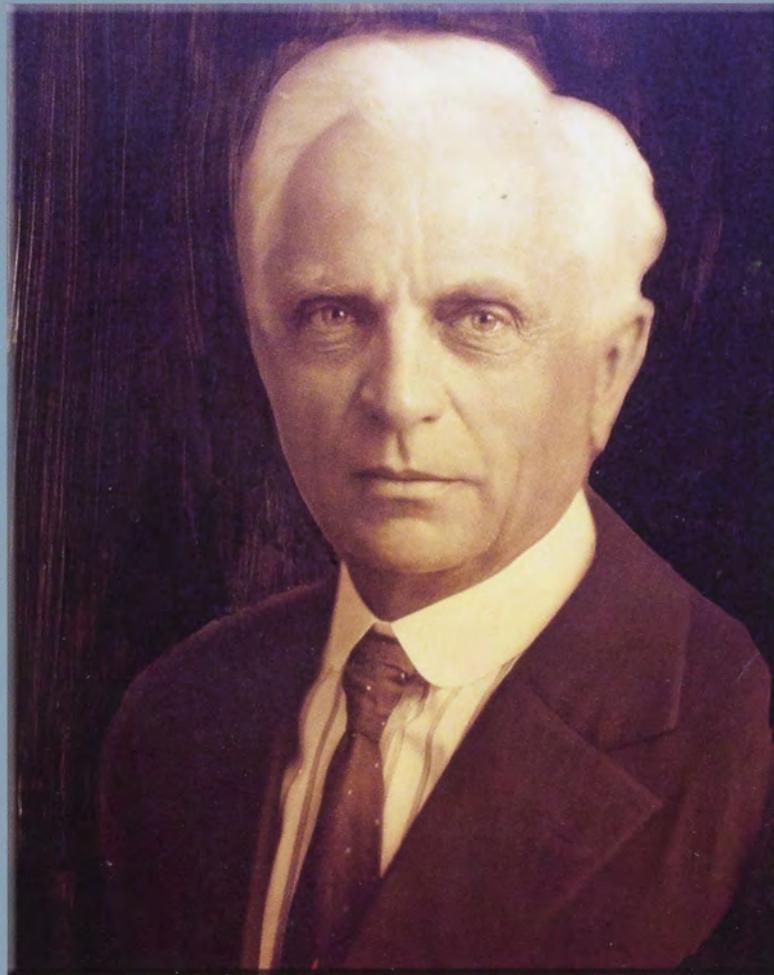
Volume 41, Number 2

“He Was Mechanic Arts”

Mechanic Arts High School

The Dietrich Lange Years, 1916-1939

—Page 4



A hand-tinted portrait of Dietrich Lange, who served as principal of Mechanic Arts High School between 1916 and 1939. Photo courtesy of John W. Mittelstadt. Photography by Maureen McGinn.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 41, Number 2

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect,
preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public,
recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make
available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major
responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 "He Was Mechanic Arts"
Mechanic Arts High School: The Dietrich Lange Years,
1916–1939
John W. Larson
- 18 "Dreams of the Immensity of the Future"
Crex Carpet Company Revisited
Paul D. Nelson
- 22 *Fighting Billy Miske*
The Heart of a Champion
Paul Picard
- 24 Book Reviews

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and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

A Message from the Editorial Board

Good historical research and writing ultimately reveals the stories of people
from a new perspective. In his history of diverse Mechanics Arts High School,
John W. Larson shares his insights on the influence of a committed principal and En-
glish teachers on the later careers of graduates, including Roy Wilkins and Harry Black-
mun. Paul D. Nelson shows how his earlier article on the Crex Carpet Company led to
a new discovery: memoirs of the company's first president, Michael J. O'Shaughnessy.
And Paul Picard outlines the story of Billy Miske, a St. Paul boxer who took on Jack
Dempsey in 1920 despite an illness that would soon take his life. We are proud to help
preserve accounts like these, which otherwise would go unrecognized, and showcase
them for our wider member audience. As you hold this magazine, you are in a unique
position to read these stories: share the wealth and recruit a new member today!

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Fighting Billy Miske

The Heart of a Champion

Paul Picard

St. Paul was known for its national boxing champions long before it was legal to box in the city. Before 1920, local promoters often sought matches for their promising new fighters in places like Hudson and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Chicago, where boxing was regulated. In a rivalry that precedes the one between the Vikings and the Packers by ninety years, St. Paul boxing fans traveled to Milwaukee to see a January 1915 bout between their man, Mike "The Phantom" Gibbons, and Wisconsin native Jimmy Clabby.

The descendants of some of these great boxers still walk the streets of St. Paul, including retired policeman Bill Miske, whose grandfather and namesake went up against Jack Dempsey in Benton Harbor, Michigan, in 1920. I talked to Bill Miske's grandson and learned more about his grandfather, a legend in St. Paul boxing.

The younger Bill Miske was on the police force from the early 1960s until 1993. His father, also a St. Paul cop, was only six years old when Fighting Billy Miske died. Thus, first-hand knowledge of his grandfather's story is rare. But Bill has a wealth of information in the form of newspaper clippings, photo albums, and even a proposed movie script on the life of his grandfather. He was approached several years ago by Hollywood screenwriters who wanted to make a movie about his grandfather. However, after reading the grossly inaccurate, "hokey" script, and sending an unanswered follow-up e-mail to their offices in California, he has not heard from them since. It's a shame, because the true story of Fighting Billy Miske is interesting, touching, and amazing.

Billy Miske, "the St. Paul Thunderbolt," was the son of Herman Miske, a German immigrant and the biggest man on the St. Paul police force. In 1918, he was diagnosed with Bright's disease, a rare and fatal kidney condition that is more typically called acute or chronic

nephritis today. Although this diagnosis was devastating news to the young boxer, he nonetheless was determined to make the most of his boxing career and to provide for his family.

Billy also operated a car dealership, but it wasn't doing well. A better boxer than salesman, Miske found himself some \$100,000 in debt. "Too" lenient

with friends and acquaintances who'd bought cars and not paid, "He gave them credit and nobody paid," his grandson remembered. "He didn't have a dime," and he was forced to make his living the best way he knew how: in the ring.

Against doctor's orders, Billy continued to box. He fought two 10-round draws with Harry Greb, the future light heavyweight champ. Knowing he had a fatal disease and keeping it to himself and a few close friends, Billy went into the ring thirty more times, three of them with Jack Dempsey. His last match, in Benton Harbor, was to be Dempsey's first defense of his newly won heavyweight title.

The fight was set for September 6,



Fighters Jack Dempsey, left, and Billy Miske on May 3, 1918. This was Miske's first fight with Dempsey, which resulted in a "no decision" after twelve rounds. These two boxers also fought to a no decision on November 28, 1918. Referee George A. Barton is in the center. Minnesota Historical Society collections.

1920. Grandson Bill Miske remembered how his grandfather trained for this bout. "Near the end he trained a lot at his home at 1387 Fairmount in St. Paul. He didn't want anyone to know how sick he was. Besides, boxers guard their secrets like military strategists, not sharing anything about their strengths or weaknesses, even if they're healthy."

Less than two minutes into the fight, Dempsey landed a hard right to Miske's body, which robbed the challenger of his power. His will unbroken, Billy clinched and hung on to Dempsey for most of the round, then barely recovered in the minute between rounds. In round two, Miske again tried to lock up the champion in clinches, but Dempsey shook loose, landed a series of punches, and another hard right to the midsection. Miske fell to the canvas for the first time in eight years of professional fighting, but he stood up at the count of "three," surprising the champion. Before Dempsey could finish him, the challenger fell into a clinch again. After the referee parted the fighters, Miske launched a wild left, missing Dempsey's head. Again, before the champ could counterattack and finish the fight, the bell rang.

After recuperating between rounds, Miske came out with a surprise attack on the over-confident Dempsey, feinting with a right and landing a left hook hard to the champ's jaw. It was Miske's best shot and he was unprepared for Dempsey's comeback. After a string of lefts to the face, Dempsey landed more devastating body blows. As Miske covered himself for more of the same, Dempsey caught him with a left to the chin that laid him out again.

Sure it was now over, the crowd apparently was taken aback as Miske got to his feet at the count of "nine." Dempsey was also surprised at the St. Paul Thunderbolt's resiliency, but he came back across the canvas and landed the final blow: a right to the jaw. The fight was over one minute, thirteen seconds into the third round.

Had Dempsey known of Miske's illness, he might never have sought him out as an opponent, but now, aware that Miske had not been in good shape to fight, Dempsey did something quite un-



This postcard of St. Paul heavyweight Billy Miske is from 1921. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society Collections

characteristic. He lifted Miske, carried him gently to his corner, and stood by to help as the challenger's team revived him. Dempsey did not leave the ring until Miske had recovered.

By the end of 1923, Billy Miske was still in financial trouble and too weak even to work out. He had nothing left but heart, and what a heart. Having not fought since January, Miske needed money, so he could give his family what he probably knew would be their last Christmas celebration together. He asked his manager, Jack Reddy, to arrange another fight. Reddy refused, afraid that Miske would die in the ring, but he told Billy to start working out again and said he'd see what he could do. Billy was not even able to work out and didn't attempt it. But Reddy, knowing his fighter's dire circumstances, arranged a fight. It was set for November 7 in Omaha against Bill Brennan, a mean boxer who had gone twelve rounds with Dempsey.

To anyone, it looked like a suicide mission, but to Billy Miske there was no choice in the matter. Boxing was his craft, a word related to the German word

"Kraft," which means "power." And it was power from the sheer force of will that Billy Miske delivered in Omaha in November 1923. At the end of a boxing career that consisted of 150 fights and only two losses, Fighting Billy Miske knocked out Bill Brennan in the fourth round, winning the \$2,400 purse. He was able to give his family one of the best Christmases they'd ever had, but it was bittersweet.

On December 26, he called Reddy and said, "Come and get me, Jack, I'm dying." Reddy took him to St. Mary's Hospital in Minneapolis, but the doctors were powerless to help him. He died on New Year's Day, 1924, of kidney failure. He was twenty-nine.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* used a big front-page headline to announce Miske's death. As part of the newspaper's extensive coverage of this news, their reporter told readers how in 1913 Miske had been working in the Great Northern Railroad's machine shop as a flange firer. According to Miske, the work had made him "so big and strong" that he was "pretty handy for my friends to have around when they got into trouble." Soon one of Miske's fellow machinists asked, "Why don't you do your fighting in the ring. . . and get something for it?" Miske did exactly that, although he admitted that when he started his career in the ring, he "didn't know anything about boxing." Undaunted Miske went on to have a remarkable professional career. He left behind a wife, Marie, and three young children. Miske's funeral was held at St. Adelbert's Catholic Church in Frogtown, and he was buried in St. Paul's Calvary Cemetery.

Paul Picard, a St. Paul native, works as an editor, writer, and limo driver in the metro area.

Sources

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This 1966 yearbook photo of Mechanic Arts High School was provided by Robert Cramer of the class of 1955. See John Larson's article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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