

RAMSEY COUNTY

# History

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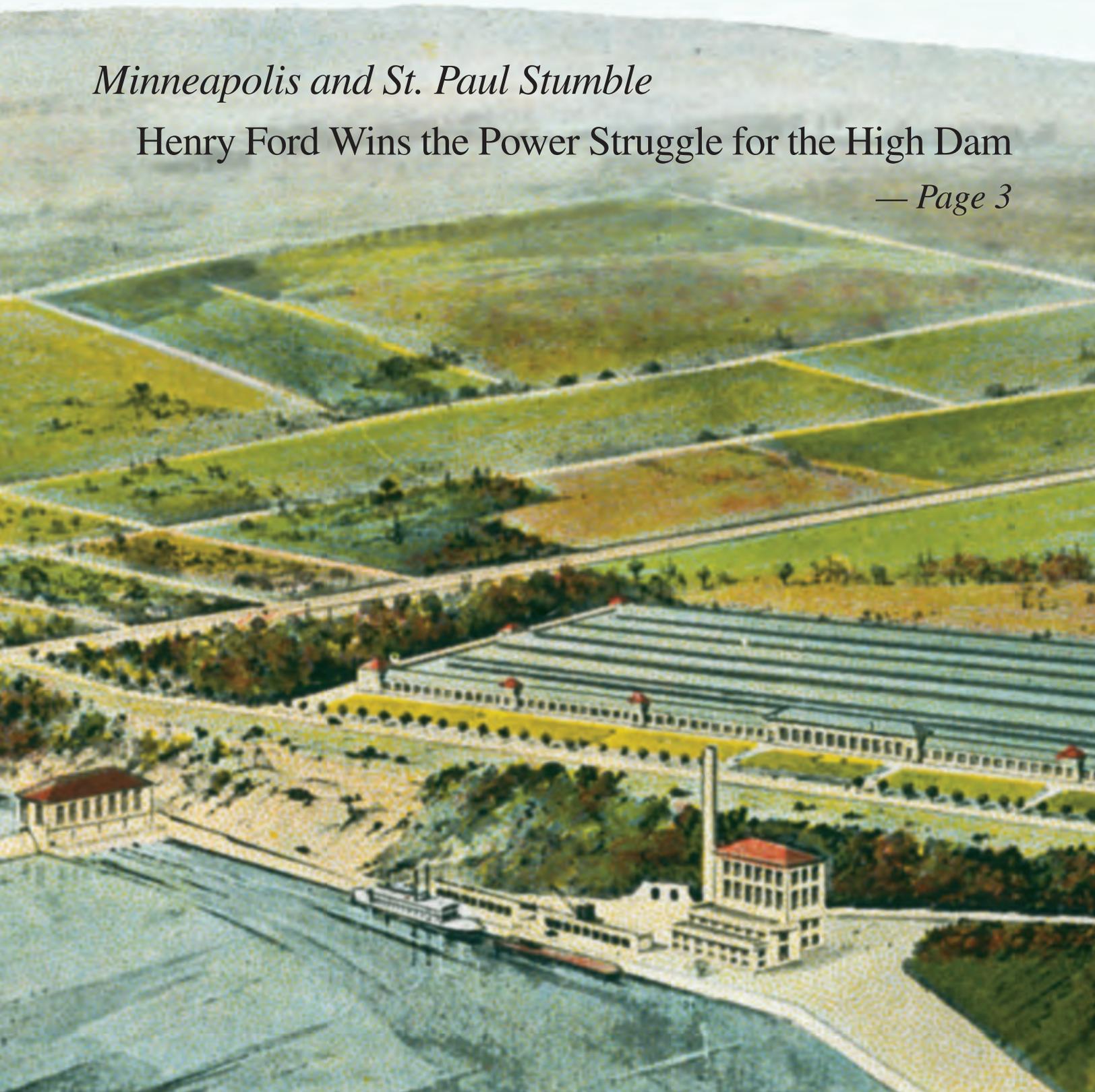
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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

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.

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### A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue brings us Brian McMahon's illuminating story of Henry Ford and his role in the licensing of hydroelectric power at the Ford Dam on the Mississippi River and its relationship with commerce and government in Ramsey County. Read it along with David Riehle's review of James Bell's new book, *From Arcade Street to Main Street: A History of the Seeger Refrigerator Company, 1902–1984*, published by RCHS and available from our office. Together, these two accounts show how Ramsey County helped drive the American consumer economy in the early 1900s: Henry Ford's commitment to hydroelectric power for the new Ford plant and the refrigeration techniques developed by Seeger allowed many Americans to enjoy a Model T in their driveways and a *Coldspot* refrigerator in their kitchens. We also offer Billie Young's mystery involving the St. Paul Public Library's acquisition of a rare set of art books, which were saved from a fire from the library's location over a candy store in 1915. And Susanne Sebesta Heimbach has written a charming memoir of growing up in St. Mark's parish. Finally, other book reviews include the Rev. Mary Bigelow McMillan's look at our own John Lindley's recently published history of the St. Paul Area Council of Churches. Enjoy, pass the magazine along, and recruit new members to keep us all reading for years to come!

Anne Cowie,  
Chair, Editorial Board

# *Growing Up in St. Paul*

## Memories of Dayton Avenue in the 1950s

*Susanne Sebesta Heimbuch*

“I’m hungry.”

With the onset of dusk, Ben, my father with dark curly hair and the build of a hockey player, stopped at White Castle on Snelling Avenue, north of the State Fair grounds where he bought a big bag of those square hamburgers reminiscent of liver and onions. He put the bag on the floor between his feet, as he drove slowly south on Snelling. We children wailed, made hungrier by the onion aroma that filled the already full car.

“Make him stop looking at me.”

Two parents and six children crowded into a station wagon filled with household items not sent on the moving van. In the last week of August 1956, we moved from 53 West Road in Circle Pines, Anoka County to 1795 Dayton Avenue, St. Paul. St. Mark’s no tuition policy attracted my parents. We had been attending St. John the Baptist school in New Brighton, an hour bus ride each way, although we belonged to St. Joseph’s church in Lino Lakes.

“I don’t want you to eat in the car,” he announced. According to my father food was eaten at a table, unless it was watermelon, which you could eat sitting on the grass, spitting seeds in a contest.

“Stop kicking me. Mom, make him stop kicking me.”

We waited, but not patiently. We wailed, stuck in various postures around lamps, chairs and boxes, while my father negotiated stop-and-go State Fair traffic down Snelling past the Fair entrance with

its memorial to famous racehorse Dan Patch. He drove over the railroad tracks, past the landmark tower of Montgomery Wards on University Avenue, and turned right on Marshall.

Mother, her brunette hair tied back with a green cotton scarf, sat in the front seat with two-year-old blond Marian on her lap. She was praying the rosary, counting her Hail Mary’s on her fingers. I was eleven. Marian and I bookended the four boys, who were nine, eight, seven, and three.

Another time, she might have asked us to pray aloud with her, but not this hot, humid and exhausted night. Marian squirmed around on Mom’s lap to look at whoever voiced the latest complaint.

“We’re here. Everybody out. Susie, wake up Stevie.” Our three-year-old had fallen asleep hugging a metal ginger jar lamp.

We spilled out of the car on Dayton Avenue and demanded our White Castles. But we were made to wait until after the truck unloaded the wooden kitchen table and its assorted, mixed-up wooden chairs, some painted and some not, and eat them in the kitchen. The kitchen was hot from having been closed up all day in late August humidity.

“Yuck. The water is brown.”

We ran the kitchen tap a long time until the rust gave out and water ran cold. Everyone drank directly from the faucet except me. I made a “Girl Scout cup” with two hands held tightly together. Mother lifted the two youngest to drink, and surprised them by rinsing their faces, too.

Men who were friends, coworkers and relatives of my father unpacked the truck until late in the night. We children chased each other up the front stairs to the landing, down the back stairs to the kitchen.

“It’s too dark up there; go get a flashlight.”



*Christmas 1956. Left to right, Marian, Stevie, Jimmy, Janny, Joey, Susie, and Ben Sebesta fill a couch in their new home. Photo courtesy of the author.*

We explored the third story attic with its unfinished beams, pine slat floor and spiders. We could smell the old timbers before we saw them. The Dayton Avenue streetlights cast a few beams upward, and we watched for ghosts.

“Hey, look at this.”

We checked out the basement with its unenclosed toilet near the middle of the south wall. Silverfish and spiders scurried when we pulled the strings to turn on overhead bare bulbs. The basement wall under the bay window was bayed, too, and the furnace was big and old.

The next day we roamed the neighborhood block east of Fairview to Wheeler, as we had been accustomed to roaming the woods and fields of the farms next to our road of three-dozen houses in Circle Pines. In Circle Pines, there had been few girls my age and none were Catholic, so important to my father. This first day exploratory urban roaming with my siblings was the beginning of my new life as a girl among girlfriends.

We met the Jungwirth’s, a family that eventually had thirteen children. Patsy, Joanie, and Nancy Jungwirth were close to my age. Mr. Jungwirth was a meat packer who worked at the South St. Paul stockyards. He liked to use his strong, workman arms to swing us around until we got dizzy.

My eleven-year-old emerging self favored this new urban life. The neighboring farms that bordered West Road in Circle Pines had sported outhouses in their yards. Here every house had toilets; every street had curbs and gutters; and those charming Old World streetlights, for which St. Paul was famous. Here, I thought, a girl could be a princess with princess friends instead of a tomboy ragamuffin running in woods and fields with only brothers for companions.

We met the Rademacher twins, Maureen and Kathleen, who did not look at all alike, one tall and one short. Mr. Rademacher worked for Butler Manufacturing as the city desk manager.

We met Larry Scovill, whose father worked on mail for the Great Northern Railroad. We met Smitty, Squeeger, the O’Connors, and the Shermans. We met the three Zackowski girls, who rarely came



1795 Dayton and Ms. Heilmayer's turret on the left. Photo courtesy of the author.

outside. Everyone was Catholic, which should have pleased my religious father.

“You should make better friends,” my father would say, distressed that so few other parents on our block had gone to college. His mechanical engineering degree gave him grandiose ideas, but he was regularly shown his place by the lady next door.

Miss Heilmayer, our next-door neighbor, from the beginning was not happy to have six semirural ruffians for neighbors. Her house had a three-story turret, with windows all around, as did the Jungwirth’s house on the other side of it. Her father had built both houses from the same blueprint, one for himself and one for his married daughter. Miss Heilmayer, a librarian at the Hill Reference Library, was the only surviving member of her family, the spinster daughter who had inherited it all.

In educated words and a hushed dictatorial librarian voice, Miss Heilmayer would come to spend many hours enumerating for my father the sins of his sons. Their primary sin was using her embankment instead of our stairs to get to the

public sidewalk from our front door. This transgression began on our first morning in St. Paul, and never abated until all the boys were fully grown.

School at St. Mark’s started the following Tuesday, the day after Labor Day, and we met more children, Billy Rosacher, Susan Childers, and others, walking in long lines on Dayton Avenue for lunch at home and back again. To the west of Fairview, the homes were larger and better cared for. Lawyers and businessmen lived there. Beyond St. Mark’s, down toward scenic River Road, the houses were palatial and were the homes of doctors, bar owners, union negotiators, and the rumor of a Chicago Mafia Boss.

My first teacher at St. Mark’s was Sister Dorinda, S.J., who taught sixth grade. She had a smiling face under her black and white wimple and I adored her. We sat in desks that were bolted to the floor, short kids in front, taller kids in back. Boy monitors passed out textbooks. We colored and sang songs while Sister played the piano.

When she gave us a big task to do—writing out answers to questions about

a story we read or twenty-seven math problems—she'd sit at her desk and knit. In the quiet room, pencil noise echoed. When students got distracted, she'd fix the laggards with one quick but serious look each, and return to her knitting.

And those knitting needles had other purposes, too. A boy might get a knitting needle to his knuckles for being off task during class-work, but never a girl. Once Sister embarrassed a girl named Gracie by straightening out the crooked part in her hair using the knitting needle as a comb.

Our classroom was the center room in the second floor center wing of the school and faced the parking lot used for a playground. On boring days we could watch kids at gym on the playground playing softball with Joe Meyers, our coach.



*Eighth grade procession from Mass in St. Mark's Church to graduation ceremony in the gym, later called Joe Meyer gym. Photo courtesy of the author.*

On really hot days, Sister Dorinda pulled the south-facing shades down over the open windows, put something famous, a speech or a poem, on the record player and let us put our heads down. But we sat with our hands folded rigidly on our desks when Sister Resignata, S.J., the principal, visited our room.

In seventh grade, Sister Dulcina, S.J., was my homeroom teacher and in eighth grade, Sister Marie Joseph, S.J., was responsible for my class. We walked from room to room, entire classes in formation, for the subjects not taught by our homeroom teachers.

In eighth grade, Sister Carolyn, S.J. became the principal. One day, a boy, angered more by the absence of Sister Resignata, whom we all loved, than by the command the new sister gave, took a powerful swing at her. He connected with the yards of worsted wool in her left sleeve instead of with her actual person, but her wimple slid sideways. I held my breath until she righted herself. He was expelled that very day.

All students went to Mass every Wednesday, presided over by "that sweet Monsignor Corrigan," as my mother called him, when his health permitted, and after his death, by Monsignor Gilligan, who was not so sweet. We girls put veils and lace doilies on our heads for Mass. The boys wore navy blue long pants and white broadcloth shirts. Our girl uniforms were navy blue jumpers with white blouses of broadcloth that needed to be ironed.

At the Jungwirth's, the ironing board was always set up in a corner between the entryway and the living room. Usually someone was ironing. Before polyester clothing, everything was either wool or broadcloth. If no one was ironing, Ann, their mother, Mrs. Jungwirth, was telling someone to iron. Baskets of clothing that awaited ironing lined the wall. A cork sprinkler fitted a Coke bottle of water for dampening.

Usually someone was washing dishes too, or else dishes soaked in the sink while Ann told someone to wash dishes.

Patsy Jungwirth and I made many tuna fish sandwiches in that kitchen, squeezing the oil out by pressing the opened lid into the can, before plopping the tuna into a bowl and adding mayonnaise. We debated whether mayo or Miracle Whip was better. We bought jars of dill pickles with our own money.

Joanie Jungwirth was one year younger than Patsy and me, but always seemed older. The Rademacher twins, Maureen and Kathleen, were Joanie's age. We five competed for best friends, usually week by week. Because there were five of us, someone was always left out and someone was always angry.

"She said she never liked you," the new best friend would say to the previous best friend. The twins couldn't be best

friends with each other, of course, so it was complicated. Oh, and it was ugly.

And there was the issue of boys.

Larry Scovill lived directly across the street from Patsy and Joanie. Patsy, Maureen, and I loved Larry. He was cute. He played a mean piano. He always had



*Patricia Clancy Sebesta, left, Marian Sebesta, center and Susanne Sebesta (the author), right.*

enough extra money—five cents—to put cherry flavoring in his Coke at the Reyer's Pharmacy soda fountain on Selby at Fairview. Sometimes he'd let one of us have a sip. Once it was me.

Several handsome boys worked at Applebaum's Food Market, across from Reyer's. They were tall and lean and dark haired, "Black Irish," some might say. They teased me until I blushed and giggled. I was so smitten I volunteered to do the daily half-gallon of milk, pound of hamburger store run until my mother explained that they were her Moriarty cousins who lived on Marshall.

When the next summers came, the Jungwirths, the Rademachers, and I sat on the concrete front steps at Jungwirth's to tell stories and jokes, mostly about sex and death.

We were obsessed with Ed Gein, next door to Minnesota in Wisconsin, a cannibalistic grave robber and killer. To fend off our nightmares and worries, and to try to scare each other, we told endless Ed Gein stories and jokes.

“What is Ed Gein’s phone number?”  
“I-812.” (I ate one, too.)

Exploring the mysteries of sex, Larry taught us to give our forearms hickeys. When Larry saw a movie at the drive-in with his family, he told us with great authority that the lead characters “did it.”

“They did not,” yelled Mary Ellen, his younger sister. When he described a lingering kiss followed by camera panning to the starlit sky, she challenged him to explain why that meant anything. But she was too young, so he changed the subject.

We girls wondered aloud about those facts of life, proclaiming that it couldn’t be. Who would do such an awkward thing? Who would let a boy see you naked?

“Go to the garage with me and I’ll show you,” volunteered Larry. He had no takers, our curiosity dampened by the spiders in the garage and by thoughts of sex being a sin.

Sometimes we girls hung out at Reyer’s Pharmacy on the corner of Selby and Fairview, reading the print off the comic book pages. We learned about dating by reading Archie and Veronica and Betty comic books. We read Seventeen guiltily because we were only eleven, twelve, and thirteen. After I started babysitting for money, I bought a copy of the magazine. The counter girl, Cathy Stevens, feigned shock. “Are you sure?” she asked.

And then we all got hula-hoops. Finally, I was good at something athletic. The best at it was one of the little girls, who had no hips at all. Larry liked to challenge his friends, Smitty and Squeeger, to toss our hula-hoops over our famous St. Paul streetlights. Then he and they would go do boy things, leaving us girls to figure out how to get our hula-hoops back from the streetlights.

We climbed the trash bins behind the Applebaum’s grocery store, where the whole neighborhood went for cardboard boxes, trying to get to the roof. Why this was important I do not remember, but once I fell and bonked my head. Patsy walked me home and then sat by my bed while I cried and held ice to the bump. All the while she said nothing.

We played a lot of baseball and softball at Aldine Field, across Marshall Avenue, past where Judy Crawford and Gene LaFond lived and others who would not



*Susie and Terry. Photo courtesy of the author.*

play. I always got right field and was usually one of the last picked, my myopic eyesight uncorrected so I could not catch anything at all, could not hit much of anything either.

Once in those most boring last days of summer, Larry and Smitty opened up the back door to a small one-floor office building on Selby near Wheeler or Aldine. The back door slanted into the building concealing stairs down to the basement, where fifty years earlier coal might have been delivered.

With Larry as our leader, we all—six or seven of us—held hands and ventured down into that dark basement. We eventually found our way up into the offices and were amazed at how boring it all was. Larry stole two paper clips for souvenirs and, feeling equally guilty and joyful for trespassing, we left as we had come in, holding hands in the dark.

As the days grew shorter and shorter, and those lovely St. Paul streetlights came on earlier and earlier, we girls developed a game of First One to See the Streetlights Come On. You had to call it, and it meant your wish would come true. I don’t know about Maureen, Kathleen, or Joanie, but while we were at St. Mark’s, Patsy and I always wished that Larry would love us.

Eventually he did date Patsy, late in our high school careers. He broke her heart, going off to play piano, while I ended up preferring highly verbal brainiacs instead of musicians.

In the winter Ben always flooded our backyard into a skating rink for my brothers to play hockey, but I preferred to skate at Aldine Field. In the warming hut, with its hissing furnace, Patsy and I professed our love of Larry on the girl’s bathroom wall. While skating at Aldine we became friends with the Lydell twins, Tim and Terry. I dated Terry in high school, and might have married him.

When our schooling at St. Mark’s ended, Patsy chose to go to Our Lady of Peace High School, because of their blue business-suit uniforms. My paternal cousins had gone to St. Joseph’s Academy for Girls, and I thought I would go there, too, but their uniforms were green jumpers. After careful consideration, I decided I was tired of jumpers, I hated to wear green and, most significant of all, I didn’t want to go high school without a best friend. I signed up for Our Lady of Peace, too.

In the autumn when we were fourteen and had been a high school freshman for three weeks, Patsy and I stood on the Dayton Avenue sidewalk in front of Miss Heilmaier’s house in early dark. As elm leaves covered our shoes, we had finished wishing on our streetlights. We teased each other about our rivaling love for Larry.

“You like Larry,” she shouted loud enough for Larry to hear had his window been open and pointed her finger at me. Luckily I could see that his window was closed.

“Do that again,” I said, “and I’ll bite your finger.”

“You like Larry,” she shouted, again, pointing her finger at me, again.

I snapped my jaw in her direction, intending to tease. But my imperfect eyesight misjudged and I actually bit her finger. She didn’t speak to me for a month.

*Susanne Sebesta Heimbuch went on to graduate from the University of Minnesota. Later in her life she relocated from Minnesota to Los Angeles, where she teaches eighth grade English to middle-school students.*

*Henry Ford was an accomplished bird-watcher and an early environmentalist who camped regularly with noted naturalist John Burroughs. His love of nature was reflected in his personal attention to the design of the Twin Cities Assembly Plant as he admonished the engineers to protect the surrounding landscape in building the "most beautiful plant in the world".*

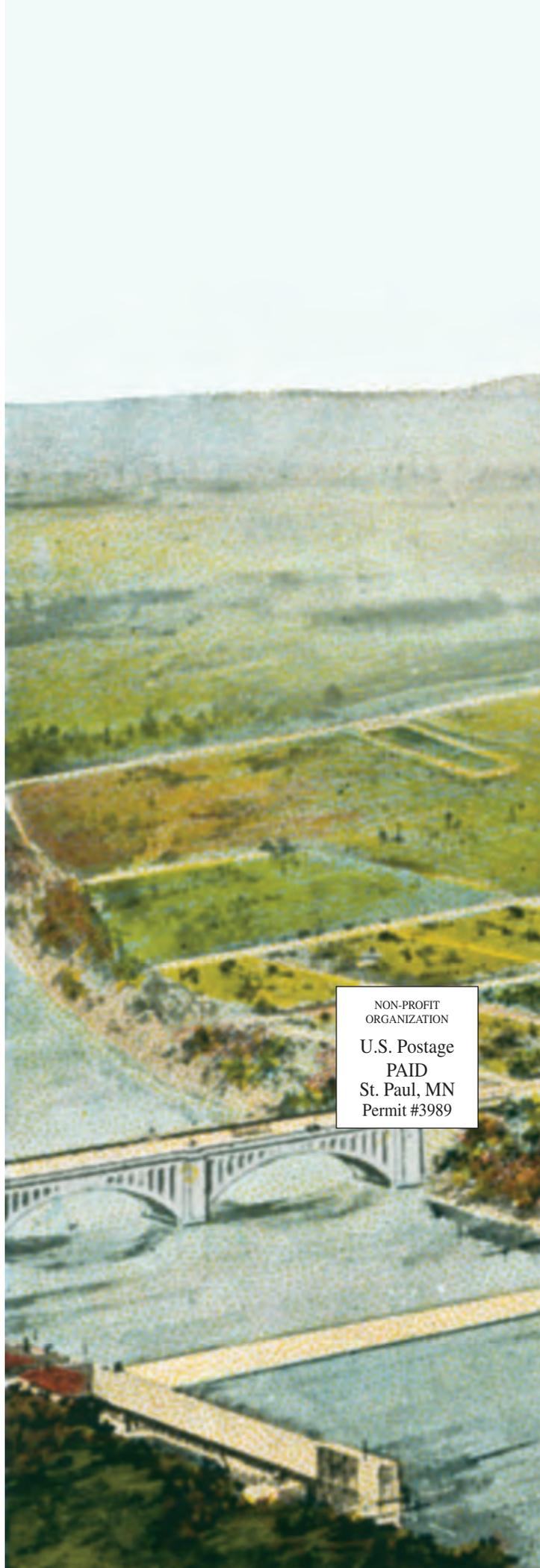
*The image on the cover is taken from a postcard of the early 1920s, showing the stately Ford Twin Cities Assembly Plant sitting atop the beautiful bluffs of the Mississippi River. This factory is the virtual embodiment of the classical image of the "machine in the garden" popularized by a book with that title by Leo Marx. The postcard shows the adjoining community of Highland Park, named after an earlier Ford plant in Detroit, as largely undeveloped. It is a tribute to Ford's environmental sensitivity that a vibrant residential neighborhood could be built in the shadow of a heavy manufacturing facility*

*Postcard is in collection of author.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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