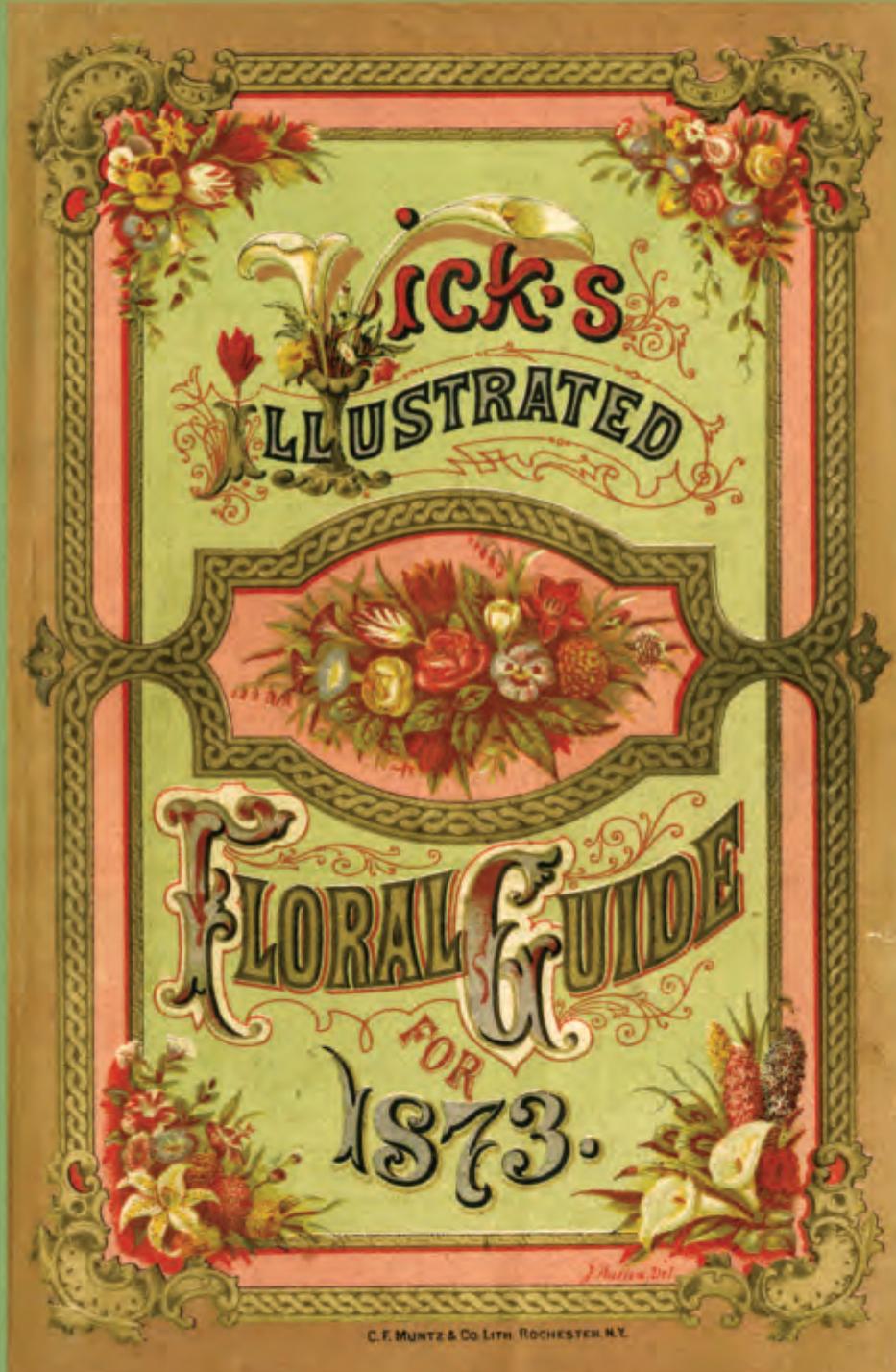


RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Summer 2009

Volume 44, Number 2

Pith, Heart, and Nerve
Truman M. Smith:
Horticulture as the Way Back
Barry L. and Joan Miller Cotter
Page 3



The cover of Vick's Illustrated Floral Guide for 1873. Truman M. Smith was a customer of this commercial nursery and he also used the Vick's catalog to help him gauge the appetite of the St. Paul market for plants that Smith raised for sale. Vick's cover by John Walton. (9 x 5 7/8 in.). Rochester, N.Y. C. F. Muntz & Co. Lith., 1873. Reproduced courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society. © American Antiquarian Society.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Many of us are newly conscious about eating locally grown foods and love to visit the farmers' markets in our neighborhoods for quality and savings. But the journey from garden to market to table has always been fascinating. In this issue we reencounter Truman M. Smith, who took up a new career as a horticulturalist and market gardener after the disastrous Panic of 1857 wiped out his bank and real estate holdings. To earn a living, Smith turned his hands to providing Twin Cities families with fruits, vegetables, and nursery stock. Although Smith succeeded, his out-of-town nursery stock suppliers did not always ship early enough, believing, in his words, that he "live[d] at the North Pole"! A generation later in the 1900s, John J. Ryan, who started out as a grocery clerk, became a long-time executive secretary of the Minnesota Retail Grocers Association. Ryan led statewide efforts to pass the Minnesota Pure Food and Drug Act, a year before national legislation, and helped bring about credit reform. But his later attempts to save family grocers from competition with new, grocery chain stores such as Piggly Wiggly fell victim to inevitable economic reality. Finally, our main book review recounts the powerful story of the Nasseff brothers, whose family saga of immigrating to St. Paul from Lebanon, and later success in differing business arenas, makes for fascinating reading.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Book Reviews

The Bond Between Brothers: From Lebanon to America: An Immigration Story

Jacqueline Nasseff Hilgert
Minneapolis:

NFR Communications Inc., 2005
259 pages; \$29.99

Reviewed by Charlton Dietz

This book will enthrall and fascinate the historian and the genealogist, particularly for those who know St. Paul and the characters who live in the city. Jacqueline Nasseff Hilgert is a superb storyteller who weaves history, family, and the *bond of brothers* together with vivid word pictures and dialog. This family history reads like a novel. But it is a true story, about religious faith, with love, suspense, family quarrels, tragedy, hardship, and success. It is the material movies are made of.

The author starts with the *Prologue* in 1980 when she introduced her ten-month-old daughter to great-grandmother Ann Nasseff. Picture this scene: "I examined the 70-year-old woman. Her gray hair was cut short and she was wearing it blown straight in a bob. She'd put on a little weight but wasn't heavy. It was weight that attaches to a life of ease, a life where three meals a day are given. Before age 60, that kind of weight wouldn't have found [her]." She wore a large diamond ring "[t]he dazzling stones played well off Grandma's olive-tone skin. They also contrasted nicely against the years when she struggled to support herself moving from shared apartment to rented room, working the lunch counter at Desnicki's Drugstore or draping tables for a Jewish caterer—never straying too far from the impoverished life she was born." Grandmother Ann is just one of the numerous Nasseff



personalities chronicled in this history, among them John Nasseff, who is well-known to St. Paulites.

The saga begins in 1906 in the mountains of Lebanon among Christian families of goat herders. The author skillfully interdicts a concise history of the region and the relationship of Christians—Maronites and Orthodox—with Muslims and Turkish Ottomans. The progenitor Nassif (now spelled *Nasseff*) decided that his sons should investigate the better life in America, which "could be a sound investment for the family." The oldest son, Joseph, twenty-two years old, was designated to make the journey, separating brothers and father.

For three years Joe was alone in America, peddling his way cross country to Michigan. Finally he had the money to send for his wife and two young children in Lebanon. The patriarch Nassif interceded and directed that Joe's wife, without the children, and brother, Betros, should go to America next. Of course, there was heartbreak to those left behind—Joe's two children and Betros's wife and her two children. But that is just the beginning of family separation.

After an arduous journey complicated by Betros's diabetes, the twosome arrived at Ellis Island prepared to follow Joe's

directions to Michigan, where he had settled. From a letter sent back to Lebanon, the Ellis Island experience is described in detail. Anna, Joe's wife, was processed through immigration without incident. Betros had an inflamed eye. He was pulled from the line for further examination to determine if it was trachoma. In 1910 there was "a great deal of pressure to keep out 'defective' immigrants." Betros was debarred entry because of his inflamed eye; notwithstanding the inflammation was caused by an accidental exposure to toxic fig juice, not trachoma.

And now comes the most extraordinary experience of the Nasseff immigrant ancestors. Anna proceeded alone to Michigan to unite with her husband Joe. Rather than return to Lebanon, brother Betros heeded the advice of a stranger, to enter the U.S. over the Texas border. His journey began with a ticket to Cuba. From there his travel is uncertain, but it is likely that he walked from Venezuela to Mexico. It took two years before word reached his wife in Lebanon that he was alive and in the Lebanese community near Mexico City.

Betros's wife, Zmorrod was overjoyed with the long awaited news. Despite the protestations of the family patriarch, she was determined to join her husband together with their two children, Mike and Annie. The reunion occurred in Mexico in 1913. The two brothers, Joe and Betros, had, indeed, reached the new world as planned by their father, but they were still 2,000 miles apart. The *bond of brothers* was compelling. Betros was determined to reunite with his brother, who had located in St. Paul.

The travails endured by the family were more than enough for a lifetime. But read on. On the rail journey from Mexico to St. Paul, the train was intercepted in Texas by a lawless gang

which kidnapped the male passengers and forced them to labor on building the railroad. Betros was among those kidnapped. Zmorrod did not know whether she would ever see him again. Her faith prevailed. At the next stop she left the train with her children in the hope for Betros's return. His servitude lasted about a week. In two days he found his way back to his waiting family at the rail station.

In late autumn of 1916, the family finally arrived at the St. Paul Union station. ". . . [S]treetscars jangled up and down Fourth Street as soot from the assemblage of trains clung to the barren trees. . . . The city was shrouded in darkness. . . . and the five of them set out on the final leg which had been an immense journey." They met a man at the station who spoke Arabic and knew Joe. He would show them the way. They piled their bags on a cart and walked over the Robert Street Bridge toward their new life on the west side of St. Paul. Joe's family lived in a small home on Eaton Avenue. They families celebrated that night and into the next day. The brothers were reunited after ten years of journeying from Lebanon to St. Paul, through parts of Europe, Latin America, and much of the eastern and central United States. For the Nasseff brothers a new life was about to begin.

The account above covers the first 75 pages of the book. In the next 150 pages the author examines the lives of the descendants of Joe (two children) and Betros (nine children) in their St. Paul environment. It is not possible to truncate the events of next eighty years in this review. The author writes with such honesty and tenderness that the reader sometimes has the feeling of invading privacy. At the same time it is uplifting to feel the bonds of family, the victory over adversity, the achievement of material success, and the commitment to religious faith.

The author writes of many familiar places, sounds, and smells. Joe was the businessman. He operated two grocery stores; one at Wabasha near Plato and the other at St. Peter near 10th Street. He converted a vacant lot into a parking lot and purchased a car to chauffeur mourners for Charlie Godbout's funeral parlor.

Some said Joe could have been mayor of St. Paul.

Betros and Zmorrod established the family at 242 Dunedin Terrace on the west side flats. It "was a two-story frame house with tar paper siding. The front door, which was never used by the children, had a small stoop with a portico overhead. . . . There was a small garage in the back and later Betros built another. He also added a grape arbor and filled the soil in the back with vegetables." Planting and harvesting and sharing the garden was an annual ritual until Betros died in 1947. It was a citadel of family events, meals, arguments, happy reunions, learning, and tragedy.

In 1929, the brothers, Joe and Betros, struck a remarkable family bargain. They arranged for the marriage of Betros second child, Annie, to Joe's second child, Michael, a marriage of first cousins. "[I]t was a covenant between two families which hoped to hedge their tradition against assimilation and a future where marriages to those of other ancestries or other faith traditions would be commonplace." Not all was well in the marriage. Michael "tried to negotiate his way out of the deal." After fifteen years and three children, Gus Axelrod, a well-known St. Paul attorney, was retained to handle the divorce. (Annie is the author's grandmother.)

A recurring theme is how Betros and Zmorrod struggled to maintain Old-World ways while the children tried to harmonize into American culture. One tradition: at the end of the day Zmorrod "would gather all the children in the front parlor. . . . She knelt on the floor . . . in front of the Virgin Mary to recite her rosary. The children lined up on their knees behind her." Some nights when the prayers were over, she would toss pennies over her shoulder where the children would scramble for them. Thus "pennies from heaven."

Betros was employed by the Chicago Great Western railroad until the Depression. Then he worked when he could, part time. ". . . Mom worked on Starkey Street, right off Concord. Louis would pick her up if he could. She'd buy rags and old clothes for pennies per pound and

that was our wardrobe," said son John. "When something good came home, it was washed, ironed, and sent to Lebanon. A hundred pounds of clothes cost \$14 to ship." Betros supplemented the family income by peddling his moonshine, until a police raid landed him in jail. No place for a diabetic father of seven. His sentence was reduced to one month, served at Ancker Hospital.

There were other challenges for the family—son John. When he was just was twelve years old, John decided he wanted to see New York. He convinced his buddy Don McCarthy to join him without telling anyone. The pair reached Eau Claire in two days, when Mac backed out and returned home. John continued, hitchhiking and riding the rails, learning how to live as a bum. When he reached Manhattan, he had enough. He hopped onto the first west-bound freight for home. The round trip took a couple of weeks. It was especially hard on his mother who cried constantly. "Facing his father for the first time in weeks, John braced himself for a fierce punishment. . . . Betros looked at John calmly and said in his native tongue, 'John, home is a very good place to be.'"

World War II found three of the Nasseff boys in the service. John, 18, and Art, 20, had quit going to classes at Humbolt high school years earlier, choosing to enter the workforce. Art was first to go, leaving St. Paul Union station on December 30, 1942. The scene was repeated when John was ordered to leave from Union Station on May 26, 1943. Because of their construction experience, both were assigned to the army engineers. Every day their mother walked a few short blocks to Holy Family Maronite Church to pray for protection for her two sons, Art in Europe and John in the Pacific. Then came the notice for the third son, Louie, to serve. He was sent to the Phillippines in March 1945.

After the war, Nasseff Brothers Builders was organized with Louie and Art as principals. Brother Mike, who was employed by West Publishing Company on Kellogg Boulevard, had negotiated a job for John, who left the army with \$200 in his pocket. John wanted to part of the

action in the construction business with Art and Louie. Louie counseled, "This is a risky deal, John . . . Your job at West is secure. Don't turn your back on it."

John stayed with West. "In 1996, Toronto-based Thompson Corporation bought West Publishing for \$3.45 billion. At 72, John had been with the company 50 years; he started in 1949 unloading boxcars and when he retired he was vice president and a member of the board of directors. Every man serving on that board had a law degree except John; his schooling took him only to the ninth grade. He closed the door on his career at West as one of its largest stockholders, then he stepped into a new role—philanthropist."

There is more about the Nasseff brothers. Nasseff Brothers Builders was successful by all accounts. Then one day "Louie told Art to pack up his tools. 'I don't need you anymore.'" Art took his tools, went home and wept. "The next morning, Art stood tall and did what everyone in the world knows a Nasseff should expect—he started anew."

John, who was then an executive at West, was in a position to patch up the rift between his brothers. He told them there was plenty of construction work for the Nasseff brothers at West if they could set aside their differences. They did, and the Nasseff Brothers Builders was resurrected.

Near the end of this family chronicle the author writes, "Men often bond with each other over the hood of an automobile, and brothers are no exception. But Art and John bonded long before cars caught their fancy. The men shared experiences now relegated to history: they were the seventh and eighth of nine children born to parents who couldn't read, write, or understand the language of their adopted country; they slept in the same bed and shared both hairbrush and toothbrush . . . All of these experiences led to a bond between John and Art cemented without a lot of attention as John sat in a downtown office [at West] and Art stood on a ladder across town [at a construction site]."

There is so much more in this book about life and personal family relationships. Perhaps your reviewer has missed

the action, but it is a mystery why this book has not received more attention. It is a gem for anyone who has immigrant ancestors or wants to know more of that experience. The book is bound handsomely in hardback with four-color photos on the cover of the *four bonding brothers*—Joe and Betros, Art and John. Your reviewer has just two small negative nits: (1) there are multiple family names—Joes, Johns, Annes, etc. To maintain comprehension, the reader must keep the identification accurate. While the book contains a complete genealogy, the addition of a simple lineage diagram would have been helpful; and (2) there is no question the book has been well researched. Citation to sources, even the author's notes, would give it added authenticity. John Nasseff and Jacqueline Nasseff Hilgert, the author, are to be commended for completing this exceptional project.

Charlton Dietz is a retired attorney who is a member of the Society's Board of Directors. Over the years, he has reviewed a number of books for Ramsey County History.

Six Miles from St. Paul: The Family and Society of Sarah Jane Sibley

David M. Grabitske
Mendota, Minn.: Friends of the Sibley
Historic Site, 2008
188 pages; \$14.95

Reviewed by John M. Lindley

In 1843, Sarah Jane (Steele) Sibley (1823–1869), the daughter of a socially prominent family of Pennsylvania, married Henry H. Sibley (1811–1891), who was then an agent for the American Fur Company in Mendota, a small community across the river from Fort Snelling. There Henry had constructed a vernacular commercial building with living quarters on the second floor that became Sarah Jane's home until their move in late 1862 to a larger, and grander, residence in St. Paul's Lowertown, a fashionable residential district some six miles away that no longer exists.

Henry Sibley, fur trader, territorial legislator, first governor of Minnesota,

treaty negotiator, and army general in the Dakota War, is well known, but Sarah Jane is largely forgotten today. Thanks to the careful research of David Grabitske, she now takes a well-deserved place alongside her famous husband.

Grabitske, a Minnesota Historical Society historian, first became interested in Sarah Jane when he worked as a guide and interpreter at the Sibley House in Mendota. Little was known of her life and accomplishments largely because following Henry's death, their surviving children destroyed anything that touched on the personal lives of their parents. Thus "her story perished at the hands of her own children." Only a handful of her letters have survived, some of which are in the Livingston Papers at the Ramsey County Historical Society.

In 1858 Sarah Jane was invited to raise money for the restoration of George Washington's plantation. She initially accepted, but she later tried to resign. In her letter of resignation, she bemoaned that she was "six miles from St. Paul on the opposite bank of the Mississippi." She was keenly aware that people now bypassed Mendota and went instead to St. Paul.

According to Grabitske, Sarah Sibley contracted pleurisy in 1849, which caused her to be "chronically ill" for the remainder of her brief life. He also calculates that having had nine live-birth children and painfully endured the likelihood of several miscarriages, Sarah Sibley was pregnant or nursing for the "better part of 22 years." She died in 1869 at the age of forty-six, leaving Henry to care for three children, two of whom were less than ten years old.

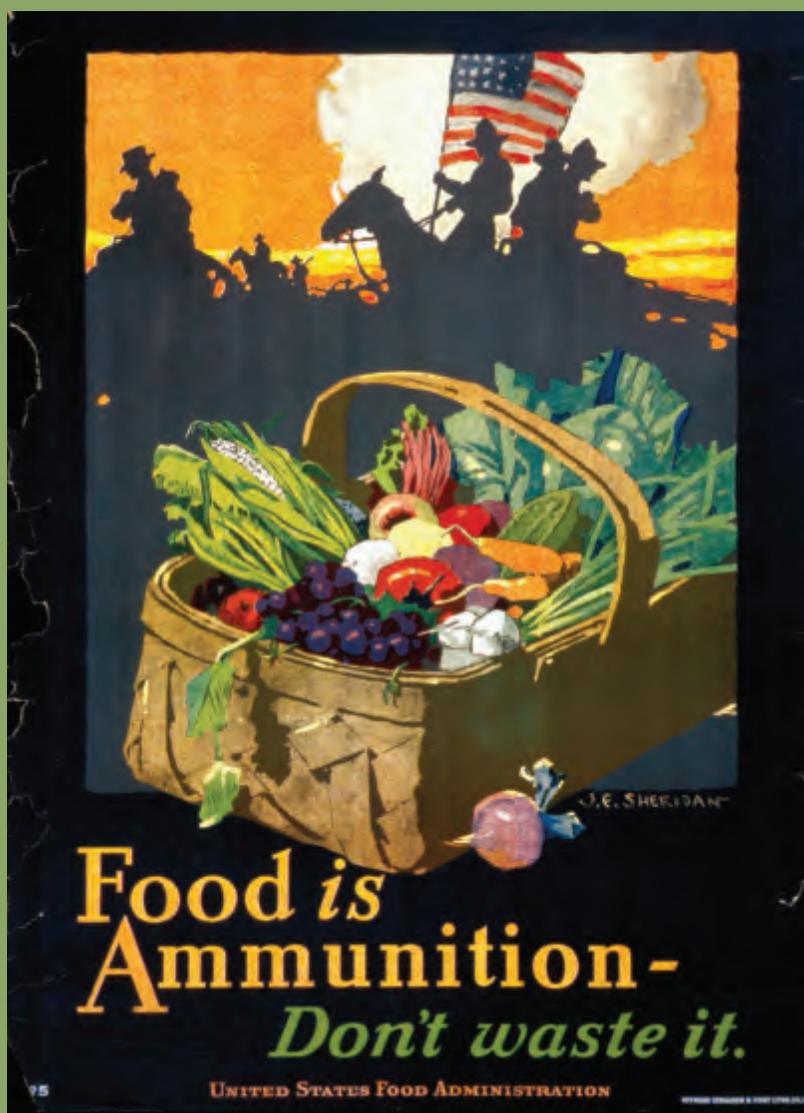
When the Daughters of the American Revolution opened the Sibley House in Mendota to the public in 1910, they affectionately referred to it as the "Mount Vernon of Minnesota." Now it is a prominent part of the MHS's network of historical sites. The ironic message implicit in Grabitske's book, however, is that as much as Sarah wanted to live in St. Paul, the only physical place that anyone can truly find her is in Mendota, that outpost that she so ardently wanted to leave.

John M. Lindley is the editor of Ramsey County History.

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Between 1917 and 1920, the U.S. Food Administration commissioned various artists to create posters that encouraged public support for Liberty Loan drives, enlistment in the army and navy, Red Cross activities, war work, and the production and conservation of food during World War I. Poster by J. F. Sheridan courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society. For more on food for the American people in the early twentieth century, see Mary Jo Richardson's article on page 13.