

RAMSEY COUNTY
History

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The burning of St. Paul's International Hotel in 1869. See article on "the men who ran with the machine," St. Paul's volunteer firemen, beginning on page 4. "The Mystery of the Leaking Lake" begins on page 18.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Ramsey County History is your magazine. Without readers who have an interest in St. Paul, Ramsey County and the surrounding area, this magazine cannot be a forum for ideas and discovery about the history of Ramsey County.

Because the Editorial Board wants to encourage and support writing about urban and rural history relating to St. Paul and Ramsey County, we invite you to send us any suggestions or ideas for future articles or topics to be presented in this magazine. Perhaps there is a favorite landmark, person, group or institution that you would like to know more about. Whether your question concerns the origin of a street name in St. Paul or the origin of a neighborhood in Ramsey County, let us know of your interest and desire to learn more. Please call or write our editor, our executive director or the Society's general office in Landmark Center.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

Book Reviews

To the Last Man: The Chronicle of the 135th Infantry Regiment of Minnesota

Kenneth Maitland Davies
St. Paul, Minnesota: Ramsey County Historical Society, 1982.

I recently stepped into a rare book store and scanned the shelves for history books. The selection was typical: volumes that the Book of the Month Club included as membership bonuses, such as Winston Churchill's *The Second World War* and Will and Ariel Durant's *The History of Civilization*; best-sellers of recent years such as Barbara Tuchmann's *The Guns of August* and the numerous chronicles of the Kennedys; and finally, a few gems. The gems, to my taste at least, are the old local history books published to preserve the "small" stories of the Midwest.

Ken Burns' recent PBS television series on *The Civil War* brought to mind a whole genre of local history, the regimental history. They can be wonderful books, sweeping the reader along with a particular vision of the "big" story—the whole war. You learn how *this* group of men faced *these* challenges. Their faults stem from the same closeness to the events and people—the soldiers become heroes without flaw and their fights become the most important of the war.

To the Last Man chronicles the history of the 135th Infantry of Minnesota. The author, Kenneth Maitland Davies, a Minnesota native, served with the regiment during World War II and the Korean War, retiring as a major. A regimental history, by its nature, tells the story of fighting and Davies takes us into the thick of many battles.



Alvin Karpis, right, heading for federal court in St. Paul in 1936.

If this military unit served on no other battlefield than the "hallowed ground" of Gettysburg, its place in the history books would still be told. On July 2nd, the First Minnesota (precursor to the 135th Regiment) played a key role in saving the Union left from collapse. Contrary to orders, General Daniel Sickles had moved his Third Corps to an advanced position—away from the high ground of Cemetery Ridge where the rest of the troops made their stand. As the sun set, a furious charge by a Confederate brigade hit the right flank of Sickles' troops, threatening to break the Northern lines. General Winfield Hancock, immediately sizing up the potential for complete disaster, ordered the First Minnesota into a frontal bayonet assault in order to buy time for other troops to come up. Poet MacKinlay Kantor wrote:

Two hundred and sixty-two, they leaped

Like birds from the spotted boulders,

An Indian screech on their aching lips,
Their rifles up at their shoulders.

The lines held at the cost of the highest casualties of any regiment in any engagement in the Civil War—over eighty per cent—in a span of about five minutes. Hancock later wrote, "There is no more gallant deed recorded in history."

Davies' book tells this story and others. His best chapters, over half the book, tell of the regiment's service in World War II in North Africa and Italy. His own personal involvement in these campaigns brings an immediacy and intimacy to the narrative that represents the best quality of a regimental history. The writing is sometimes stilted and the narrative away from the battlefield is not strong, but *To The Last Man* tells a story important to Minnesotans. The book is available through the Ramsey County Historical Society.

Saint Mudd: A Novel of Gangsters and Saints

Steve Thayer
Washington, D. C.: Pilot Grove Press, 1990.

Since coming to Ramsey County, I have listened to people when they tell what catches their interest in local history. I sit and hear tales of neighborhoods, of the power of John Ireland, of the rich and famous of Summit Avenue, of river tales. But the era that strikes the loudest chord is that of the early 1930s when, as the Attorney General of the United States said, St. Paul was "the poison spot of the nation." Under the "O'Connor System," criminals were welcome in the city if they remained clean within the borders. Alvin "Creepy Face" Karpis wrote,

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What's Historic About This Site?

The West Side's Riverview Carnegie Branch Library

Editor's Note: This is the fourth in a series of articles on Ramsey County's historic sites.

Andrew Carnegie's steel money found its way into many communities, including St. Paul where the Riverview Carnegie Branch Library at 1 East George Street still serves the West Side. The first attempt to address the reading needs of the people of the West Side was a "small station [established] in Bastyr's Drug Store, 548 Ohio Street, in 1905," as reported in a history of Carnegie branch library buildings in Minneapolis and St. Paul. By 1914 the Riverview community had outgrown the little station and acquired a site for a library building in order to qualify for support from the Carnegie Corporation which was donating money for libraries from Philadelphia to Wyoming.

The Riverview branch, designed by city architect Charles A. Hausler and built by Cameron and Company, was completed in 1916 at a cost of \$26,000.

The new library opened on September 4, 1917, with Dorothy Rogers as librarian. Besides its books and periodicals, the library had an auditorium for meetings of local organizations and it quickly became a community center. The auditorium also was used for Americanization classes and war registration during World War I.

In its early years, the library focused on the young in an attempt to reach out to their immigrant parents. Working closely with local schools and clubs, the library provided story hours, reading classes and puppet shows. A Teen Corner was established in 1946.

In the mid-1930s a piano was donated to the library and used for club meetings in the auditorium. By 1938, volunteer teachers were giving piano lessons there.



The Riverview Branch Library, photographed in 1981.

Beginning in 1945 the meeting room also was used by the Cherokee Heights Garden Club for its flower sales.

In 1958 the library was renovated, its original Carnegie interior refurbished with contemporary colors, furnishings, lighting and floor coverings. Discipline

problems in the 1950s led to a reduction in the number of school visits and, in the 1960s, a 7:30 p.m. curfew was established. Otherwise, the library remains today, still serving the changing community of the West Side.

—Steve Haebig

Book Reviews from page 30

But, of all the Midwest cities, the one that I knew best was St. Paul and it was a crook's haven. Every criminal of any importance in the 1930's made his home at one time or another in St. Paul. If you were looking for a guy you hadn't seen in a few months, you usually thought of two places—prison or St. Paul.

The story has never been told so well as in *Saint Mudd*. It is a good read, full of fictional and historic characters, written in a fast paced narrative. Thayer knows the facts and knows the city and this allows him to comfortably build his character, Grover Mudd, into the period. The fictional Mudd, a reporter for the *Frontier News*, manages to stick himself

in the thick of the action, giving the reader some history plus personal plot.

History tells, through the selection of facts, what happened in the past. Fiction, good fiction, tells a different kind of truth—a truth that brings us, through the accurate vision of the writer, into the hearts and minds of people. Historical fiction walks a mine field between the two forms. Thayer generally does a good job. One element detracted from the story, for me, at least. The title of Mudd's column, *Grover's Corner*, obviously brings to mind the charming fictional village of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, possibly a cute metaphor except that the play had not yet been written in 1934.

Get the book and have fun. A powerfully written, well researched history of the era still needs to be published in the future.

—Daniel John Hoisington



Before the days of boom boxes, canoeists at Phalen Park in the 1920s brought along their victrolas to listen to music. For a history of the park and of Lake Phalen, see the article beginning on page 18.

R.C.H.S.
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