

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

Christmas Myths, Memories and Our Pagan Past

The powerful grip of myth and memory that fastens upon so many of us as the holidays approach is not always loosened by historical fact. Amid the religious overtones of a joyous season we sometimes fail to notice that many of those myths and memories are rooted in our pagan past.

Holly, mistletoe, the wassail bowl and the Yule log all have come to us out of the mists of the pre-Christian era. It's understandable. The disappearance of the sun into the long winter night was a terrifying experience in ancient times and the beginning of the sun's return at the winter solstice called for a celebration.

The early Christians celebrated along with everyone else but they added a new symbolism—the coming of the light of the world. Except that Jesus of Nazareth probably was born in the spring of the year when the shepherds had their flocks in the fields. The candles we light recall both traditions.

There is also the tradition that the Christmas tree, now an inseparable part of the holiday season, originated in Germany and was introduced into England when Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha married Queen Victoria in 1840. Albert did import small fir trees from the woods around his boyhood home in Rosenau to decorate the palace parlors, but some scholars believe that the early Romans decorated trees as part of their winter solstice celebration.

However, the Christmas tree, as we know it today, was not imported from Victorian England. It arrived in America along with the Hessian soldiers during the American Revolution. Mince pie dates back at least to 1344 when the recipe called for chopped pheasant, hare and partridge, instead of beef and suet.

Henry VIII introduced the wassail bowl to the English in the 15th century. For the court of his son, Henry VIII, that riotous celebrant of the holidays, a boar's head was considered a delicacy.

A White Christmas originally had nothing to do with snow on the ground, Irving Berlin or Bing Crosby. White Christmas once meant the old English custom of



Evergreen garlands and wreaths decorate downtown St. Paul in December, 1940.

gathering together to sing carols and wrap gifts for the poor in white paper.

Today, Christmas has become a delightfully romanticized version of the Victorian Christmas immortalized by Charles Dickens, the Reverend Clement Moore and the talented cartoonist, Thomas Nast, who so memorably illustrated Moore's *The Night Before Christmas*.

And so it has been in Minnesota and St. Paul, although in generations past it has not been as glamorous as it is today. Before we had the carefully cultivated tree farms where our Christmas trees are expertly grown and shaped, the family Christmas tree tended to be scraggly, sparse and haphazardly trimmed.

Though we decry what we think is the modern commercialism of the season, old newspapers tell us that holiday hucksterism is nothing new. In the 1850s William Dahl, who ran a book and stationery store on Robert Street in downtown St. Paul, bought an ad in a St. Paul newspaper to call attention to his holiday stock of "SPLENDID GIFT BOOKS," all of them heavily sentimental in tone and bearing such titles as *Leaflets of Memory*, *Friendship's Token* and *Affection's Gift*.

In 1880 Colton's, advertising itself as "the only one-priced book, stationery and fancy goods house in the West," took out an ad in the St. Paul papers offering gifts that covered all possible occasions—Christmas, New Year's, birthdays and weddings.

Holiday decorations apparently did not appear as early in turn-of-the-century St. Paul stores as they do today, but at least by Thanksgiving the newspapers were filled with ads and sales promotions. In 1895 the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* teamed up with a sewing machine company to run a contest "for 10 of its famous Ideal Sewing Machines to be given away to 10 lucky little girls as Christmas presents." The newspaper published photographs of the winners in a full page of testimonials for the machines.

"Festival" shopping isn't new, either. Holiday shoppers were encouraged to embrace conspicuous consumption in 1895 when Olson's, over in Minneapolis, advertised its "Grand Holiday Opening" in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and brought in

Continued on page 26

'Be Intimate with None'

Family relationships might or not have been much different in mid-19th century America than they are today, but the lives of young women certainly were circumscribed then by custom and etiquette.

Sarah Wilkin, of Goshen, New York, was fortunate to have an older brother who apparently was all too willing to provide guidance as she prepared to negotiate the thorny thickets of Victorian society. In several delightful letters written in the 1850s, Alexander Wilkin, a St. Paul businessman and real estate entrepreneur who was then in his early thirties, describes his own social life and offers some advice drawn from his vast experience as a sought-after bachelor and man-about-town.

"I scarcely know what to write about that will interest you," he told the teen-aged Sarah in an early 1850s letter that draws a picture of social life in the frontier village. "If you were older and had 'come out' in society, I could amuse you with descriptions of balls & parties, which are numerous here this winter. Day before yesterday I attended a wedding and a large supper party. Last evening, an evening party; and a very elegant gentlemen's supper party. Tonight I am invited to a musical soiree—tomorrow night to a German ball, and on Monday to an Odd Fellows ball, which will be the grandest affair ever

known here. It is expected that 100 couples will attend. It is to be got up in New York style, with a programme of the dances and printed cards for the ladies to mark their engagements upon."

By 1854 Sarah had moved to New York, apparently to attend a finishing school, and Wilkin was generous with his advice, as well as with some financial support:

"I received your letter informing me of your arrival in New York. I trust by this time you have become reconciled to the change and find your situation pleasant. Try and improve yourself, but do not apply yourself so closely as to ignore your health.

"Be very careful what associations you form and do not suffer yourself to be too much influenced by those about you. You will find many amiable, obliging and kind hearted persons to whom you will become attached but who possess little principle.

"Be intimate with none until you have fully ascertained their character, but be kind and pleasant to all. Bear in mind your Mother's instruction and advice, for you will find none during your life more worthy. I wish you would pay attention to your French, as I may after awhile wish to take you abroad for a time.

"Attend to accomplishments as well as the useful branches. I have written to William Palmer to advance you money if you

need, as Father may not think to supply you with what is necessary. Be economical but do not stint yourself. Dress well but not gaudily."

Later, he offered the following advice on etiquette:

"When you are in [New York] city you should take pains to learn the little matters of etiquette of Society. In these seemingly unimportant items consist good breeding & people are judged among strangers by their compliance with them. It will do no harm to read some standard work on these subjects.

"You have a good deal of natural dignity of manner & grace which goes a great way. Avoid all cant phrases. They are undignified and vulgar Never call your acquaintances by nicknames as seems to be an almost universal custom in Goshen. When respectable strangers visit in the neighborhood, if you know who they are and that they move in the best society where they live, be particular to call on them. You should have some neatly engraved cards."

Wilkin's wistful hope of someday taking Sarah abroad for a time was never realized. He lost his life in the Battle of Tupelo during the Civil War.

—Ronald M. Hubbs

This article is based on Wilkins letters in the archives of the St. Paul Companies.

Myths from page 15

Danz's Military Band to entertain the customers. Only the prices were new, for today's readers.

Schuneman and Evans's ad in the *Sunday Pioneer Press* for December 15, 1895, urged readers to "spend here where everything is cheapest" and offered a ladies gold-plated watch with a Swiss movement for \$4.50; an engraved sterling silver pocket knife with two blades for 48 cents and "a real diamond ring" for \$1.98.

Cost-cutting went on in the face of competition from other merchants, and down payments, easy credit and deferred pay-

ments abounded. The New England Furniture and Carpet Company at 435 Wabasha Street, advertised its \$6 desk for \$3.95, offered a partial payment plan and waived the 5 percent carrying charge if you bought before January 1.

Zimmermans, at 380 Minnesota Street, advertised Kodaks in 1910 and coined the word "Kodakery" to describe the hobby that had been all the rage since 1889 when George Eastman invented the flexible roll film and a simple camera to go with it. Somehow, "Kodakery" didn't catch on but the term "Brownie," meaning almost any little box camera, did enter our language. These sold for \$1 in 1910 and "Special Kodaks," evidently top-of-the-line, for \$65.

Then as now there were toys, toys and toys advertised—China head dolls, cast iron wagons drawn by two horses. Autograph books with their sentimental little greetings were big sellers, at least up through the 1930s. Stitchery, then an art rather than a craft, was promoted for loving hands at home to add beauty to such practical gifts as aprons, doilies, tablecloths and kitchen towels.

At this time of year, when tradition and memory hold us in thrall, it is interesting to note how much a part of the past the present is.

—Virginia Brainard Kunz



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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