

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
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**Josias King —  
First of the First**

*Page 18*

**Winter, 1992-1993**

Volume 27, Number 4

**Henry Bosse and the Mississippi's  
Passage Into the Age of Industry**

*Page 4*



*St. Paul, photographed in 1885 by Henry Bosse. Photo from the St. Paul District, United States Corps of Engineers. See article beginning on Page 4.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

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## *Draughtsman, Photographer, Artist—*

# Who Was the Mysterious Henry Bosse?

*William Roba*

**W**ho was Henry Bosse? The answer lies hidden, as do so many other stories of the last century. The forgotten dreams and accomplishments of German-American emigrés—of which Henry Bosse was one—are slowly being exhumed and refurbished for a new generation interested in reclaiming an ethnic past. At one time a force in the development of American culture, the German-American contribution was consumed by the war hysteria of 1917–1918.

Henry Peter Bosse contributed to the development of photography as an art form in the late nineteenth century. Between 1883 and 1892, he documented the technological refashioning of the upper Mississippi river as the environment was dramatically altered by the dredging of a federally mandated channel four-and-a-half feet deep.

His origins remain virtually unknown. For the last year, historians in the United States and in Germany have attempted to document Bosse's early years. The result has been a number of frustrating "dead ends." According to the tombstone which marks his grave in Davenport, Iowa, he was "born at Sonneburg, Magdeburg, Prussia, Nov. 13, 1844 on the estate of his grand-father, General Neithardt V. Gneisenau." This would seem to be a rather definite start in tracing his early life.

However, when Professor Herman Fink of the University of Paderborn proceeded to verify this information, the trail led nowhere. Fink first tried the University of Paderborn library with the help to two library assistants, but found nothing in the standard reference works. He then contacted the Office for the Registration of Residents of the City of Magdeburg, without any results. In addition, the archives of the Catholic church in Magdeburg had no records before 1945. Furthermore, all towns or villages called Son-



*Mike Connor, the Washington, D. C., antique dealer who discovered a rare album containing 169 of Henry Bosse's cyanotype photographs, also discovered that Bosse was a talented sketch artist and caricaturist. While sifting through the Mackenzie papers donated to the Corps of Engineers, Connor found a pocket-sized leatherbound notebook dating from the early 1880s and containing maps and a number of Bosse's pen-and-ink self-caricatures. Two of his sketches from Connor's collection are reproduced here, with Connor's permission.*

*"Given his work along the Mississippi," Connor has written in an unpublished copyrighted manuscript, "Bosse may have seen himself as something of a Huck Finn-type character. Another self-caricature from a pen-and-ink Christmas card sent to Mackenzie portrays the artist as a ragged waif holding a giant drafting pen." Mackenzie and Bosse were close friends, Connor wrote. In 1885 they jointly purchased building lots in St. Paul. Mackenzie tried for several years to move the Corps' headquarters to St. Paul. He was not successful and Bosse ultimately made his home in Rock Island.*

nedorf, Sonneberg or Soneburg are located far from Magdeburg. Fink failed to pinpoint the exact place of birth, one of the primary points of investigation.

Public records provide only sketchy details about Bosse's beginnings. According to the Scott County, Iowa, microfilmed records, he married in 1895, but this was his second marriage. Unfortunately, the only solid details are that he supposedly was born in Sonneburg to Newhart Bosse and Julia Gneisenau. The genealogical record of the Bosses is completely unknown while the Gneisenau ancestry is incomplete.

Julia Gneisenau was descended from the famous General Gneisenau, remembered by military tacticians for his prescient suggestions for reform of the Prussian national militia so that guerrilla tactics could be used to hinder the enemy advance. Military historians consider Gneisenau's rallying of the Prussian troops under Blucher the day before the Battle of Waterloo as a decisive event.

According to obituary accounts, Bosse did study at the University of Magdeburg, although there is no record of his attendance. It was claimed that he studied engineering, art and classical studies. This was not uncommon for the children of Prussian military families in this period. What else he may have done during the German wars of unification in the 1860s must, for the time being, remain conjecture.

One other possibility is that he may have been involved with the dredging of the Rhine river. According to Ron Deiss, Rock Island District, Corps of Engineers, in the 1860s the Rhine was "the only other river system extensively improved for navigation close to the size of the Mississippi."

The next consideration is emigration to America. His name has yet to show up in

any publication of passenger lists. However, his name appears in the Chicago city directories for 1871-1873. Bosse apparently entered this country at the age of twenty-six and moved to Chicago where he operated a book and stationery store. He had another German immigrant as a partner in the business located near the loop business district. They survived the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, but dissolved the partnership. Bosse then worked as a bookkeeper for a construction company.

The career of Henry Bosse began when he entered the Corps of Engineers in 1874 as a draftsman. For the next thirty years he was closely associated with creating a permanent record of improvements to the upper Mississippi river valley. In those early years, staff members moved around a great deal as they completed short assignments at many places on the river between St. Louis and St. Paul. Bosse was listed as living at the Cosmopolitan Hotel in St. Paul in 1875. Later on he invested in land in Ramsey County and Duluth, perhaps following an earlier pattern of temporary residence.

In 1878 Bosse was named draftsman for the Rock Island District, with its headquarters in Rock Island, Illinois. He apparently still lived a nomadic existence because his name doesn't appear in the city directory until December, 1881. For the next decade-and-a-half, he boarded in hotels and apartment houses in Rock Island while probably making field trips in good weather. He lived in one of the centers of German-American culture in the upper Mississippi river valley. Rock Island, along with the adjacent factory town of Moline and the larger city of Davenport across the river in Iowa, comprised what was then known as the Tri-Cities. The entire metropolitan area consisted of 44,000 people on both sides of the river. There were five Turner clubs, three German-language newspapers, and seasonal theatrical presentations for the large German-American population.

But Bosse's community connections remain shrouded in mystery. He apparently never joined a church in the Tri-Cities, although on October 24, 1895, he married Hulda N. Thiele, daughter of a prominent Davenport family. Since he was fifty-one and she was thirty-eight, it was under-



*Bosse's Christmas card. The photograph of the Bosse burial plot in Oakdale Cemetery, Davenport, Iowa, is from William Roba.*



standable that their marriage ceremony was limited to the immediate families. The pastor of Davenport's First Christian Church officiated in the home of the bride's stepfather at a morning ceremony. After a ten-day honeymoon on the East Coast, where Bosse may have had relatives, the couple returned and set up housekeeping in a series of boarding houses in Rock Island.

Finally, in 1899 they moved into a substantial house in the midst of a compact German-American neighborhood in Rock Island. The neighborhood was located midway between the downtown business district and the Swedish Lutheran Synod's Augustana College. In the passage of time,

the area's ethnic origins have been completely erased from local memory.

The couple's new home, which still can be seen, was a three-story frame structure, vaguely Queen Anne in style. Towards the rear of the modest city lot was a frame shed and a two-story stable. The alley behind dead-ended on his property, so Bosse had his own private drive. It is likely that they used their horse and phaeton to take short drives to the nearby Rock Island Brewing Company with its beer garden and recreation area.

Tragedy struck the couple four years after moving into their home. Bosse died of heart failure in the city's only hospital, St. Anthony's, which was conveniently located one block up the hill from the brewing company. The obituaries tended to be laudatory in the English-language newspapers. Bosse was remembered as a professional who was cultured and well-known in the community. However, according to the editor of the Moline-Rock Island *Volks-Zeitung*, he appeared to many as someone with an aristocratic manner, who had a military bearing about him and used a heavily accented version of the English language.

Henry Bosse was well-regarded by his peers in the Corps of Engineers and they eventually named a towboat after him. The famous Diamond Jo boatyard in Dubuque had built a sternwheeler in 1881. Measuring 100 feet by 20 feet by 4 feet and originally christened the *Vixen*, she was renamed the *Henry Bosse* in 1908. It was an ill-fated towboat, capsizing on August 19, 1913, downriver near Keokuk, Iowa. A tornado touched down near the Burlington Railroad roundhouse and not only destroyed the vessel, but also killed six members of the crew. Afterwards, only the hull and rudder showed above the 20-foot-deep Mississippi river. Within a year, both the towboat and Bosse's accomplishments, as well as most German-American contributions, were forgotten in the upheaval of the war in Europe.

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*Henry Bosse's photograph of St. Paul's old High Bridge after it opened to horse-and-buggy traffic in 1889. Because the bridge offered easy access to the Cherokee Heights neighborhood, settlement of this section of the West Side began in earnest. A modern bridge replaced the old bridge in 1985. See article beginning on page 4. Photograph from the St. Paul District, United States Corps of Engineers.*

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