

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

James J. Hill and
His Oriental Rugs:
A Practical Millionaire

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Winter, 2001

Volume 35, Number 4

Attacked by a Starving Wolf
Four Sisters of St. Joseph and Their Mission to St. Paul
—Page 4

U.S.P.R.R. EXP & SURVEYS - 47 & 49 PARALLELS.

GENERAL REPORT — PLATE I.



Stanley del.

J. Bien N.Y. lith.

SAINT PAUL M. T.

St. Paul as it looked in 1853, two years after four Sisters of St. Joseph arrived in St. Paul. This colored lithograph was produced as part of a United States government survey of Minnesota Territory. Ramsey County Historical Society collections.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Our Winter issue presents three diverse articles ranging in time from Minnesota's Territorial period to the turn-of-the-century and on to the 1930s. In our lead article, Sister Ann Thomasine Sampson recounts the story of how four Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet came to St. Paul in 1851 and began their missionary work at this lonely outpost high on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi. Through her access to the details found in the records of the Order and other sources, Sister Ann provides a compelling portrait of these four female pioneers, their religious loyalty and faith, and their persistence in the face of great hardships. This is the story of the enduring influence of these devoted missionaries on St. Paul in its earliest years.

From the poverty and hardships of the four Sisters of St. Joseph, the issue moves on to the opulence and splendor of the mansion that James J. Hill built on Summit Avenue between 1887 and 1891. Writer and historian Lou Ann Matossian focuses on the Oriental rugs that Hill purchased to furnish his splendid home. By examining the available records, Matossian shows that Hill, who could easily have afforded Oriental rugs of any cost, bought many medium-quality rugs that impressed visitors but showed that Hill was what she calls "the practical millionaire." The James J. Hill that emerges from her research is a man who spent only what he needed to on his rugs and avoided any that might have qualified as works of art.

In our third article, John Larson's "Growing Up in St. Paul" tells how he and his family dealt with the serious eye ailment he had in the 1920s and '30s. He also recalls with detail and good humor his experiences as a member of the Vision Class at Webster School. Within the St. Paul Public Schools of that time, the Vision Class consisted of all the students at a particular school who were blind or had other serious vision problems. Although Larson tells his story matter-of-factly, his account is an understated tribute to the caring and well-qualified teachers who helped him (and by inference other students) succeed in their studies in spite of their medical problems.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Letters to the Editor

Ramsey County's 'Poor Farm'

I was most interested in the history of the county poor farm in the most recent issue of *Ramsey County History*. We had a distant relative who ended his days there in the 1920s. I had understood that the farm had once occupied the present site of the Minnesota State Fair but not how the fair took over that site.

Marilyn Johnston, Afton.

Ramsey County donated the site. Caught up in the rivalry between Minneapolis and St. Paul, the early state fairs, directed by the Minnesota State Agricultural Society, wandered between the two cities and elsewhere for more than thirty years until the issue of its location was finally resolved in 1885. That's when George H. Hazzard introduced a resolution providing that Ramsey County donate the Ramsey County Poor Farm site to the state agricultural society. At the society's annual meeting that January in St. Paul, the society accepted the offer "with loud acclamation and enthusiasm." The Poor Farm then moved to its final home in Maplewood and the fairgrounds settled permanently in St. Paul.

That O'Connor System

The history of the County Attorney's Office was fascinating. However, I was confused about the reference to the O'Connor system of the 1920s. I thought that the system was in place much earlier than the 1920s and that by 1920 the police chief who ran it was no longer in office.

Denise Walters, White Bear Lake

Although the "O'Connor System" is associated chiefly with the crime-ridden "Roaring Twenties," it did, in fact, date back to the early years of the twentieth century and it wasn't unique to St. Paul. Similar systems requiring known crimi-



The superintendent's house at the Ramsey County Home, 1958. St. Paul Dispatch-Pioneer Press photo, Minnesota Historical Society.

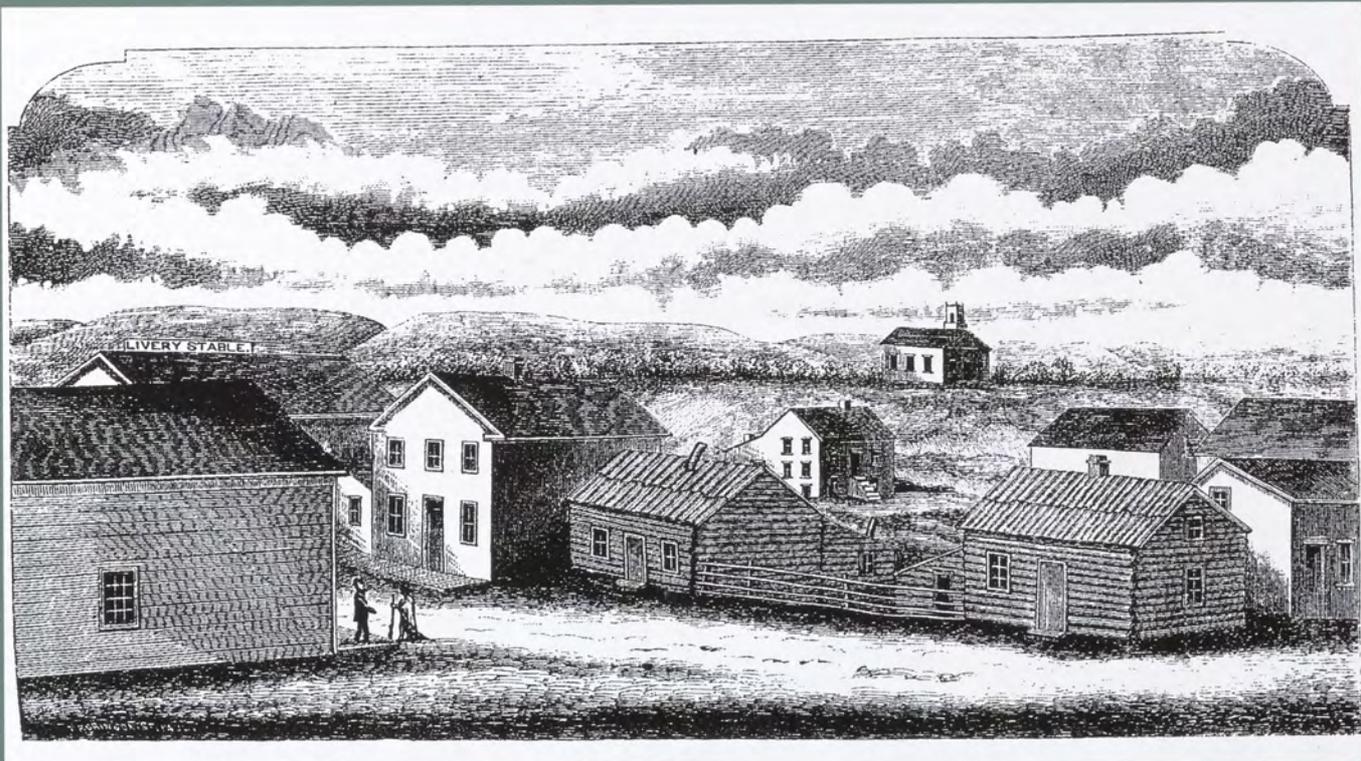
nals to register with the police when they came to town were used in one form or another by other American cities, including Minneapolis. In St. Paul, the system originated around 1900 when it was adopted by John J. O'Connor, the St. Paul police chief who was known as "The Big Fellow." However, while the "O'Connor System" achieved its greatest notoriety during the 1920s, O'Connor himself was no longer in charge. He had retired from politics by 1920.

Who or What Was Nininger?

Sometime ago I read a reference to Nininger, which seems to have been a town near Hastings. I think it was mentioned by Governor Elmer L. Andersen in something he wrote. Who and what was Nininger?

Charles L. Dockins, St. Paul.

In 1856 a young man named John Nininger, a brother-in-law of Alexander Ramsey, bought up some claims of early settlers in Dakota County and platted the town of Nininger, which was not far from Hastings. He was joined in his venture by Ignatius Donnelly, a man of many talents and much enthusiasm who would become a prominent St. Paul lawyer and politician. Donnelly was the genius in the promotion of Nininger, seeing it as a budding metropolis. He built a fine house there but the scheme, based on a shaky financial foundation, came to nought. The Panic of 1857 spelled doom for the promoters' efforts. By 1859, Nininger was a dying village that has disappeared. Governor Andersen had once hoped that Donnelly's home could be saved and restored, but it, too, has disappeared.



A sketch based on one of the oldest photographs of pioneer St. Paul as it looked in 1851 when the Sisters of St. Joseph arrived there. The log house on the right stands at Third and Robert Streets. Minnesota Historical Society collections. See article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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