

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Building Permits—  
Oh the Stories  
They Can Tell

Page 19

Winter, 2005

Volume 39, Number 4

*Curtain Up in 1933*

The Legacy of the St. Paul Opera Association

—Page 4



"Attending the Opera," a gouache by painter Miriam Ibling (1895–1985). This was a 1938 study for a WPA mural at St. Paul's Galtier Elementary School. From the Minnesota Historical Society archives.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 39, Number 4

Winter, 2005

the mission statement of the ramsey county historical society  
adopted by the board of directors in July 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

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## A Message from the Editorial Board

Beginning in 1933, the St. Paul Civic Opera Association played a vital and enriching role in the city's arts and cultural life. When in the mid-1970s financial problems caused the St. Paul organization to merge with the Minnesota Opera, local pride in the city's ability to stage and present this grand art form gave way to the realities of what it actually cost to deliver any sustained program in the arts at the end of the twentieth century.

Historian Steve Trimble tells the story of the St. Paul Civic Opera Association with insight based on substantial research, interviews with a number of individuals who were involved in the Opera Association, and sensitivity to the complexity of opera as an art form. Despite the differences of opinion on whether operas should be done in their original language or in English; use homegrown talent for key roles or hire outside, professional voices; or select works for a given season that include Grand Opera, light opera, or musical comedy, the depth of commitment of opera supporters in St. Paul was steadfast until funding problems made all other issues secondary. What shines forth from Trimble's account is how hard many people worked to sustain their belief in the importance and value of the arts as an integral part of civic life in St. Paul.

Juxtaposed to the fantasy and delight of Grand Opera in our winter issue is a detailed examination of the birth, life, and death of the DeLoop Parking Garage on Cedar Street in downtown St. Paul. On the surface, Bob Garland's analysis of the paper trail left by a deservedly forgotten and otherwise unremarkable St. Paul building whose life span paralleled many of the same years when the Opera Association flourished seems not only mundane, but also incongruous.

Yet the painstaking research Garland did in this case study makes a powerful point: the proper preservation of the paper records of the city of St. Paul is essential if historians are going to be able to recount the city's history accurately and in detail. Just as families need to learn how to preserve their own letters, photographs, and other paper records, so cities need to learn how to properly archive their many records. Fortunately, in the case of St. Paul's building permits, in 2003 the city turned these records over to the Ramsey County Historical Society and the Society is working hard to make them more accessible to all who want to search them for answers about St. Paul's built environment.

*John Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board*

# Books

## *In Gatsby's Shadow: The Story of Charles Macomb Flandrau*

Haeg, Larry

University of Iowa Press, 2004

Reviewed by Steve Trimble

*Life for the most part is very little more than a succession of horrors that must be met with whatever courage and dignity it has been given to one to display.*

—Flandrau letter to his sister Patty in 1903

When he died in 1938, the obituary of Charles M. Flandrau, "recognized as one of the distinguished critics of America," was on the front page of the St. Paul newspapers. Today, few people are even familiar with his name. That may change with the publication of *In Gatsby's Shadow*.

Author Larry Haeg says that his work is not a literary biography, but the story "of one man's character-how it was forged by his world, the choices he made and the price he paid for those choices." He uses information from letters, newspapers, and interviews along with material from contemporary authors to tell the life story of this talented but often troubled writer.

Haeg tells how young Charles grew up in a time that spanned the fading Victorian era and the beginnings of the modern age. Throughout his life, Flandrau harkened back to that earlier era, living the leisurely life of a world traveler made possible by an inheritance, and remaining faithful to the literary tradition of the genteel essayist and letter writer.

Born in 1871, Flandrau was raised in a large house below Summit Avenue at 385 Pleasant. The family was well-to-do, but there was sometimes worry about money. Raised as an independent

thinker, Flandrau never liked institutions, whether they were religious, political, or educational.

Flandrau frequently traveled with his mother, leaving his emotionally distant father behind. They often went back East or took extended trips to Europe. He always cherished these early trips and Haeg suggests that his frequent return trips were an attempt to return to a time of youthful happiness.

In 1891 Flandrau entered Harvard. His grades were mediocre because he often chose to set aside study to partake in Boston society with its teas, plays, theater and salons. It also was when he started his life-time habit of consuming copious amounts of alcohol.

But Flandrau's writing flourished. He became an editor of his college literary magazine and he was later chosen class poet. By 1893 he had sold a story to a national magazine. Stories from his experiences became *Harvard Episodes*, a somewhat controversial work once called "the most realistic description of undergraduate life in American colleges."

One of Haeg's main themes centers around the choices Flandrau made that kept him from fulfilling his literary promise. While clearly a talented writer, he never seemed to have the drive to produce work or to involve himself in self-promotion. Unlike F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis, Flandrau didn't need to write for money. In fact, he often criticized how the search for money and fame eroded the literary integrity of the two younger writers.

Flandrau was upset with the need of literary compromise. He quit writing stories for *Saturday Evening Post* because the editors changed words and cut phrases. At one point Haeg comments that the thirty-year-old author was writ-

ing these articles and essays "when he should have been writing his novel." This criticism of Flandrau for not wanting to write more substantial works is one questionable area of the book.

Another is the use of the title *In Gatsby's Shadow*, implying that Flandrau's work should be compared with that of Fitzgerald and seen as having less value. It may be that the author did not make this choice. As Haeg points out, Flandrau had a different title in mind for his own first book, but the publisher insisted on starting it with *Harvard* to make the book more "commercially valuable."

A few of Flandrau's rambles did result in books. Some of his college writings of European travel became *Sophomores Abroad*. In 1904 he began to make trips to Mexico where his brother owned a coffee plantation. The essays about the experiences were gathered from magazines and published as *Viva Mexico!*, which some consider the best travel book ever written.

In 1909 Flandrau started writing a column for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, a job he continued for eight years. He felt that arts should spring from the local level. He covered a variety of presentations and actually loved vaudeville. Flandrau's comments were often barbed. He once said a man "played the piano with fluent inaccuracy" and wrote that a singer "uttered a series of strange sounds which the program called songs." Some of this work was later collected by some of his admirers and published as *Loquacities*.

He clung to older ways, preferring wood fires for heat and candles for reading; however, he joined the automobile craze and bought a Hudson. He hired William Clark as a driver and a traveling companion and spent countless days

and weeks with him, driving around the United States and Europe throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

What money Flandrau did spend went for liquor, fine clothes, and travel, living for extended periods in Mexico and France. When in St. Paul, he started to spend much of his time in an upstairs bedroom reading and drinking. He had few close friends and was said to love his dogs more than people.

Haeg does a good job of detailing the city's high society and the workings of St. Paul's colony of writers and artists, including the times that Flandrau crossed paths with Fitzgerald, Lewis, and others. He also describes the rocky relations with Grace Flandrau, his sister-in-law, who became a writer of note.

Constant drinking began to affect Flandrau's health in the late twenties and he became even more reclusive. Later, on another extended automobile trip, he developed severe abdominal pains and was rushed back to a St. Paul hospital where he died on March 28, 1938.

Charles Flandrau once wrote that "people who write books about somebody else are usually inspired to do so by either a temperamental dislike or a temperamental sympathy with their subject and in either case justice is likely to disappear in the shuffle." Haeg seems to have avoided either extreme. He has produced an informative and enjoyable book that accurately and interestingly describes Charles M. Flandrau, the world in which he lived, and the choices that shaped his personal and literary development.

*See page 4 for Steve Trimble's history of the St. Paul Opera Association.*

### Georgia Ray comments:

*In Gatsby's Shadow* by L. P. Haeg, the recently published biography of Charles M. Flandrau, presents an interesting and real picture of the author and includes enough quotes from Flandrau's letters and publications to remind us of his intensely personal, intelligent, and humorous prose. However, as the biographer of his sister-in-law, Grace

Flandrau, I must point out a few of the distortions in Haeg's book, flaws that perpetuate a misogynistic view of Grace Flandrau and a misjudgment of her as a writer and as a woman. Some of the inaccuracies and distortions referred to can be found on page 113, page 168, and in another place in Haeg's book where it says: "After the deaths of Blair and Charles Flandrau in 1938, Grace Flandrau never wrote another novel." Haeg doesn't seem to know that Grace Flandrau did her best work as a short fiction writer and essayist, both right after World War I and in the 1930s and 1940s. Eventually, ten collections of *Best Short Stories* and other anthologies included her short fiction and essays.

The recently published *Memoirs of Grace Flandrau* (Knochloe Beg Press, St. Paul, 2003) presents a first-hand description of Flandrau's impoverished childhood, yet Haeg projects Grace Flandrau on page 113 of his book as someone who was thought to exaggerate the poverty of her childhood for effect, a cruel misjudgment. Most important, Haeg does not document some of his book's most damaging words about Grace. On page 168, paragraph 2 of *In Gatsby's Shadow*, Haeg writes, ". . . Grace was capable of spreading a good deal of havoc in her wake. Beneath her charm was a devastating vanity and destructiveness. . . ." Who said that? Was that his own conclusion? Or did Flandrau females in Tucson, who didn't wish to be quoted, say that to Haeg? Jealousy, snobbery, and especially, lack of accurate information about Grace negatively influenced all her in-laws, especially Charlie's confidante, Patty Flandrau Seimes.

The quotes of Charles M. Flandrau's and James Gray's harsh views on Grace Flandrau, page 168, may actually increase Minnesota readers' understanding of the intense misogyny, and jealousy that crippled Grace Flandrau's reputation in Minnesota, causing her to leave the state in 1955. These comments are documented.

A recently completed biographical manuscript about Grace Flandrau, *Voice Interrupted*, by this writer includes the following positive comments about her by her closest female and male friends.

There are many more, but these comments illustrate what Grace Flandrau's good friends thought and said about her and challenge the accuracy of some of the derogatory comments about her in Haeg's book:

1. "People adored Grace Flandrau." Dudie Klein (Mrs. Horace B. Klein, Jr).
2. "I absolutely adored her." Barbara Bemis (Mrs. Judson Bemis).
3. "The women in my mother's crowd almost worshipped Grace Flandrau." Connie S. Otis (Mrs. James C. Otis).
4. "You have sense, taste, civilization." Richard E. Myers, Flandrau family friend of many years, to Grace Flandrau.

These sources are quoted in *Voice Interrupted*.

### *Paddlewheels on the Upper Mississippi 1823-1854*

Nancy and Robert Goodman  
Washington County Historical Society  
Press, 2003

144 pages, index and bibliography  
*Reviewed by Paul Nelson*

The steamboat era was St. Paul's early childhood. Like all early childhoods it was both formative and short. But while people can remember little of their own toddlerhoods, St. Paul's steamboat years (roughly 1840-1870) occupy a disproportionate share of our historical interest and imagination.

Riverboating on the Mississippi has generated a vast literature, and naturally so, for the themes have universal resonance: water, travel, and the interplay of the familiar (it happened here) with the strange (there is nothing remotely like it today). Many of us carry a mish-mash of images of this distant time—Delta Queens, the riverboat gamblers of movies and television, *Ole Man River*, levees piled high with cotton, Mark Twain fact and Mark Twain fiction. But, what was it really like?

Those who want to know what it was really like should read *Paddlewheels*.

*Paul Nelson is a frequent contributor to Ramsey Country History.*



*Mrs. W. Homer Sweney, known to family and friends as Mary Glyde Griggs, a founder of the St. Paul Opera Association. Portrait is by St. Paul artist Carl Bohnen (1871–1951), and is reproduced here courtesy of her daughter Pat Hart. Bohnen, an opera buff, was nationally known for his portraits, including seven governor portraits in the Minnesota State Capitol. Border taken from the Mary Molton Cheney Papers (1872-1950) in the collection of the Ramsey County Historical Society. See article on page 4.*

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