

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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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

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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

Letters to the Editor

Blame the Proofreaders

Because *Ramsey County History* is such a beautifully put-together magazine, I am reluctant to call attention to the strange error on page 17 of the fall issue: the date of the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. I doubt that anyone who heard Roosevelt's declaration of war on December 8, 1941, will ever forget his opening words: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date that will live in infamy. . ."

Is it possible that the substitution of October 8 in place of December 8 for that unforgettable date is an unsolicited contribution of an over-confident but ill-advised word processing program? Could it be that someone double checked the article, but the computer then changed it to *October 8*? If so, it simply proves that we must remain vigilant to prevent the information revolution from getting out of hand and rewriting our history.

John Larson, Taylors Falls

Much as we'd like to hide behind a computer glitch that transformed December into October, honesty compels us to admit that it was a bunch of less-than-alert proof readers who let that whopper get into type.

Central Park's Demolition

I enjoyed the recent article on Central Park. The park had been removed by the time I started at Mechanic Arts High School in the fall of 1961, but I think the author's date of its demolition is wrong. The high school closed in 1976, but the building was used by the school district for marginal purposes for another ten years. It finally was torn down in about 1987 to make way for the courts' building. I remember watching the demolition from my office in the Landmark Towers.

Terrence J. Garvey, S. Paul

More On the Fulton House

I've lived in the James Fulton house since 1946. I'd always heard that the builder was a lumberman from out East, but the

article said the builder was Robert Fulton, inventor of the steamship. I checked the internet and found that Robert Fulton married a Harriet Livingston and they had three children. Their daughter Mary married Robert Lewis Ludlow, an artist who inherited most of the Fulton treasures. With that history, I wonder if the house really was built by that family, since there is no mention of James Cooper Fulton in any of the articles I read. I would welcome help in solving the puzzle.

*Sheila Kyle Cunningham
(scunni1234@aol.com)*

The McDonough Project

Could you please tell me when the McDonough Housing Project was completed and open for occupancy? My grandmother moved in as soon as it was completed, and I am trying to determine when that was. Thanks for your time and help.

Robert Gliske, Nephi, Utah.

The McDonough Homes, St. Paul's first subsidized housing community, was dedicated by John J. McDonough in September, 1951. Most of its buildings were built in the early 1950s to alleviate the housing shortage that followed World War II. First to move in were a World War II veteran, his wife, and three children. The Mississippi Elementary School was built that same September on the northeast corner of the site. In 1959 and 1965, brick apartments were added along L'Orient and Arlington. A community center was built later.

Kretz and His Style

I'm researching architect Hermann Kretz, and I'm particularly interested in "The Colonial" at 579 Summit Avenue. What's the historical significance of this building? Is it representative of his architectural finesse or an aberration? Are there better examples?

Prithul Murphy, St. Paul.

Kretz was born in Essen, Germany, in

1860. He attended school there before emigrating to St. Paul in 1887. He specialized in commercial structures and apartment buildings and also operated a real estate business. He designed in many styles and owned and managed some of those he designed; 579 Summit was built in 1896. He was the original owner and lived there as well. Other Kretz buildings were Blair Flats, Selby and Western; The Elmwood, 235-237 Arundel; the Commercial Building, 2-16 East Fourth Street, and The Waldorf, 672-676 West Summit (dated 1900).

Coffin on the ROOF?

On Summit Avenue, just a short distance west of the University Club on the north side of the street (across from the old Lewellyn house, I think) is a house that looks as though it has a coffin on the roof. What's with that coffin?

Dick Bonneville, St. Paul

You must be thinking of the house at 465 Summit, built in 1886 for William and Bertha Constans. Constans established the Constans and Burbank Freight Company in 1850, was also involved in a wholesale grocery firm and a brewery supply company, and was a trustee of the State Savings Bank. August Gauger, who designed the house, practiced in St. Paul from 1878 to 1929 and built at least six houses on Summit. As for the coffin: there is a coffin-like shape projecting from the peak of the roof, but it appears too thin to be a coffin. Simply ornamentation. Sorry about that.

Crex Carpet Company

My name is Paul Nelson, and I'm working on a history of the Crex Carpet Company, located at Front and MacKubbin street in St. Paul between 1899 and 1935. I would like to hear from people with family stories, photographs, and memorabilia. Please contact me at 651-222-0701 or the RCHS web site address, www.rchs.com.



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.
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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