

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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“A Great Experience”
Villaume Builds Gliders in
World War II
Page 22

“If It Can Be Manufactured from Wood, We Can Make It”
A History of the Villaume Family and the
Company They Built — Page 4



Eugene Villaume. Portrait by Nicholas Brewer (1857–1949), one of America’s finest portrait artists. Minnesota-born, Brewer trained in New York and later moved back to St. Paul. He painted presidents and official portraits of governors from Minnesota and ten other states. Brewer also painted portraits of a number of prominent Minnesotans, including Theodore Hamm, Ignatius Donnelly, George Dayton, and Archbishop John Ireland. Photo courtesy of Nick Linsmayer and Villaume Industries.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 41, Number 4

Winter 2007

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

This issue of Ramsey County History showcases the significant history of Villaume Industries, formerly the Villaume Box and Lumber Company, which is celebrating 125 years as a continuously operated family owned business. Steve Trimble tells the fascinating story of this company, which Eugene Villaume, a French immigrant, started in 1882. The firm initially specialized in making commercial boxes and installing fine interior woodwork, such as can still be seen in the art deco interior furnishing of the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse. During World War II, as John Lindley explores in a separate article, the Villaume Company helped defeat the Axis enemy by building glider floors and wings for the Army Air Forces. After the war, Villaume diversified into manufacturing roof trusses and custom wood packaging. The Winter issue concludes with a short article by Leo J. Harris about a little-known meeting in 1839 at Kaposia (now South St. Paul) between Bishop Mathias Loras and Dakota leader Big Thunder.

The Society is grateful to Villaume Industries and its president, Nick Linsmayer, for giving authors Steve Trimble and John Lindley access to the company archives, providing photos, and arranging for interviews with individuals who could tell the Villaume story based on their own experiences with the company. We hope that other local businesses will follow the example of Villaume and share their story with us.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Book Reviews

The Street Where You Live: A Guide to the Place Names of St. Paul

Donald L. Empson

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
Press, 2006

322 pages, \$19.95

Reviewed by James Erickson

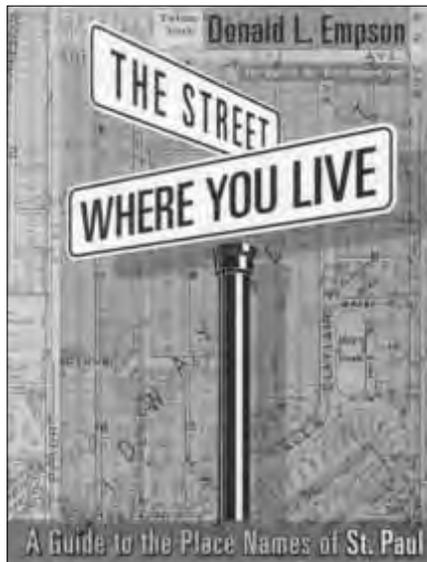
Anyone interested in St. Paul and its history or wants an entertaining and thoughtful explanation of how its streets, neighborhoods, lakes, parks, and characters who built the city will find Donald Empson's *The Street Where You Live* an entertaining, informative, and useful book.

Containing more than one thousand alphabetically listed place names with over a hundred photos and illustrations, the reader is taken on a mind's eye tour to stroll along the city's streets with explanations of their meaning and role in history of the city. The vicarious tour includes touches of humor, questions to challenge the reader, and intriguing historic details.

To bring the reader on the imagined view of the city, Empson employs the use of a literary device he calls Intrepid Urban Traveler (IUT). Using this fictional tour guide, the reader is transported into scenes presented as if the reader were actually there looking at them the way IUT would see them. Though some might find it unnecessary, others will find the technique adds a refreshing sense of playfulness to the descriptions.

By connecting street names and other features of the city to obscure or

little-known facts the author is bringing to light an encyclopedic quantity of historic information unavailable in any other single work. The formidable job of digging out the information can be appreciated by the difficulty encountered just researching the street names. Empson points out that, "With few exceptions, there is no record, official or otherwise how any street name was



selected. It is almost always necessary, therefore, to determine or infer the significance of any name from the shreds of evidence that can be gathered." The shreds of evidence for street names and other features were extracted from plat maps, genealogies, government records, librarians, local historians, engineers, and other individuals.

Taking the imaginary trip through the city with IUT reveals much about the settlement patterns of this wonderful city with all its beauty, glories, quirkiness, and seediness of the past. One

of the revealing stops illustrating the development of the city on the virtual tour is Swede Hollow. Many romantic ideas surround this neighborhood today. The name itself, "Swede Hollow," often conjures up nostalgic images of a quaint ethnic hamlet. For those who once lived there, the reality as revealed by this author was not so rosy. This was the beginning point of many newly arrived immigrant ethnic groups who found work in the growing number of factories and businesses. With no running water, sewers, or paved streets along the Phalen Creek ravine, there were sixty homes for many years and the desperate poverty that created severe health problems is very apparent in cited newspaper accounts. Today the Hollow is a park.

There are entries that contrast poverty conditions of Swede Hollow with the opulence of those who made fortunes by coming to the burgeoning river town. Two of the best examples are railroad magnate James J. Hill and Norman Kittson, fur trader, provider of riverboat transportation, and investor in Hill's railroad. They were counted among the wealthiest men in the country. Kittson's lavish estate is gone, the former location now marked only by a stop light on Seventh Street. An illustration with the text gives an idea of its former glory. Hill's well-known mansion on Summit Avenue, which still stands, is open to the public and visited by thousands each year.

This story was repeated throughout the city where neighborhoods developed into collections of the poor, the wealthy, or those in between. Tracing neighborhoods on a map and using the information given in the entries, it is

possible to identify much of the settlement pattern.

The usefulness of this book is not restricted to vicarious experiences in the study of history. With Empson's book in hand as a guide and by making an actual visit to various neighborhoods, it is possible to find surviving examples of early city history. Of course, on many streets including Summit Avenue there are the impressive mansions. More obscure are the remnants of artifacts, and physical features from the past in a number of spots that are less spectacular but in their own way also exciting. Having such a handy book to locate and guide a visit to some of the rarely seen features from the past is to touch history in a very special way.

The book is also useful in visiting some of the vanished sights of the city. By marking locations on a city map described and identified with sidebar illustrations, the reader can see where the vanished houses, streams, streets, parks, and other features once were located. Visiting these locations to see what is there today is especially interesting.

In spite of all the jokes about the streets in St. Paul, there was a system used at one time in numbering the houses. Empson includes a sidebar that actually explains how cities across the country, including St. Paul, number the buildings on their streets. He even goes so far as presenting the mathematical formula for calculating street numbers and solves a sample problem to illustrate how it works. Other sidebars explain technical information about the history of such things as street construction and maintenance, which is a lot more interesting than it sounds on the surface.

The use of mathematics and systematic numbering apparently were of little avail for giving order to some of the streets in St. Paul. An example of one particular street says all about how many view the house numbering. In describing one short street called Crocus Hill, Empson writes, ". . . the house numbers are not in sequence, or indeed in any discernable order whatsoever." The changes occurring throughout the years

account for the labyrinth of streets and cryptic method of numbering houses.

There is much more that can be found in this jam-packed book. There is a fact or bit of history at every turn. It is also a fun book with humor and wit sprinkled throughout. Undoubtedly the reader will find something of interest by looking at *The Street Where You Live*.

Jim Erickson is a local historian and an interpreter at the Society's Gibbs Museum of Pioneer and Dakotah Life.

Little Crow and the Dakota War (The Long Historical Cover-ups Exposed)

Mark Diedrich

Rochester, Minn.: Coyote Books, 2006
254 pages, \$34.95

Reviewed by Robert W. Galler Jr.

Mark Diedrich's new biography of Little Crow presents a detailed portrayal of the Mdewakanton Dakota leader most remembered for his participation in the 1862 Dakota Conflict in Minnesota. The author of six previous books (mainly self-published biographical works on Dakota and Ojibwe leaders) and several articles claims that over twenty years of research supports this current work, and it clearly shows. Seven pages of single-spaced bibliographic citations include evidence of extensive research in manuscript collections, personal and administrative papers at the Minnesota Historical Society, correspondence by federal officials from the National Archives, regional newspapers, and a healthy collection of secondary sources. This is a challenging work, but provides one of the most detailed portrayals of Little Crow (also known as Taoyateduta, Kangicistina and by other names) to date.

Diedrich's cultural and political history places Little Crow at the center of mid-nineteenth century Dakota history and Dakota-federal relations. Context-

tualized with a lengthy introductory chapter on Dakota cultural components, Diedrich takes his readers through Little Crow's rise to influence within Mdewakanton Dakotas* and then spends the majority of the work on the last fifteen years of his life. Readers learn about his participation in the Treaties of 1851 and 1858, diplomatic missions to Washington in 1854 and 1858, willingness to cooperate with and stand up to numerous federal agents and traders, his difficult decision to join Mdewakanton Soldiers' Lodge in the "Dakota War," and leadership strategies during the conflict. What emerges from his biographical profile is a sophisticated leader who rose to prominence within one society and learned to work with another. Rather than an ignorant or passive pawn of federal officials, Diedrich provides a more realistic portrayal of a savvy trader, accomplished diplomat, military tactician, and a curious student of American culture. Readers can't help but question the often-simplistic portrayal of Little Crow as a violent war leader after recognizing his decades-long ability to build relationships and construct compromises. This is refreshing and fits well within the work's goal of revitalizing the image of Little Crow, who Diedrich claims has "largely received unfair treatment" in previous scholarship.

Diedrich's work is also more than a biography. It presents a tribal history of a dynamic people who are anything but monolithic. Dakotas change over time and are comprised of individuals who do not fit within simplistic categories of "traditionalists" or "assimilationists." As most contemporary tribal members recognize, most Dakota leaders chose their own formulas of balancing societal adaptation with cultural persistence to best support their families. In many ways, Little Crow is more the exemplar of Dakota adaptability than an aberration. Throughout the work, Diedrich shows how Little Crow attended Christian churches without conversion, learned English while maintaining cultural traditions, had a house built for him but often

chose a tipi and a non-sedentary life, retained the respect of the Soldiers' Lodge while also earning the esteem of federal officials. While other notable Dakota leaders like Wabasha and Shakopee also negotiated intercultural relations and made significant decisions, not surprisingly, Diedrich shows preference for Little Crow's choices. Befitting more traditional scholarship, the work makes little connection to the significance of Dakota women other than as marriage partners solidifying political alliances.

Like much recent scholarship, the work also reveals Dakota initiative and creativity. Rather than passive people portrayed in earlier accounts, Diedrich shows Dakotas retaining connections to productive ancestral lands despite federal removal policies, arguing (successfully in some cases) for new federal policies, calling for replacement of agency employees, critiquing the lack of fulfillment of prior treaties, and establishing alliances with other tribes and missionaries. Through most of the 1850s federal officials revealed their limited control in the region. As late as 1857, they needed to turn to Little Crow for assistance to retrieve captives from Inkpaduta's violent retribution for the murder of several Wahpekute family members by an "Iowa whiskey trader."

A third component of the work is its attention to federal Indian policy as it played out on the local level in Minnesota. Diedrich shows readers how frequent changes in agency personnel, agent support for increasing and reducing (depending on the individual) assessments of land values, and a painfully sluggish bureaucratic process of providing annuities to tribes all contributed to declining intercultural relations. Most notably, also, he critiques federal agents for withholding annuity

payments already earned through land cessions to gain further Dakota concessions. Numerous sources have portrayed governmental incompetence, but Diedrich provides specific evidence to support such claims. While he differentiates between federal officials on some levels, Willis Gorman, Richard Murphy, William Cullen, Joseph Brown, and Clark Thompson generally appear as



inexperienced, licentious, greedy, irresponsible, and arrogant men.

One problem with the book is the seemingly reductive argument Diedrich promotes regarding the cause of the 1862 conflict. The majority of the work provides a complex context for the violence based on the expanding influence of market capitalism, increasing land loss, fears and incompetence of federal agents, new non-Indian settlements in the region, and declining kinship relations between Dakotas and Euro-American settlers as well as within Dakota communities. Still, Diedrich seems to place most of the blame on the 1862 Lower Sioux agent Thomas Galbraith, and emphasizes that agent's "false chronology" of the six months leading up to the violence to cover-up his incompetence. Overstating his influence compared to numerous causes discussed throughout the book as well as the subtitle "the long historical cover-

ups exposed" tends to move the work toward problematic conspiratorial and mono-causal history that distracts from the overall strength of the work.

The 254-page, single-spaced work could have also used some pruning. The book will serve as a great reference for specialists and researchers, but it may intimidate readers interested in Dakota history and Little Crow. His effort to provide comprehensive coverage and include much of the research he located is understandable for all who have done significant archival work and want to tell all. With that in mind, Dakota tribal members may appreciate the author's inclusion of the names (in Dakota and English) of seven who join a thirty-four-year-old Little Crow when he returns in 1846 to Kaposia (near present-day St. Paul) to eventually become his band's leader. Students of Minnesota history may be glad to learn of the half-dozen locations of Dakota winter camps in central Minnesota in 1854. Others may be overwhelmed with details.

Still, Diedrich makes contributions to the scholarship of an important person in Dakota country and a major incident in nineteenth century American Indian history. His effort to revitalize the legacy of Little Crow is commendable, and the cultural context he offers contributes to complicating the more political portrayal in Gary Anderson's well-regarded 1986 biography, *Little Crow: Spokesman for the Sioux*. Advanced students of history will welcome new dimensions to the portrayal of Little Crow, genealogists will appreciate the two-page appendix "Little Crow's genealogy," and researchers will value fifty pages of endnotes.

Robert W. Galler, Jr. is an Assistant Professor of History, teaches courses in U.S. history, American Indian history, and History/Social Studies education at St. Cloud State University. He has published articles on northern plains intercultural relations and is current writing a book on Indian education on the Crow Creek Reservation in South Dakota.

* In addition to the Mdewakantons, the Dakota division of the Sioux confederation includes the Wahpekutes, Wahpetons, and Sissetons. Other Sioux tribes within the original seven-member confederation include the Yanktons, Yanktonais and Tetons (commonly known as Lakotas).



This late-afternoon photograph taken in the 1960s shows a supply of building trusses with their "Gizmo Gussetts," or metal connector plates, ready for shipping on a Murphy Trucking Company flatbed trailer in the yard at Villaume Box & Lumber Company. In the background is the Villaume sign, complete with hundreds of light bulbs, mounted on the bluffs on the West Side. Various residences are just visible beyond the sign and above the bluffs. Photo courtesy of Nick Linsmayer and Villaume Industries. See Steve Trimble's article on page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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