

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

*Labor Found a Friend*

W.W. Erwin for  
the Defense

Page 18

Winter 2008

Volume 42, Number 4

*Tommy Milton*

The Story of “St. Paul’s Speed King”

*Steven C. Trimble*

—Page 3



*Tommy Milton and his Duesenberg racing across Daytona Beach on the way to a new world speed record in 1920. This portrayal is by Peter Helck, a very successful magazine and advertising artist. Helck's realistic and highly detailed works often captured the drama and speed of racing. Sometimes called the "Dean of American Motoring Artists," Helck (1893–1988) produced hundreds of sketches, drawings, and paintings during his career as well as writing two illustrated histories of racing. Painting courtesy of Automobile Quarterly.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 42, Number 4

Winter 2008

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations  
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program  
of presenting, publishing and preserving.

## CONTENTS

- 3 *Tommy Milton*  
The Story of "St. Paul's Speed King"  
*Steven C. Trimble*
- 18 *Labor Found a Friend*  
W.W. Erwin for the Defense  
*David Riehle*
- 27 Book Reviews

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and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

### A Message from the Editorial Board

Every locale has its cultural heroes—and this issue showcases two men who filled that role for many in Ramsey County before they took to the national stage. Tommy Milton first wowed crowds driving his Duesenberg at the Twin Cities Speedway, and twice won the Indianapolis 500, in 1921 and 1923. His cool demeanor and consummate skill impressed fans, and his career reflected the excitement surrounding the new, automobile-focused culture. W.W. Erwin was a folk hero of another sort to labor sympathizers. A prominent St. Paul attorney and impassioned orator, he served as lead defense counsel in the trial of labor leader Eugene Debs for his role in the 1894 Pullman railroad strike. He also successfully defended participants in the strike against the Pittsburgh Carnegie steel works. We have been lucky to have two members of our editorial board, Steve Trimble and David Riehle, compile the stories of these fascinating characters. A grace note is the review of Georgia Ray's book on Grace Flandrau, a noted St. Paul author whose keen observations also extended her influence beyond local boundaries. As winter turns to spring, enjoy a good read with us.

*Anne Cowie,*  
Chair, Editorial Board

# Book Reviews

## *Grace Flandrau: Voice Interrupted*

Georgia Ray  
Roseville, Minn.: Edinborough Press,  
2007

304 pages, \$34.95

Reviewed by Eric Pedersen

Why is it, asks Georgia Ray in her biography of the St. Paul-born Grace Flandrau, that the critically acclaimed author is not held in the same esteem as her peers Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald, or even Brenda Ueland or Meridel Le Sueur?

This question has propelled Ray during more than two decades of research and the subsequent publication of several articles ("In Search of the Real Grace Flandrau," *Minnesota History*, 1989, and "Saving Grace," *Mpls/St. Paul*, 1998) and her editing of *Memoirs of Grace Flandrau* (2003). In 2007, these efforts culminated in her biography, *Grace Flandrau: Voice Interrupted*. The biography is chaptered chronologically with the major events of Grace's life—beginning with her illegitimate birth in St. Paul in 1896 (her birth-mother was the mistress of her father) to her burial at St. Paul's Oakland Cemetery in 1971.

After publication of her novel *Cousin Julia* in 1917, Grace and her husband Blair entered the St. Paul literary scene. They soon joined the Nimbus Club, which was an informal organization of local writers and journalists that met at Kilmarnock's Bookstore once a week to discuss books and authors. Other members of the Nimbus Club included Grace's brother-in-law Charles Flandrau (*St. Paul Pioneer Press* literary and drama critic), future St. Paul Mayor Larry Hodgson (Grace's first-cousin), and Tom Boyd (manager of



Kilmarnock's and author of *Through the Wheat*, 1935). While at Kilmarnock's Bookstore—located at 84 East 4th Street in downtown St. Paul—Grace frequently encountered Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Through meticulous research and extensive citation of personal letters and correspondences from Grace to her family, friends, colleagues, and literary professionals, Georgia Ray tells the remarkable story of a woman struggling with the concept of "home" and later, her bout with depression after the death of her husband Blair, in 1938. For Flandrau, her roots were in St. Paul—she resided at 385 Pleasant Avenue and on Summit Avenue in the Hill District of St. Paul when in the state—but she struggled to feel at home there. Her writings contained scathing criticisms of the upper class St. Paul society that she and her husband were often at the center of and statements such as "My hometown of St. Paul, Minnesota has been chiefly a place to go away from" did not gar-

ner many accolades from her contemporaries. Although directly critical of her hometown, Grace's talents in narrative could not be disputed.

Ray presents Flandrau's correspondence with such legendary editors as H. L. Mencken and Maxwell Perkins (of Charles Scribner's Sons, who was responsible for launching the career of F. Scott Fitzgerald with *This Side of Paradise* in 1920) as evidence of her talents, potential, and production as a writer—which has never been fully recognized in her home state.

In her biography, Georgia Ray sheds light on the largely successful career of the forgotten Minnesota author of *Cousin Julia* (1917), *Being Respectable* (1923), and *Then I Saw the Congo* (1929), among others—a career that extended past fiction writing to journalism ("My Week" in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*) and radio ("Grace Flandrau Edits" on KSTP) as well. Although this reviewer was wanting for more depth given to the reasons behind the disdain shown toward Flandrau by her fellow St. Paulites, the biography is still an excellent account of a this remarkably unique life story and career.

But, to understand the author is to understand the major events of her life and the experiences that led to them. Georgia Ray's biography, *Grace Flandrau: Voice Interrupted*, does just that. For the Flandrau enthusiast, the book is a must read.

*Eric Pedersen has lived in the Twin Cities since 2000. He holds a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies degree from Hamline University and works at the Minnesota Historical Society, where he has authored content for the "Books of an Era" timeline, found on the Historical Society's Minnesota's Greatest Generation website ([www.mngreatestgeneration.org](http://www.mngreatestgeneration.org)).*

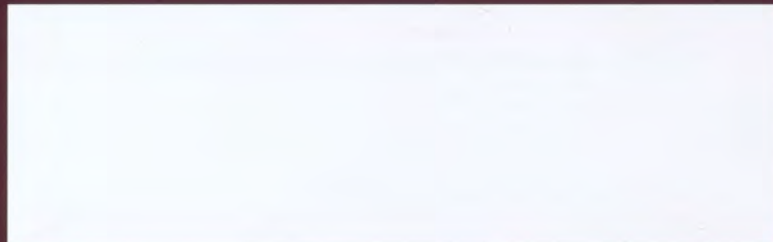


*Tommy Milton in the Frontenac he drove to victory in the 1921 Indianapolis 500. This is #27 in a series of trading cards showing great moments in racing history. It was produced as a marketing promotion in 1994 by the Valvoline division of Ashland, Inc. and is reprinted with their permission. The back of the card explains that Milton was a replacement driver that day, using the car in which Gaston Chevrolet had died. It also recounts how Tommy dealt with a main bearing leak by slipping the clutch on turns, using friction to burn off the dripping oil. See Steve Trimble's article on page 3.*

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