

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

The St. Paul Society
for the Hard of Hearing
*Kristin Mapel Bloomberg
and Leah S. McLaughlin*

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Winter 2010

Volume 44, Number 4

Recollections of Cathedral Hill

A Glimpse of Old St. Paul from an Up-and-Down Duplex
on Holly Avenue

Mary Reichardt

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One of the distinguishing features of the up-and-down duplex at 444 Holly Avenue in the Cathedral Hill neighborhood is its spacious front porches that encourage conversation and reminiscing about old St. Paul on warm summer days. Photo courtesy of Mary Reichardt.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 44, Number 4

Winter 2010

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.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Sometimes, reading history fuels our imaginations. This issue contains some great moments that we can conjure up in the comfort of our armchairs. Kristin Mapel Bloomberg and Leah McLaughlin's history of the St. Paul Society for the Hard of Hearing lets us join in when a hard-of-hearing person went to the movies in St. Paul and, thanks to technology pushed by the Society, could for the first time "hear with ease the slightest whisper . . . the baby's gurgle, the villain's chuckle." We are there, too, when Norm Horton inched along drifted roads during the Armistice Day Blizzard to get home to fill the oil heater for his family, after working his shift at the Ford plant. And we share Mary Reichardt's thrill when, on purchasing her house on Holly Avenue, she received a postcard from the Dow family, the house's longtime former owners, opening up a rich vein of family and neighborhood history. Join us to read these stories, and contact our editor if you have your own to share.

Anne Cowie, Chair, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

The CCC, Flying Hands, and the Armistice Day Blizzard

Norman C. Horton Sr.

My father, brother, sister, and I arrived in St. Paul at Christmas time in 1930. The railroad restaurant we had run in Rochester closed its doors after train service to that city in southeastern Minnesota was terminated. Our family had broken up a few months previously. My mother had moved to St. Paul and was living with her mother, who operated a boarding house at 591 North Western Avenue. My sister went to Gram's boarding house. The rest of us moved into a light housekeeping apartment on Iglehart Avenue, not far from Western.

The Depression was in full bloom. Unemployment was probably 25% to 30% in Minnesota. My dad, who had been making a restaurant manager's salary, got a dishwashing job that paid \$9 a week. Christmas vacation in the St. Paul schools expanded from two weeks to six weeks before the city could raise enough money to reopen the schools. My brother and I enrolled at Mechanic Arts High School. He took the required electrics and mechanical shop program. I took a college prep course.

By the start of the next school year, we had moved to 396 Blair Avenue, just off Western, and my mother and sister had joined us. Earlier that year, my brother and I had obtained a *St. Paul Pioneer Press/Dispatch* paper route in that area. We carried 135 papers and had to collect 65¢ a month from each customer to pay the company for the papers. The route netted us about \$30 a month.

At Mechanic Arts, an assistant principal helped me get used books because I had no money to buy them. This was during the years that Dietrich Lange was the school's principal. The school had a

huge enrollment because there was no work for school-age kids; so they stayed in school. I studied hard, sometimes all night, hoping for a college scholarship. I was elected to the student council and



Norm Horton, right, and another teenage friend in St. Paul in the early 1930s. Photo courtesy of Norman C. Horton Sr.

was associate editor of our school paper, the *Cogwheel*. When I graduated, I had a 94.5 average for four years and had won a small scholarship to Hamline University. By that time, however, my mother had remarried and moved and I had no home.

All my plans went down the tube; no college education.

Working for the CCC

I heard about the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and decided to sign up. The CCC, as it was known, was a New Deal program that paid \$30 a month. Out of that total, \$5 went to the worker and the other \$25 was required to be sent home. The CCC furnished clothes, room and board, and had a dispensary that provided limited medical care. The purpose of the CCC was to provide useful work and vocational training for unemployed young men through projects involving the conservation of natural resources.

I wound up way up in the "boonies." I had been assigned to CCC Camp No 723, which was located five miles north of a little place called Buyck, which is sixteen miles northeast of Orr, Minnesota, in the Arrowhead region. The camp was situated on the bank of the Vermillion River, near the Vermillion Rapids and about five miles from Lake Vermillion. The lake is about ten or twelve miles from Cook and Tower, Minnesota. After I got there, I had the \$25 a month that I made sent to my dad, who would send back some of it and put away the rest. My hope was to save enough to get back to college.

In December 1933, most of the members of my camp had a five-day Christmas leave, but I volunteered to handle the wood detail as part of the cadre that would maintain the camp while everyone else was gone. After the others returned, the volunteers would take



Members of Civilian Conservation Corps Company 723 eating lunch near their quarters at Buyck, Minn., in the winter of 1933. Photo courtesy of Norman C. Horton Sr.

their leave. Some of the cadre members cut down trees, usually tamarack, for firewood and trucked them into camp. We had to cut these logs into 15" lengths using a powerful Model T Ford chassis that had been converted to a saw rig. Then we split each chunk into four pieces using two-bladed axes. Once we had split the logs, we distributed them to cord-sized piles outside of four barracks, the mess hall, the officers' quarters, the latrine, and so on.

It was bitter cold every day. Usually the temperature was from 0° to -35°F. Then one day it plunged to -64°. We had to wear mufflers over our mouths and noses to prevent getting frostbite in our lungs. I put newspaper in my boots and wore three pairs of socks, long underwear, and chopper's mitts. Working in fifteen-minute shifts, we had to split that wood and get it down to the various buildings or the camp would have shut down. Everything would freeze up within minutes. The cold was brutal on our hands and bodies.

Some guys tried getting a couple of our trucks running, in case someone got seriously hurt and needed to be taken to town for treatment. Using a blowtorch, they heated the oil pan on the underside of one truck, but this only succeeded in setting the truck on fire and burning it to the ground. Finally they were able to get one running and kept it running twenty-four hours a day until the temperature slowly



CCC enrollees at a camp in northern Minnesota plant tree seedlings on a slope to prevent topsoil erosion. Stakes marked the locations where seedlings would be planted. One worker, upper right, prepares a hole for a seedling while the man in the foreground inserts a seedling in the newly made hole. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

climbed back up to zero and above. We got the job done.

When the others came back from their leave, I took my holiday by hitching a ride on an army truck to Duluth, where I caught a passenger train that was headed out of the city. I had only \$1 in my pocket, so I hid in the tender, behind the locomotive, with the temperature about -35°. Soon the fireman spotted me and had me shovel coal into the boiler once in a while to keep me from freezing. When I got to St. Paul, I had to walk three miles on

frost-bitten feet to my dad's apartment. There I spent all day soaking my feet in cold water to save them.

After about six months in the northern wilderness, my camp moved to Caledonia in southern Minnesota. While I had been in St. Paul during my Christmas leave, I had looked for work. There was nothing. Things were very bad. People in St. Paul were starving. So I reupped in the CCC and went to Caledonia. There I became a platoon leader. I had 50 to 55 men on my crew planting trees and building erosion dams along the rivers and streams in the area. At that camp, we lived in tents at the local fairgrounds. La Crosse, Wisconsin, was about twenty-seven miles to the east of our camp. When some of us would get a weekend pass from Friday night to Sunday night, we would catch a ride on an army truck or some other vehicle that was going to La Crosse, where we could then catch a freight train headed for St. Paul. When we had found an empty boxcar and crawled in, we would huddle for warmth as the steam engine blew its highball and we were rolling northward. Each time I returned to St. Paul, I looked for a job. So was everyone else.



Platoon leader Norm Horton, straddling a stone wall, with some of his fellow CCC workers at the camp in Caledonia, where they labored to prevent soil erosion along southern Minnesota streams. Photo courtesy of Norman C. Horton Sr.

Eventually Norm was able to get a job in an auto parts store on University Avenue and he left the CCC. At the parts store, he drove tow trucks, dismantled cars, and cleaned parts, but this job was short-lived. In the fall of 1934 Norm signed up for another six months with the CCC. This time he went to Little Fork, Minnesota, and became a squad leader right away because of his previous experience. Then he transferred to a camp in Virginia, Minnesota, where he stayed until April 1935, when he went back to St. Paul.

Still no job! So Norm and some buddies rode the rails to the West Coast, hoping to get work picking fruit in California. Although Norm and his friends had several adventures along the way, they were unable to find work and returned to St. Paul. This time, however, Norm went through a series of jobs: auto parts; second cook at a twenty-four hour restaurant; auto parts, again. Along the way in the late 1930s, he got married and in 1938 became a father.

The Best Blue-collar Job

This was the height of the Depression. It was also change of model time of year at the Ford Plant in St. Paul. I went there and stood in line day after day. One day I made it inside. A man behind a one-way window talked to me. I left. A friend of mine caught on there, so I called him.

He said, "If you get in there again, you have to talk to that man. Tell him you are a fast worker, that you worked at all those auto parts places, that you like Ford, and really want to work there."

Lucky me, I made it to the window once again. I prayed to God: put those words in my mouth. I did what my friend said. I showed my hands to the man. I said, "These are a working man's hands that want to work for Ford." He told me to go straight ahead into the first aid room for a physical. When I got into the first aid room, there was Al Pearson, a first-aid hospital helper from the CCC camp in Buyck. He knew I had been there only



A 1938 aerial photo of the Ford Plant in St. Paul. In addition to the main plant on the right, Ford's hydroelectric plant, to the right of the lock and dam, generated electricity for the auto assembly complex. The Ford or Intercity Bridge, center, was constructed in 1927 and connected St. Paul's Ford Parkway, center right, to Minneapolis.

six months and had been in a lot of fights while I was there.

I thought, "I'm stuck." I started to faint away. Al stuck an ammonia stick under my nose and never said a word. I had a brief exam, was given a time card, and told to punch in at 8 A.M. sharp the next day. I was in the best blue-collar job in Minnesota. I made \$6 a day, five days a week.

My job at Ford was putting channel (a U-shaped metal bar) on glass windows and wing windows, stapling sponge rubber strips onto auto tail boards, and covering screws that protruded in the trunks with black "dum-dum" goo. The moving assembly line was the trim line. It kept moving all the while I tried to do my job. My hands were flying. Ford had a "no running rule." I had to keep up. The only break we got was half an hour for lunch. I did not think I could do it. My heart was willing, but my body parts could not move that fast all day long. The third day on the line, I bought a pair of roman slippers and wore them instead of work boots. Even though these slippers had only a thin leather strap to hold them on, they were tight because my feet had swollen up. If a person did not keep up with the line, they were discharged.

With the help of God, I made it. Then the model year came around and we were off for two to three weeks. If they did not want you back, you never received a card telling you when to report. I got my card. This was in 1938 going into 1939.

By this time, my wife and I and our children were living at 388 Starkey Street, near the junction of South Wabasha and Concord streets on the West Side. I had purchased a house there for \$50 down and payments. The old lady next door claimed the well on the property was hers; so I got a friend to show me how to drill a shallow well. I put in a chemical toilet and built a garage out of half lumber and half railroad ties. For \$125 I acquired a 1929 four-door Ford sedan. Because the lot at 388 Starkey was large, we put the wash in the back. We took baths in a big galvanized tub, cooked on a wood-burning

kitchen range and kerosene wick stove, and heated the house with a free-standing oil burner. We had one bedroom, a living room, and kitchen.

I had Saturdays off. So I would either find a junk car to cut up for parts and scrap or I would pick up broken aluminum washing machines and repair them for sale. I cut up the cars with a hack saw and used a come-a-long winch to pull the motors into my two-wheel trailer for a trip to the scrap yard. In addition, I bought railroad ties and rented a Model T Ford converted saw rig to cut the ties up for use in our cook stove. I also cut glass for repairs to people's cars. During this time, I managed to get into Dunwoody Institute in Minneapolis for night classes in gas welding and blueprint reading. You never knew at Ford if your job was safe. They hired and fired at will.

The Armistice Day Blizzard

On November 11, 1940, the day of the monumental ice and snowstorm in Minnesota that killed forty-nine people, I was working on the assembly line at the Ford plant at the west end of Highland Park, next to the Mississippi River. My house on Starkey Street was about fifteen miles away. The route that I drove home from the Ford plant was along West Kellogg Boulevard, across the Robert Street Bridge, and along Concord south of the Mississippi.



The Armistice Day blizzard on November 11, 1940, caused all sorts of problems such as this car that got stuck in the snow at Dayton and Summit avenues in St. Paul. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The day started with balmy weather. Temperatures were near the sixties. Unbeknownst to all of us who were at work at Ford, the weather changed dramatically. A light mist came up. It soon changed to a light drizzle. The temperature dropped like a rock to below zero in places and heavy, wet snow came down like a blanket. High winds accompanied the rapidly falling snow.

At quitting time (4:30 P.M.), we were told to stay inside; that the parking lot was covered with about 20" of wet, heavy snow and cars could not move. Being line workers, we were tired and hungry. Time passed. Everyone became irritable, angry. Our hunger increased and we grew more tired as we waited. Periodically we would hear a voice from the administration on the loudspeaker telling us that they were working on the snow in the parking lot. Apparently vehicles could not get through on the streets to the plant. Finally, we were given some rolls and coffee.

Then we were told some Traxcavators (tracked machines with a front-end scoop that could be used in excavation work) had finally gotten through to the Ford parking lot. It was now 2 A.M. on November 12. They would only allow us to leave the parking lot row by row. My turn finally came. My 1929 Model A Ford had no heater. Its 21-inch tires were skinny and not much good in this kind of snow. Luckily, my car started. I followed

a Traxcavator out to the street. By this time some plowing had also been done on Ford Parkway.

I plowed through the drifts—sometimes on one side of the street; sometimes on the other—as I tried to avoid the bigger drifts. I had a wife and children at home. The heat in the house was supplied by a room oil burner, which had a tank that held about two gallons of heating oil. It had to be replenished from a 250-gallon oil barrel using a can with a long neck. I was worried to death the burner would or had run out of oil and my family would freeze before I could reach them. At the same time, I was beginning to doubt that I could survive the treacherous fifteen-mile drive to get there.

Finally, I got the car within a half a block of my house. I had to park in a drift on South Wabasha and crawl across a vacant lot on my hands and knees in the direction of the house. It took an eternity. I was soaked and frozen all at the same time. At last I reached our door. My family was all huddled together in our small, three-room home wrapped in blankets. The oil burner was still flickering. Grabbing the filler can, I forced open the back door, dug out the fuel oil barrel as quickly as I could, filled the can with the precious oil, and poured it into the tank on the back of the heater.

With the heater now fully working, I changed into a clean set of work clothes

and lay down for about an hour of rest. It was now morning. Leaving the house about 6 A.M. with an old shovel, I walked and crawled to my car. Once there, I shoveled as much snow away from it as I needed so that I could get it turned around and headed back to the plant. The car started and I took off for my shift at Ford. There were few cars on the streets and I made it to the parking lot that I had so recently left.

Unfortunately I was between five and ten minutes late for my shift. This was a big “No-No” at the Ford Motor Company. I found that someone had already pulled my time card and I could not punch in. So I rushed to the timekeeper’s office.

I could hear them yelling on the line, “Glass! Glass!” I knew why. I wasn’t there fitting the glass.

The timekeeper said, “You know the rules. You’re late.”

I said, “Please, please give me my time card. I had a carburetor problem.”

He said, “Ford pays you enough to keep your car in shape. You should not



Norman C. Horton in his World War II army uniform. Photo courtesy of Norman C. Horton Sr.



By the end of World War II, the plant facilities of the Northern Pump Company in Fridley occupied many acres of former farmland on the northwestern edge of Ramsey County. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

have car trouble.” The door to the work floor, however, was open.

I said, “Hear them. They’re hollering for glass. That’s my job. Please let me punch in and get down there so I can get glass on the line.”

He listened a moment and said, “Take your card and get down there.” As he handed it to me, his parting words were: “Don’t be late again.”

Soon it was December 7, 1941. Six months later the Ford plant shut down to be converted to war work. I was laid off but was told I would be rehired. A week passed. In the meantime I heard that Northern Pump Company in Fridley was hiring. They were doing all government work. I applied there for welding work or whatever they might give me. Soon they called me and gave me a welding test, which I passed and was hired. At Northern, they made naval antiaircraft guns, and I put in twelve hours a day, seven days a week. The company paid its wartime workers time and a half once they had put in more than forty hours in a week, which was a big incentive. While I was working there, I answered a request from the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) about my interest in joining them. I agreed and took their secret oath in 1941. My job was to watch for sabotage while I worked at Northern Pump.



When Norm Horton moved his family to 2186 North Rice Street after the war, he built this Sinclair service station in his front yard. Photo courtesy of Norman C. Horton Sr.

I suppose this made me a low-level U.S. spy. After the war was over, the company was renamed Northern Ordnance and continued its work for the U.S. military.

Norm and his wife had another baby and moved to 480 Van Buren Avenue in the Frogtown neighborhood. They lived there until 1944. Then they moved again to a big, ten-room house at 2186 North Rice Street, where they stayed until 1957. In the meantime, Norm was drafted in 1945 and sent to Camp Robinson in Arkansas.

Soon he made the rank of staff sergeant. He did not tell the army about his work for the OSS. Once the war was over, Norm received his discharge and went back to his old job at Northern Pump.

Weary of war work and by that time needing to support a wife and five children, Norm needed to find a way to make more money. He soon realized that his property at the corner of Rice Street and Highway 36 was at the junction of two very busy roads. People’s cars were always breaking down or getting flat tires at this intersection. They often came to his door asking for help with a repair. This led Norm to start his own auto repair shop in a garage that he built in his front yard. He put in long days and nights building the business. Over the years, Norm Norton’s auto parts and repair business grew and became very successful. He subsequently bought a trucking business in the Miami, Florida, and expanded into dismantling cars for used parts in Orlando. Today he divides his time between St. Paul and these Florida businesses.



Norm Horton in the 1950s on the phone at Norm’s Auto Parts. Photo courtesy of Norman C. Horton Sr.

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



The Northern Pump Company produced this poster of naval guns in 1942 to promote the work that its Naval Ordnance Division did to support the war effort. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society. For more on the CCC and working at the Ford plant and Northern Pump, see Norman C. Horton's article on page 19.