

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

*Louis and Maybelle:*

*Somewhere Out  
in the West*

John W. Larson

—page 13

**Winter 2011**

Volume 45, Number 4

*“We Can Do Better with a Chisel or a Hammer”*  
Appreciating Mary Colter and Her Roots in St. Paul  
*Diane Trout-Oertel, page 3*



Artist Arthur F. Matthews painted the portrait of Mary Jane Elizabeth Colter seen above in about 1890, when she graduated from the California School of Design. Colter subsequently taught art for many years at Mechanic Arts High School in St. Paul and later designed eight buildings at the Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona. Shown here is Hermit's Rest, located at the westernmost stop on the south rim, a building that Colter designed in 1914. The Colter portrait is reproduced courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society, Flagstaff, Ariz. Photograph of Hermit's Rest courtesy of Alexander Vertikoff. Hermit's Rest copyright © Alexander Vertikoff.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 45, Number 4

Winter 2011

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 Ramsey County is a jumping-off point. In this issue, Diane Trout-Oertel examines the career of Mary Colter, a St. Paul-born designer and architect who learned her craft here, taught at Mechanic Arts High School, and later moved west to design buildings and interiors for the Fred Harvey Company at the Grand Canyon. The article traces Colter’s ties with the Arts and Crafts movement and the integration of Native American traditions in her designs. On another level, John Larson portrays an evocative view of his aunt and her husband, who also “take off” for the West as proprietors of a nightclub hotel in a Montana boom town, which flourished during the construction of the Fort Peck Dam. And the use of the mail to move substantial goods became prevalent in the early twentieth century, as shown in Janice Quick’s sketch of the process of buying a tombstone from none other than Sears, Roebuck. Finally, we share a book review and some new perspectives relating to the life of Louis W. Hill Sr., as shown in Biloine Young and Eileen McCormack’s recent book, *The Dutiful Son*. Happy winter reading.

*Anne Cowie, Chair, Editorial Board*

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## *Growing Up in St. Paul*

### Louis and Maybelle: Somewhere Out in the West

*John W. Larson*

At the outset of that memorable Christmas Eve of 1928 when I was five years old, I remember sitting alone on the living room floor of our Merriam Park apartment, mesmerized by the blue, gas-fueled flames that flickered about the artificial logs in the fireplace. As I sat there, mother packed Christmas presents and laid out warm clothes for the trip to my Swedish grandparents' home at St. Paul's North End. My father, Walter, a machinist who installed and repaired printing presses, had gone directly to grandmother's from his work at Brown and Bigelow. Mother and I were waiting for my Swedish grandfather Joel Larson to fetch us in his Model A Ford.



*After a Christmas breakfast of rice pudding with raisins, coffee cake, and coffee, gifts were exchanged. Then the Larson family gathered in front of the house for a group photo. It was warm for Minnesota at Christmas time, perhaps even above freezing, yet here all the ladies, except Grandma Alma at the far left, wear fur coats. Grandmother was a law unto herself. She ran her household like a tight ship. Next to grandmother, and squeezed between her and Aunt Miranda, Aunt Maybelle is visibly pleased to be back with the family. Towering above his two sisters from the back row, Uncle Ted is unattached and will soon join the army. Left of Uncle Ted in the back row is my father Walter. He is half hidden there by the collar of my mother Vivian's bulky wombat coat. Unconcerned with father, mother rests her hands on her son's shoulders as an assurance perhaps because she knows his eyes cannot tolerate bright sun, but he only squints and attempts a smile. At the far right is Grandfather Joel, who manages to rise above the Christmas turmoil by leaving it all to grandmother. Still, every year, grandfather's contribution is to fetch the Christmas tree from the farmers' market on Jackson Street. Always a large tree, he manages to bring each one home on the back platform of a streetcar. Yet to become my uncle, Louis Wolf, does not appear in this 1928 photo. He and my Aunt Maybelle are not yet married. He is still in California and has not even been introduced to the family.*

Curious, I went to the window overlooking St. Anthony Avenue and the bakery across the street, pressed my thumb to the cold glass, made a tiny hole in the frost, and peeked down into the winter twilight to see if grandfather had arrived. I saw large flakes of snow falling very softly as though from a long way off, and then the familiar black Ford rounding the corner at Prior Avenue.

"Merry Christmas," said grandfather, standing at our door in his great coat, his fur hat, big fur gloves, and with pearls of frost rimming his large, old-world mustache. Mother and I bundled up in the back seat of the Ford, under a blanket.

No one was about. There was little traffic. The snow kept falling, and it was uncommonly quiet. During the ride, mother and I peered out into the winter evening for glimpses of lit Christmas trees in houses along the way. Grandfather drove slowly to University Avenue, then to Dale Street, out Dale past the darkened Great Northern Railway shops where he worked as a steamfitter, then over Front to Rice Street and north to Jessamine. From the top of the Jessamine hill, just above Cortland Street, we saw the many lighted candles grandmother had set out on the glazed-in front porch as a Christmas greeting. Inside, the house was bright, aglow with warmth, filled with noisy merriment and the festive odor of cooking lutefusk.

Most everyone was in the kitchen. I can see my father now, his close-cropped red hair combed straight back, looking very much like the young man in the 1920s Arrow Collar advertisements, making eggnog according to some exacting and traditional recipe. His younger brother, my uncle Ted, said the eggnog was O.K., maybe better than last year. Uncle Ted was twenty-one, slender and tall. I sensed him swaying ever so slightly as I looked up high into his smiling face.



*Maybelle and Louis met in the summer of 1925. She was working as a waitress in a small Greek restaurant in Sacramento, California. Louis, who drove taxis, ate his lunches there. She found him more interesting than the usual crowd at the lunch counter and when she had to quit her job because of an ankle injury, she went with Louis to Los Angeles and stayed there with his mother. As she told me before she died in 1984, once her ankle healed, she joined Louis and friends in an elaborate bootlegging operation. All went well, she said, until federal agents began to close in on them. Then they, along with the rest of their "bunch," as she called them, absconded to a rented tavern high up in the San Bernadino Mountains, where they hid out for the winter of 1926–27. This was also when Louis started to use the name "Jerry," Maybelle bleached her hair, and preferred to be called "Evelyn."*

Grandmother was at the stove overseeing the ritual preparation of the lutefisk while Aunt Marinda, she was only eighteen, was about to melt butter and prepare the white sauce that would eventually be poured over the lutefisk. Grandfather made banging sounds in the basement, which meant he was stoking the furnace. My mother began to set the Christmas table, covering it with the traditional white cloth, and bringing out grandmother's fine, azalea-decorated Japanware.

Ideally, each Christmas was like the last. Actually, it was never quite so. This Christmas would be remembered for

as long as any of those who were there survived.

My Aunt Maybelle was back from California. For years no one had known where she was. Married at seventeen in 1922, she had left St. Paul with her husband Bob the following year, shortly after I was born. At first they motored to New Orleans, then drove back to St. Louis where she left Bob and disappeared. Eventually picture postcards arrived from San Diego, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Sacramento, from Maybelle, but without return addresses. From these postcards I gained my first impressions of California,



*By 1932 Grandfather had worked in the Great Northern Railway's Dale Street shops for over thirty years. Even so, the company fired him without compensation or pension. They did so because he had joined in when across the country hundreds of thousands of unionized railroad shopmen struck for wages equal to those paid for similar work elsewhere. The union lost. Although the railroad rehired Grandfather, he was no longer allowed credit for the years he had worked for the Great Northern before he went on strike. It was a hard blow in the depression-ridden years of the 1930s, but the family rallied and no one went without food or other necessities. It also meant that Grandfather was left with lots of time on his hands, a condition he rarely enjoyed in his sixty-some years. In this 1935 snapshot, he looks younger and somewhat pleased with himself. He is shaving his moustache. He told my father it had been turning grey.*

the mysterious bright and multicolored place that had swallowed up my aunt.

To me Aunt Maybelle was legend but now, exhausted from the unaccustomed cold, she reclined on a daybed at the far end of the dining room, a strange but friendly, warm and beautiful figure. She immediately hugged me and called me Johnny. I fell in love with her from the start. Everybody loved Aunt Maybelle.

Maybelle was California, a warm country without winter. No wonder she was pale and ill now, here in our frigid land of the north. She stayed with us only a few weeks and then, amid tears and long farewells, she boarded a train and returned to what I imagined to be a fairy-tailed land on the shores of the Pacific. Each Christmas she sent us California things. I still have the redwood box in which she mailed us an assortment of candied fruits: red cherries, yellow pieces of pineapple, segments of pear, figs, and dates. Whenever I was permitted, and sometimes in secret, I tasted one of those sweet things and thought of my aunt Maybelle in her faraway home of postcards, a land of tall date palms, and the rich green foliage of orange trees heavy with golden fruit.

Then, in the summer of 1930, when I was seven, Aunt Maybelle came back to Minnesota accompanied by her distinctive California aura and a new husband, a Californian, Louis Wolf. Louis drove the fanciest automobile I had ever touched. He was as exotic and rare in our Swedish-American, Midwest milieu, as the tropical plants I'd seen in St. Paul's Como Park conservatory, and he had irresistible charm. I took to him immediately, and so did the rest of the family. He was gracious, incredibly flashy and entertaining, everything that we were not.

Louis was tall and, in contrast to my Swedish family, darker skinned. He was different in other ways as well. In the middle of his otherwise dark head of hair there was a broad strip of white running back from the center of his forehead. He wore hundred-dollar suits, or so my father said, and a large diamond in a gold ring. His two front teeth were also of gold as was his Hamilton wristwatch. A gold chain dangled over the affluent yet modest protrusion of his belly, a bulge, not gross but genteel and neatly vested,



*Already attending Webster Junior High School, the writer, as shown here, wearing a tie, a pullover, knickers, and knee-high boots, was not particularly involved in school. Granted there were still a few friends who had accompanied him all along in his special-education "Sight-Saving" classes, but there was nothing much at Webster to interest him. Otherwise, like then-President Franklin Roosevelt, he spent his free time on his postage stamp collection, or he went shopping on Payne Avenue with grandfather in his Model A Ford and occasionally, of an evening, he and grandfather played checkers. Both had time on their hands. They never argued and most assuredly they agreed on all matters pertaining to their favorites, my Aunt Maybelle and my Uncle Louis.*

which he sometimes patted with pride and obvious satisfaction.

In contrast, my grandfather's pocket timepiece had cost no more than a dollar and in place of a chain he tied it with a brown shoelace. My father carried no watch and certainly would never have worn one on his wrist. In another person, the men of my family would have been put off by Louis' flashy style and gratuitous show of jewelry. But Louis, they recognized, was no ordinary man. Instead of working as they did, Louis

lived by his wits and the men admired him for his audacity.

My grandmother, Alma, a practical, straightforward woman, was not impressed. She liked Louis well enough, accepted him as a son, but after Louis and Maybelle had stayed more than a few days at the house on Jessamine Street, grandmother tired of Louis's lounging about all day in nothing but a dressing gown over his golden, silk pajamas, while eating chocolates and reading. She tried to interest him in digging up the garden, but he said he had never yet found a shovel to fit his hand. Grandmother was furious, but my grandfather who had done a good deal of shoveling in his day was amused. Louis, grandfather told my father, was the only truly free man he had met on these shores since arriving from Sweden some fifty years earlier.

Back in the depression years of the 1930s, Louis Wolf with all his gold and easygoing ways may have come closer to grandfather's youthful dream of life in the New World than anyone he had known since coming to America. Indeed, for all of us, particularly for me in my pre-teen years, Uncle Louis was an astounding character. It was from him that, at an early age, I learned to play blackjack and poker. "Bet 'em high on an ace in the hole," or "Read 'em and weep," he would say when the family gathered for a social game of penny ante or blackjack.

I believed him to be a professional gambler. The idea fit my picture of him as a product of the Wild West. So too did his piano playing. Grandmother had a player piano. Even before Louis arrived on the scene, on special occasions, the family gathered around it to sing loudly from the printed words that were exposed as the perforated roll unwound and played the piano mechanically in response to one of us pumping the piano pedals. No particular talent was required. Even I could play the piano after my legs had grown long enough to do the pumping. At an early age I received uncommon pleasure from belting out such old ballads as, "There is a tavern in the town and there my true love sits him down" or "The man on the flying trapeze," who flew, I sang lustily, "through the air with the greatest of ease."

Not only did Uncle Louis actually play

the piano, but he did it in such a way that it sounded mechanical. He could do so for hours. His big diamond sparkled all the while as his well-manicured fingers moved easily, but with special firmness, over the keyboard. He said that as a boy his ambition had been to play the piano in a saloon. While he played, I imagined my grandmother's living room transformed into a frontier bar where at one end men played blackjack and poker, and where beautifully dressed ladies mingled with ornery cowboys, and where, at any moment a fistfight or shooting could take place.

\* \* \*

Shortly before Thanksgiving 1934, when I was eleven, Louis and Maybelle turned up unexpectedly late one evening in a large car with bulletproof windows, or so my father told me, after crossing seven states in three days, being pursued, I think father exaggerated, by the police.



*It was said that Franklin Roosevelt enjoyed getting away from the tensions of running the government in Washington by visiting work projects that his initiatives had set in motion. This was particularly true for the Fort Peck Dam. This project had been authorized by the 70th Congress during Calvin Coolidge's administration, but it was never funded. After Roosevelt's election, it was soon funded along with a good many other projects on the president's initiative to revive the stagnated economy. Indeed, in this informal photo the president does look relaxed, even benign.*

# Wild West Going Full Blast in Town Near Ft. Peck Dam

By ERNIE PYLE

**WHEELER, Mont.**—You have to see the town of Wheeler to believe it.

When you drive thru, you think somebody must have set up hand-painted store fronts on both sides of the road, as background for a western movie thriller. But it's real.



Pyle

Wheeler is today the wildest wild-west town in North America. Except for the autos, it is a genuine throwback to the '30s, to Tombstone and Dodge City and Goldfield.

Wheeler is a shantytown from the Government-built city at Ft. Peck dam. It is not an Government property, hence is free to go its own way. These boom towns always mushroom up around a big construction project. There are 18 of them around Ft. Peck.

They are shantytowns proper. They have such names as New Deal and Delano Heights. Their houses are made of boxes and tin cans and old boards and tar roofing. They look just like Hoover's famous Bonus Army camp of 1932 on the Anacostia flats.

All except Wheeler. It is the metropolis of the mushroom villages. It has 2,000 people, and real houses and stores. It has 62 little businesses lining either side of the main street. Such places as "Buckhorn Club" and "Hoosier-56" and just "HOTEL."

It has nearly a thousand homes scattered back behind the main drag. It has half a dozen all-night taverns, and innumerable beer parlors. The taverns open at 8 in the evening and run till 6 in the morning.

At night the streets are a noise of drunken men and painted women, as they are called in books. Gambling and liquor by the drink, are illegal in Montana. But Wheeler pays no attention. You can sit in a stud game, or keep smoking forty-rod all night.

The taverns don't have floor shows. You just drink and dance. The music goes off long after daylight. You don't



Main-st of Wheeler, Montana

have to pay to dance with the girls, but they get a nickel a glass for all the beer and whisky they induce the boys to buy.

Back behind Wheeler is a separate village where the women of easy virtue live. This town has an imprinable name. It has no other name. Everybody calls it by this name. They say a thousand women have heard the call and drifted in for the easy respings among the dam workers.

Wheeler is two-and-a-half years old. It started with Ft. Peck dam, when some guy brought in a trailer, built banks in it, and rented them to dam workers at \$4 a week.

Ruby Smith was the first real settler. She started an eating place along the road, and within 30 days the town had sprung up around her almost to its present size.

Ruby now runs the Wheeler Inn, one of the biggest all-night hot spots. She goes to bed at daylight and gets up late in the afternoon. She's losing the money.

Joe Frazer is the entrepreneur of Wheeler. Twenty years ago he homesteaded a large batch of practically worthless land here on the bare Montana knobs. It never did pay his way. Joe Frazer became a barber in Glasgow, 20 miles away.

Then God sent Ruby Smith and the Army Engineers, and they say Joe Frazer will come out of it easily with \$100,000. He owns all the land Wheeler is built on.

Wheeler won't exist six months after the dam is finished in 1939. So Joe Frazer doesn't try to sell lots. He just rents them. His income, they say, is \$2500 a month.

Wheeler is all wood. There isn't a stone or steel building in town. It has no water system. They have had 16 fires since New Year's. One side of the town has wells. The other side hasn't any. There has been, fortunately, no epidemic.

Prices are typical boom-town prices. Rents aren't bad, but food is high. There is one small wooden church and there are two gospel ministers.

Quite a few of the boys indulge in holdups. Motorists on the road, and cashiers behind the cash register, have looked many times down the barrel of a six shooter.

There has been considerable gun waving, but little pulling of the trigger. The thieves take their swag and beat it. Wheeler has not developed any spectacular individual bad man, such as "Curley Hill" of old Tombstone.

And whereas the cowboys used to get drunk and ride down the main street yelling and shooting up the town, nowadays the practice is to get drunk and drive down the main highway at 70 miles an hour. They've killed and maimed so many people that way around Wheeler as the tough characters used to with their bullets.

It was the wild criminal driving that finally brought a little law and order to Wheeler. They have a deputy sheriff and two constables now. They don't go in extremes, of course, but they pull in the drunken drivers. They say the law justices of the peace have a very good thing.

Wheeler will be gone in three more years. There may never be another one. Somebody had better record it for posterity, before it's too late.

Ernie Pyle, who wrote this newspaper column about Wheeler, Montana, in September 1936, grew up an Indiana farm boy who complained when he graduated from high school in 1918 that "Town kids can make you feel awfully backward." Nevertheless, during the years of World War II, in spite of the town kids, he became one of the best-known people in the country, or so the Washington Post Book World maintained. The Book World explained that in syndicated newspapers everywhere, millions read Pyle's daily dispatches from the battlefields of World War II. They did so because of his emphasis on the experiences and feelings of the common soldier, the little guy. In this article, Pyle's descriptions of the "little guys," Wheeler's ordinary folks, display his special gift for empathizing, even, one assumes, with people like you and me.

Around noon on Thanksgiving Day, Louis and grandfather went off in Louis' big car on some errand or other. We were all to eat at two. Two o'clock came, then three, four. It was almost five when they returned home. Louis explained that he had taken grandfather to the bar in the St. Paul Hotel, certainly St. Paul's finest. He admitted that they had drunk a little too liberally from the best of the top-shelf whiskey. Then, too full of liquor to return home, they went instead to a double feature of western movies at the State Theater, on Seventh Street below Jackson, a rather seedy place in those days, and slept.

Explaining all this, Louis, in his hundred-dollar suit and the rest of his finery, stood just inside the kitchen door. Maybelle, close by, said "You damn fool!" then bent down, removed a shoe and threatened Louis with its high heel. Louis shrank together, his arms protecting his ribs. As Maybelle hesitated before choosing a target area, Louis

twisted and turned in anticipation of a blow. I was surprised. As a youngster even I rarely received a spanking. It was funny, partly, but it was somehow wrong



to see Louis humiliated with the heel of Maybelle's shoe.

Shortly after Thanksgiving, Louis and Maybelle drove off, not for California

In St. Paul we were able to follow Louis and Maybelle's lives in Wheeler, Montana, in Maybelle's letters and from an occasional newspaper clipping such as the Ernie Pyle article. We knew that Louis was driving a taxi and that Maybelle sometimes worked part-time in the kitchen of the "Casino," one of the few two-storied buildings in town. The "Casino" was primarily a hotel with a bar. However, a dance band played every evening, and there were ladies to dance with. They were compensated by the management with five cents for each glass of beer they could encourage a patron to buy. Not infrequently, since there was no public transportation, people who wanted to hire a taxi were told they would find one outside the casino, and that is precisely where Louis Wolf is parked on the day this photo was taken. You cannot miss him because of how he is dressed. Nor, back in St. Paul, did Grandfather Larson miss him when shown the photo. He just chuckled and said, "Our Louis Wolf. He will never grow up."



*The Casino may have been the grandest building in Wheeler and judging from the taxicabs parked outside in this photo, it was the one where all the action was. For a time this appeared to be so, but not for long. In early September 1938 the dam project was completed and business dropped off sharply. Nevertheless, even with the construction phase over, the dam provided employment to caretaking personnel and this may have been what Louis and Maybelle were counting on when they bought the Casino.*

this time, but for the high, scarcely populated, plains of northeastern Montana, to the boom town of Wheeler. Near Wheeler an enormous federal works project was under way, construction of the Fort Peck Dam on the Missouri River. Attracted by the promise of work, thousands of jobless men from all over the country were gathered in the area when Louis and Maybelle arrived late in 1934.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was responsible for designing and constructing the dam. The Corps also built the town of Fort Peck, an attractively landscaped community, it was said, with wholesome recreational facilities for dam project supervisors and their families. The government also built barracks for unaccompanied workers. But the government town was not big enough for all the workers. Many built towns of their own, shanty towns where they lived, without electricity or running water, in shelters made of boxes, tin, and old lumber. Of the shanty towns, Wheeler was the most substantial, and perhaps the least wholesome.

Ernie Pyle, who later became famous as a war correspondent reporting from World War II battlefields, was writing for the Scripps Howard news chain when he visited Wheeler in the late summer

of 1936. Pyle dubbed Wheeler the wildest Wild West town in North America, a throwback to western towns of the 1880s. "At night" he wrote, "the streets are a melee of drunken men and painted women." Wheeler was outside federal



*Two weeks after the dam was completed, on the afternoon of September 24, 1938, the dam's upstream embankment broke loose plunging millions of cubic yards of earth along with eight workers and heavy machinery, hundreds of feet below into the Missouri River. The tragic mess shown in this photo was enough to encourage speculation as to whether or not the project would be abandoned. Meanwhile, the town of Wheeler, along with the Casino, languished. But then, in March of 1939, a board of engineers ruled in favor of resuming the work on the dam after corrective measures had been incorporated. Crowds of workers soon returned to Fort Peck and during an addition two years of work to finish the project anew, the Casino flourished as never before.*

jurisdiction and remote from county and state authority.

Government officials at Fort Peck may have suspected that fugitives from the law were hiding out in Wheeler and the other boom towns. When they announced that it was standard procedure to fingerprint employees, ten percent of the workers packed their bags and went off. One foreman reported losing one hundred men overnight. I never believed that Aunt Maybelle and Uncle Louis were hiding out from the law in Wheeler, but I did wonder why they were not known in Wheeler by their given names. Louis was known as "Jerry," Maybelle as "Evelyn."

In St. Paul we got some idea of the colossal size of the Fort Peck Dam from the first issue of the weekly picture magazine *Life*, which appeared on the newsstands on November 23, 1936. The Fort Peck Dam, *Life* explained, would be the largest earth-filled dam in the world. A dramatic photo of the dam's spillway appeared on the magazine's front cover.

We got our inside information on Wheeler from accounts in Aunt Maybelle's letter to my grandmother. Clearly, Maybelle enjoyed Wheeler and took a zestful pride in its notoriety. It was



*The Casino's dance hall, shown here with proprietor Louis Wolf standing to the middle left in the front row of a surprisingly traditional wedding ceremony, is evidence of some of Wheeler's boomtown contradictions. The Wheeler of Ernie Pyle's 1936 article was not what many of the more respectable residents would have preferred. But then there was no federal jurisdiction in Wheeler and state and county authority remained remote. Occasional holdups and in particular drunken driving called for more law enforcement. In 1937 two justices of the peace, a deputy sheriff, and two constables were installed. Wheeler was growing up, and judged by his appearance here, perhaps our Louis was growing up as well.*

she, after all, who sent us the Ernie Pyle clipping. Louis, of course, was not working on the dam. He was driving taxi and dealing blackjack. Depression or no depression, he had not, all of a sudden, found a shovel to fit his hand.

\* \* \*

Louis and Maybelle left Wheeler and went back to California for a visit in March of 1938. Louis's seventy-year-old dad, who, as I later learned, owned and operated the W.A. Wolf Detective Service in Sacramento, had been ill for some time and died while they were visiting him. In addition to a few family keepsakes, some old letters, and a Civil War-era Remington revolver, there may have been a small cash inheritance because afterward, when Louis and Maybelle returned to Wheeler, they bought a nightclub-hotel, the "Casino" a two-story, wooden structure, perhaps the grandest building in town. At home in St. Paul, we were puzzled by this because we knew the Fort Peck Dam was scheduled for completion in a few months. When that happened a nightclub-hotel in Wheeler

would be worth no more than the lumber it was built of.

The dam was completed on schedule in early September 1938. Two weeks later, shortly after noon on September 22, a massive section of the dam's upstream embankment broke loose and some five million cubic yards of earth, along with workers and heavy machinery, plunged several hundred feet into the Missouri River below. Eight men lost their lives. Six bodies were never recovered. Tests were made to determine the cause of the slide. There was talk of abandoning the project. Business fell off at the Casino. But in March of 1939, a board of engineers decided on corrective measures. Workers returned for two more years of labor on the project. The Casino flourished as never before.

Running a boomtown nightclub and hotel came naturally to Louis. He fit right in. One saw it in the photos Maybelle sent home. In a picture taken inside the Casino, streamers of crepe paper lower the barn-like ceiling and provide an air of festivity. Louis, every inch the proprietor, officiates at a wedding. Broadly smiling

and smartly dressed as always, he stands to one side of a traditional wedding group, the bride in her gown and bouquet, groom with boutonniere, bridesmaid, best man, and flower girl. But only the half dozen men standing toward the front wear suits and have taken off their hats. Crowded behind them, are the heads of what is probably a more typical Wheeler crowd, onlookers for the most part, men who mostly kept their hats and caps on but stretched their necks to appear in the photo. After all, there were not many weddings in Wheeler.

As proprietors of the "Casino Nite Club," Louis and Maybelle counted among the better, more substantial, citizens of Wheeler. They employed nearly a dozen bartenders, waitresses, and other help including a band that played nightly. Louis



*Louis and Maybelle were among the more substantial citizens of Wheeler. Looking smart came natural to Maybelle; while Louis, having grown up with some of the quality families of Oceanside, California, was blessed with an aura of respectability. Finally, Maybelle may have been the stronger person of the two. Or at least she might have thought of herself so. Looking closely at this photo, one can see that with her right arm she is reaching behind Louis and has laid her hand protectively on his shoulder.*

had calling cards and stationery printed, became a member of the Benevolent Order of Elks, wore a golden, double-tooth Elk pin, and contributed to good causes.

In truth, by 1938, Wheeler had settled down. The most undesirable elements of the population had been brought under control. The town now had two justices of the peace, a deputy sheriff, and two constables. Drunken driving rather than robberies and shootouts had finally brought in the law. More people had been killed and injured in Wheeler through reckless driving than had ever bit the dust from bad men's bullets in the old-style Western boomtowns.

\* \* \*

Hours were long at the Casino. By the time customers had left and the till checked to determine the night's take, it was frequently five in the morning. When they were not at the Casino, Louis and Maybelle were at home in a two-room shack of a house with an outdoor toilet. In St. Paul we learned that they were looking beyond Wheeler for something with more of a future, another night club, but one where they could settle down for good. After all, they had been on the move since before they married. They had lived a gypsy life with no more home than Maybelle's sentimental attachment to the family in St. Paul.

In August 1939 Louis and Maybelle found what they were looking for, the "Oasis," a run-down dance hall with an attached dwelling, three miles south of Whitefish in mountainous Western Montana, on the southern edge of Glacier National Park. In Wheeler, Louis bought a truck, loaded it with what could be spared of bar paraphernalia from the Casino and together with Roy, one of the Casino bartenders, headed west for Whitefish. Roy drove the truck, Louis his Lincoln. Maybelle stayed behind to run the Casino and, if possible, to sell it while the business lasted. Aunt Marinda, my father's other sister, went out to Wheeler by train from St. Paul to keep Maybelle company. Good-hearted Marinda, she was the family troubleshooter, always ready to step in and help.

From Wheeler, Maybelle was able to send money to Louis in Whitefish, money



*In St. Paul the Oasis never captured our imagination as the Casino had, especially not after Uncle Louis died and even though Aunt Maybelle had good help and hung on there until after World War II. Indeed it was the war itself that dampened our Wild West fantasy, while the whole matter of growing up was set aside until such time as one was again permitted to make one's own life decisions. Still, Uncle Louis' premature death left unanswered questions. Did he, as Grandfather Larson said, never grow up? And, if this was so, was it an alternative open to any one of us?*

he used to replace the Oasis's worn out dance floor, to install new light fixtures, a new furnace, modern plumbing, and generally to assure a viable business and a permanent, comfortable home for the two of them. But once the last load of material was dumped on the Fort Peck Dam in October 1940, business at the Casino fell off abruptly. Maybelle had been unable to sell. The Casino was torn down and its timbers sold to build a house and outbuildings on a ranch near Wiota, Montana, some eleven miles away.

With the disappearance of the Casino, a colorful phase of Louis and Maybelle's lives, and indeed our own, was at an end. Marinda returned to her husband in St. Paul and brought us up-to-date on western developments. Maybelle had joined Louis in Whitefish and they were settling in, and finally making a home for themselves. Nothing especially dramatic was expected from that quarter.

\* \* \*

In St. Paul, the slow pace of the 1930s speeded up toward the end of the decade. Louis and Maybelle and our Wild West fantasies were overshadowed by events closer to home. As a junior in Mechanic Arts High School, I had been caught up, finally, in study and school affairs. My father was doing well at his own business on the fourth floor of the old Foot-Schultz building at 500 Robert Street. Even Grandfather Larson's spirits light-

ened when he started working half days sweeping up and otherwise keeping busy in father's cluttered machine shop.

Filled with self-importance, on June 15, 1941, I graduated from high school, but I was unprepared for the post-graduation letdown. With life ahead wide open, I had no idea what was to be done about it. My summer job downtown in a woodworking shop was only stopgap. I hoped for something more from life but was uncertain as to how to proceed. Then, early in the morning of July 1, a Tuesday, grandmother came down from her house next door to tell us that Maybelle had called from Whitefish to say that Louis had died the night before of a heart attack, one day short of his forty-fifth birthday.

Louis was, for me, the first of our family to die. As I walked my familiar route downtown to work that July morning, along Cortland Street and the mile-long Oakland Cemetery fence, I felt my world had changed. Nevertheless, to my surprise, life went on as though no such awesome thing had happened.

*John W. Larson is a retired civilian employee of the U.S. Department of Defense. A graduate of Haverford College with an advanced degree from the University of Minnesota, he has published a number of articles in this magazine. He now lives in Taylors Falls, Minn.*

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*Mary Colter designed Hopi House at the Grand Canyon National Park in 1905. It is one of the eight buildings at the Grand Canyon that Colter designed over a period of about thirty years. For more on Mary Colter and her connection to St. Paul, see page 3. Photograph of Hopi House courtesy of Alexander Vertikoff. Hopi House © Alexander Vertikoff.*