Ramsey County's 'Boy Problem'

Snapshots of Boys

Totem Town

BOBBIE SCOTT, PHD, PAGE 1
Contents

1  Ramsey County’s ‘Boy Problem’
   Snapshots of Boys Totem Town
   BOBBIE SCOTT, PHD

16  #MinneAsianStories
   Illustrated Living History
   BERT LEE, YUSANAT TWAY, AND ZOUA VANG

25  Growing Up with the St. Paul Saints
   Memories of a Teen Groundskeeper at Lexington Park
   VERN SCHULTZ

Message from the Editorial Board

Stories of youth are often the most compelling, and this issue opens a window into several of those in our county’s history. Bobbie Scott details the one-hundred-year history of Boys Totem Town, which housed boys who had committed minor offenses in Ramsey County. In its early days, the detention facility provided important consistency in discipline and education for the boys, even though runaways were frequent. But as models for treating juvenile offenders changed and populations of color were overrepresented, Boys Totem Town became outmoded and finally closed its doors in 2019. This issue also includes engaging stories from three young Asian Americans—Bert Lee, Yusanut Tway, and Zoua Vang. These show daily living in different cultural settings in Ramsey County. Some of them were illustrated in a graphic booklet as part of #MinneAsianStories, a campaign of the Coalition of Asian American Leaders. Finally, Vern Schultz shares memories of his boyhood dream job, landed at age fourteen: a groundskeeper for the St. Paul Saints at Lexington Park in the 1940s. Among other duties, the ground crew scrambled to retrieve valuable hit-outside-the-park balls from such places as the Prom Ballroom parking lot and University Avenue!

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

ON THE COVER

Boys Totem Town, a juvenile detention center in Ramsey County, closed its doors in 2019 after more than a century. Photos (left to right) courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society and Ramsey County, Minnesota.

The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the updated design of this magazine. Publication of Ramsey County History is also supported in part by a gift from Cara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr., and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon. Thanks also to the Coalition of Asian American Leaders for their financial support.
Ramsey County’s ‘Boy Problem’

Snapshots of Boys Totem Town

BOBBIE SCOTT, PHD

Nick Davis and his friends were hanging out one day in 1958 when they spotted a car—unlocked, keys inside—theirs for the taking. The teens from St. Paul’s Rondo neighborhood enjoyed their wheels for over a month—until they ran out of gas. As they stood on Jackson Street near Mechanic Arts High School wondering what to do, an ambulance and squad car rushed by, headed to an emergency. The foursome instinctively reacted. Police in a second car noticed and also reacted, pursuing the fleeing boys. In the end, only Davis was sentenced—eight months at Boys Totem Town.¹

Davis, who later in life converted to Islam and changed his name to Nathaniel A. Khaliq, found himself lost, angry, and asking, “How did I get here?” Upon arrival, he looked at the building on a hill—no fences in sight—and plotted his escape. But Donald Brandvold, the assistant superintendent, seemed to read his mind, “Mr. Davis, you can leave any time you want. But we will get you, and there’s another place for you after that.”²

Boys Totem Town closed in July 2019 after more than a century. As Chris Crutchfield, a deputy director with Ramsey County Community Corrections observed, “Totem Town meant so many things to so many people through so many administrations.”³ Because of its long and complicated history, however, we can only glimpse pieces of its story through the available public records, newspaper accounts, and memories of those who worked or were sent there.

Boys Totem Town was called the Ramsey County Detention Home—Highwood when it opened in 1913.⁴ People also called it the Boys’ Farm and most often, after 1935, the Home School for Boys.⁵ Around that time, the institution’s Boy Scout troop carved a totem pole from a dead tree. Over the years, more poles were carved, and in 1938, Superintendent George Reif began informally referring to the facility as Boys Totem Town. The moniker became official in 1957.⁶

While the name changed several times, the staff’s efforts to help troubled boys remained constant. The initial goal was to alter the behavior of Ramsey County’s “incorrigible”⁷ or “unfortunate” boys between the ages of eight and eighteen, who had committed lesser offenses, and keep them out of adult jails and the Minnesota State Training School at Red Wing. From the beginning, the facility had no fences or locked gates. Teachers from Saint Paul using homemade scaffolding, boys often created their totems from the top down. This 1942 totem was just one of many built over several years. Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.
Public Schools provided instruction. Activities ranged from farming to fishing, from building a greenhouse to building a canoe. The number of boys in residence ranged from just four after the main building burned in 1936 to well over one hundred in the 1960s, and from primarily white boys to mostly boys of color over the last thirty years. By May 2019, only six remained.8

Boys Totem Town began as an innovative alternative to Red Wing but became an anachronism. Lack of investment, overcrowding, and runaways were always common. In its last fifty years, the problems grew more challenging. Concerns about abuse, safety for boys and staff, mental health, and rising costs were ever present. By the time Totem Town reached its hundredth birthday, big changes were on the horizon. The crime rate had fallen significantly, and juvenile justice workers were realizing that in most circumstances, out-of-home placements could be damaging to children.9 For several years, Ramsey County had been turning to community alternatives, such as “functional family therapy and culturally specific services”10 for the majority of juvenile offenders and didn’t need Totem Town anymore.11

The Early Years of Ramsey County’s Juvenile Justice System

Less than a decade into Minnesota statehood, the state legislature recognized a need for a reform school to keep youth (mostly boys), “out of adult jails and prisons . . . and to provide education, shelter, and training for young people found guilty of crimes or neglected by incompetent parents.”12

The House of Refuge of the State of Minnesota opened in 1868, and for nearly twenty years, a Presbyterian pastor named John G. Riheldaffer and his wife, Catherine, took charge, incorporating educational and religious instruction and regimented chores. There were problems, including runaways, overcrowding, and four deaths from typhoid fever in 1874. The legislature relocated the school to Red Wing in 1891. This new, larger facility followed a similar mission for incorrigible children, but it also took in those who committed more serious crimes.13

At that time during the Progressive Era, organizations across the nation took an interest in the welfare of abused, neglected, and wayward children, and many believed that children should be at school or playing, not working in factories. In 1895, Minnesota passed a law that no child under fourteen be employed in any factory, workshop, or mine, and that children under sixteen could be employed only during vacations.14

Such groups ushered in a new philosophy of juvenile justice, believing children were qualitatively different from adults, and the justice system should treat them differently. They also thought that sentencing a child as an adult did not provide deterrence and could stigmatize the child for life. In 1899, Chicago established the first juvenile court.15 The goal was to rehabilitate rather than punish. That same year, Minnesota enacted a law allowing larger cities to hire a probation officer to attend municipal court hearings where a youth under eighteen was being tried and to act in his or her best interests.16 In January 1902, Albert Graves was named boys’ probation officer in St. Paul. The Saint Paul Globe described the probation process:

If a child pleads guilty, or is convicted, the judge commonly asks the probation officer to talk with the bad boy or girl privately and report back to the court. . . . the court as a rule sentences the offender to a fine or to detention for six months or one year in the training school at Red Wing. Immediately, also, the court suspends the sentence and places the child “on probation” under the care of the probation officer. Thereupon the very naughty angels must submit in private to questioning by the probation officer.17

Ramsey County established a juvenile court in 1905, Judge Grier Orr presiding.18 This removed “wayward” youth from adult courts and provided them with rehabilitative services. Boys had to report to probation weekly and refrain from frequenting saloons or pool rooms, smoking, and playing hooky.

Most boys brought to Orr’s court were there for larceny (stealing bicycles or other property), disorderly conduct (throwing stones or breaking street lamps), or truancy. Minnesota’s first truancy law from 1885 seems lax by modern standards. It mandated that children under sixteen attend school for at least twelve weeks a
year, six of which had to be consecutive. There was no mechanism for enforcement of even these minimal requirements.¹⁹

Over the next several years, the legislature amended the truancy law and added stricter attendance requirements. Eventually, Probation Officer Graves suggested the legislature authorize a detention home for children who were “going wrong.” The home would not be a prison but a milder version of Red Wing. Judge Orr agreed.²⁰

The Reform School Idea Becomes Reality

In 1906, the new superintendent of Saint Paul Public Schools, S. L. Heeter, wrote about “reaching the troublesome boy.”²¹ He suggested creating a parental school—a day school for truants and incorrigibles—to accommodate petty, first offenders. The first parental school opened in 1907 at 509 Lafayette, the former homestead of Elias F. Drake, a wealthy businessman.²² Elmer Bonnell, a teacher at Central High School, served as principal and teacher of fifteen to twenty boys—ages seven to fifteen—in one room.²³

A few months later, the legislature authorized Hennepin, Ramsey, and St. Louis Counties to establish detention homes for more serious offenders.²⁴ In Ramsey County, a committee assembled by Judge Orr recommended that the parental school and a proposed detention home be housed together.²⁵ On November 27, 1907, the parties signed a three-year lease for the Mayall property at 753 East Seventh Street near today’s Metro State University. This dual-purpose facility, which opened in early 1908, was called the Parental School and Detention Home.²⁶ Mr. Bonnell continued as superintendent, with Mrs. Hattie Fox as matron.²⁷

While the parental school served habitual truants or poorly adjusted boys, the detention home housed boys awaiting court action and those already sentenced by the juvenile court. This was a difficult combination. For one thing, the superintendent of the home only had authority over the boys sent by the court, not the day-school boys, who were the responsibility of the superintendent of schools. Despite the challenges, Heeter wrote:

Every item and influence surrounding the [parental] school as well as the Detention Home is “Parental.” The building is situated on a block of ground. The boys take care of the lawns in summer, make their own tennis courts, cultivate their own gardens, etc. In winter, they sweep the snow, care for the walks, build their own toboggans, and flood their own skating rinks. The home and the school are here brought together, a home such as the majority of the boys have never been permitted to enjoy, and a school perfectly adapted to their needs.²⁸

Hattie Fox served as matron of the Parental School and Detention Home and later became the school’s superintendent. A 1911 grand jury report described her as “a woman of rare tact and a proficient student of boy nature. Her sympathy and patience, coupled with firmness, fairness and culture, especially adapt her for this important position.”

Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.
It became clear, however, that the Mayall building was too small, so Mrs. Fox began advocating for a new facility. For the next two years, during which time she was appointed superintendent, she prodded the county board. “One great trouble at present is that the little boys, almost infants, must be mixed with boys of fifteen or sixteen,” she said. “We could not have such a thing.”

On August 5, 1912, Mrs. Fox asked the board for money to visit other parental homes. To demonstrate how productive her boys were, she brought a basket of flowers and produce from the half-acre garden, including a large cabbage, which one commissioner pronounced first class. That produce was a sign of the future.

**Looking for Other Options**

St. Paul was not alone in its search for solutions in juvenile justice. The Hennepin County Detention Home for Boys opened at Glen Lake in 1909 on ninety-two acres that included meadows and farmland, with a farmhouse, outbuildings, and barns—fourteen miles from Minneapolis near the streetcar line. Mrs. Fox and Commissioner Louis Nash visited in 1912.

Then Mrs. Fox traveled to other institutions, including the Ford Republic in Detroit, where boys were supposed to govern themselves. “The boys elect their own officers to enforce rules and keep order. The Republic has its own currency system, its graded school system, industrial department and gardening system which gives every boy his own garden.” Mrs. Fox’s verdict: “It’s like an insane asylum.” She did, however, like the Illinois Industrial Training School for Boys in Glenwood, featuring twelve cottages on three hundred acres with space for four hundred boys and staff. It included an administration building, school, club house, chapel, greenhouse, laundry and central heating plant, and a farm and dairy.

**The Ramsey County Detention Home–Highwood**

Mrs. Fox recommended that Ramsey County acquire a farm near a streetcar line. She requested individual rooms for boys rather than dormitories and stated that because most boys came from St. Paul, the city should furnish teachers. In the end, and despite neighborhood worries over lower property values, the county acquired the eighty-acre Ambrose Tighe farm just within the city limits on the east side, but not near a streetcar line. Commissioner Nash proclaimed the property “peculiarly adapted for the purpose for which it is desired,” though it required extensive alterations before it was ready for its new role.

Mrs. Fox continued as superintendent and lived on the property with her husband, Solomon. A cook and a laundress hired on, and H. J. Maas was appointed farm instructor. Teacher Elizabeth Newton, provided by the school district, completed the staff of five. In a 1942 interview, Newton said the boys walked about five miles from the Mayall building on East Seventh to the farm in Highwood on their first day in August 1913.

Early visitors were impressed:

> Mrs. Fox . . . appears to have the boys under very good and excellent control. Her discipline is of a nature that appears fruitful of good results. The boys are occupied in school studies and various chores about the establishment, and ample time is given for play and recreation.

Almost immediately, the facility faced challenges. The dormitory grew crowded, and additional beds cluttered hallways. Repairs were slow. In May 1914, Commissioner Nash reported that wells kept filling with sand and, at times, the home had no water. In July 1915, Mrs. Fox asked to replace two cows that died after eating a toxic chemical used to kill rodents. A few months later, she requested more than one bathroom for the boys. In November 1915, the commissioner reported that some boys were sick with typhoid, possibly because the pipes leading to the cesspool were only six inches below ground. In addition, during the home’s first decades, fires destroyed several buildings—the first school (1927), the barn (1934), and the main house (1936). No one was hurt.

**Keeping a Watchful Eye**

Committees of the District Court’s grand jury were routinely appointed to inspect public
institutions in Ramsey County, including the detention home, Ancker Hospital, and the jail. These inspections took place starting at least in 1907, and judging from available reports, usually happened twice a year. The most recent report is from 1958. The members of these committees were regular citizens called to serve on the grand jury with no particular expertise in the institutions they were evaluating. They often spent just a few hours on site.

Grand jury reports typically praised the program and the meals but repeatedly pointed out shortcomings elsewhere, including a lack of available water to fight fires. Year after year, they noted how bad the road to the farm was and that in the spring it could be impassable; a new road was built in 1931. The main building was replaced as part of a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project in 1937 after the original farmhouse/dormitory burned. A school addition followed.

Challenges continued, but through the decades there were many positive opportunities for the boys, as well—from local Boy Scout hikes to camping trips to the Boundary Waters, from a variety of athletic programs to building canoes. And, importantly, consistent chores and schooling.

The Farm
Then there was the farm. For decades, staff and boys grew their own produce and forage and cared for horses, cattle, pigs, and lots of chickens. A 1928 inspection report praised the “thought of thrift and efficiency” of Mrs. Fox, “The vegetable cellar was literally filled with all kinds of vegetables, apples and berries grown in the
gardens attached to the school.” A 1941 write up in *The Totem Pole*, a newspaper put out by the boys, included even more details:

Our fire proof dairy barn offers adventure and worthwhile experience for the boys. Here they learn to milk and care for the herd, consisting of six Holsteins and two Guernsey cows which are T-B and Bangs tested at frequent intervals. The dairy crew consists of six regulars, but at milking time extra boys who are interested may receive lessons in milking. All milk is consumed by the boys. Our team of horses furnish the power for plowing, cultivating, harvesting and the general work about the fields. The dairy crew looks after the pigs. . . . The butchering is done by our good neighbors at the City Workhouse Farm.

The boys raise most of our alfalfa hay which is cut, cured and stored by them; moreover, they fill our silo each fall with corn fodder they have grown. The poultry yard is always popular with many of the boys and much valuable experience is gained through the work with geese, ducks, turkeys, chickens, guineas and pigeons. Caring for the flowers, lawns, shrubbery and orchard is a big project which is handled by the boys most satisfactorily and which seems to develop in them an interest in this type of activity and a love for real beauty.⁵⁰

Eventually, though, the farming operation became difficult to maintain. Then came July 1954, when twenty-two boys showed signs of food poisoning. Suspicion landed on the milk. Dr. H. E. Erickson with St. Paul’s health department wrote that the milk was unpasteurized, inadequately cooled, dirty, and shouldn’t be used for drinking or cooking. Refrigeration also was inadequate, as was dishwashing. Meat in storage was uninspected, and sewage sometimes backed up the floor drains and toilet room.⁵¹ Officials suggested the herd be sold, but the farm still had eight calves, and youth continued to work the farm as late as 1959.⁵²

**Who Were Those Problem Boys?**

The 1937 annual report of the probation officer listed the offenses committed by the boys who appeared before the juvenile court. Of 391 boys, 121 had committed larceny, ninety-eight had committed car theft, and fifty-six were cited for disorderly conduct. That year, forty-six boys were sentenced to Red Wing, while sixty-three were sent to the Home School. These statistics don’t tell us which offenses those sixty-three committed, but larceny and car theft were clearly common among this group.⁵³ Cars were a persistent temptation for boys; in the mid-1900s, many of the boys were sent to Totem Town for joyriding or “borrowing someone’s car without permission.”⁵⁴ Rich DuPaul describes his teenage car stealing this way, although he ultimately was sent to Totem Town for siphoning gas, not for “borrowing” cars. He spent his sixteenth birthday there in 1962.⁵⁵

Some of the boys before World War II were there more from neglect than for crime. One shyly told a reporter in 1939, “Well, you know all
the kids out here are not here because they did something bad. Some of them are here because things aren’t right at home. My mother and father wouldn’t take very good care of me.”

Sometimes boys broke the law and were neglected. In 1964, the *Minneapolis Star* reported on ten-year-old Billy, already on his second stay at Totem Town. He was first sent to the facility after neighbors complained he was sleeping in their yards. The second time, he’d been caught housebreaking. Billy, indeed, might have been happy there. He had weighed only thirty-four pounds upon arrival; after five weeks, he had gained thirty-two pounds.

Sometimes boys were just passing through. In 1924, police picked up two vagrants—teenagers sleeping in Rice Park. They’d left London, England, with the equivalent of $300, their parents’ permission, and the promise of jobs in Canada, but—no jobs, so they moved south and were sent to the school while the court decided what to do with them.

Khaliq (then Nick Davis, the boy who had stolen a car with his friends) was one of a small handful of African Americans at Boys Totem Town in the late ’50s. He remembers a late-night boxing match. He and his friend Chris sometimes teased a boy named Chuck, smacking him on the head. One night after lights out, Mr. Arthur Arnold called the three to the gym and announced the harassment would stop. As punishment, the boys could buff the rec room floor on their knees or box. Chris opted to buff. Young Nick faced off against Chuck. “That boy was born with muscles,” Khaliq remembers, and the match wasn’t called until both had pummeled each other good. Khaliq learned an important lesson about respecting others. He and Chuck got along the rest of their time there. Years later, the two ran into each other at a Rainbow Foods store, where they swapped news about their families and reminisced about their time at Totem Town.

There are indications in staff meeting minutes that as more boys of color arrived at Totem Town, beginning in late 1950s, some staff grew uncomfortable. For example, at a September 1968 meeting, the superintendent congratulated staff for handling a series of incidents. “We have at least one negro boy who is looking for things he can complain about to his parents as well as different organizations. He is here for insiting [sic] a riot. We are not going to give in to any of these people. Please be extremely careful how you handle these problems. Don’t let them create prejudice.”

Was that boy looking for things to complain about? Was he the one creating prejudice? How were the other boys treating him? It had been a turbulent year with the assassinations of both Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy. Had this boy been influenced by the Black Power movement of the 1960s? Or perhaps by race riots? Was there anyone on staff who could relate to the circumstances of the boy’s life?

Khaliq says that when he was there a decade earlier, staff discouraged boys of color from congregating even then. “They didn’t realize we all came from a small neighborhood and knew each other. Of course, we gravitated together.”

Still, Khaliq says Boys Totem Town was good for him. While the now seventy-six year-old former president of the city’s NAACP and retired St. Paul firefighter says the facility wasn’t perfect, he credits the place for giving him a second
chance. “Mr. Arnold knew I was a knucklehead, but he pulled me aside, and said, ‘If you straighten up, you will make something of your life.’”⁶²

Education was key when it came to turning many boys around. DuPaul, (the boy who siphoned gas) dropped out of high school prior to his sentence, but after spending two months at Totem Town, his counselor helped him enroll in an evening program through Mechanic Arts High School. He completed his education, married, attended trade school, and worked as a machinist until retirement. Today at age seventy-four, he is active in the city’s Dayton’s Bluff neighborhood.⁶³

Rehabilitation, Not Punishment . . .
From its founding, the intent at Totem Town was to change a boy’s behavior and keep him out of Red Wing. The rehabilitation or treatment philosophy included a system of earning rewards and losing privileges. Breaking a rule might bring the loss of dessert or eating at the silent table. The most valuable reward was the chance to spend a weekend at home.⁶⁴

A 1942 staff editorial in The Totem Pole, explained:
We see our institution as a home and school. We see our charges as real normal boys. There is no blame, no criticism as re-buke, and no sentimentality in our attitude toward our boys, just an acceptance of the fact that many of these youngsters have had no chance for normal, wholesome development, and that it is our privilege to give them the opportunity of which they have been deprived. . . .

A 1954 grand jury committee reported, “The boys themselves appeared happy, well-mannered and well disciplined. We are particularly impressed with the positive form of discipline as against a negative form of corporal punishment.” But how much could these “inspectors” see on a short visit? Every boy had a story.

At a 1963 meeting, the new superintendent, Wayne Johnson, told staff:

The policy of the institution is that boys are not to be slapped in the face, and this is not to be used as a disciplinary measure, staff may shake a boy or “slap him on the butt.” This is not our decision but is from the Main Office. . . . We do not want to have to answer to Downtown on any lawsuits. . . .

In 1975, the typical daily population was sixty-three, with an average stay of three months, and the facility was understaffed. That year, a resident attacked a staff member; a resident assaulted another resident; a fire was apparently set deliberately; there were 142 runaways; and boys filed twelve complaints that staff had physically abused them. Late in the year, Totem Town received a six-month conditional license. The inspection team criticized supervision, staffing, programs, policies, and the buildings. A Task Force voted 7–6 in early 1976 to close Totem Town, but, instead, the county and staff made improvements. Steve Dornbach, the new superintendent who started in October 1975, instituted numerous changes in policies and upgrades. As a result, there were fewer runaways, fighting was reduced, and better and more individual counseling was introduced. Staff grew from thirty-seven to forty-six.

In the 1980s, Totem Town used PEARs (Personal Effort and Responsibility System), a method of behavior modification that rewarded good behavior and pointed out where individuals could improve. In recent years, staff introduced the Juvenile Response Model of positive reinforcement. Boys could still get home passes, but there were other rewards as well at the
bronze, silver, and gold levels. Under this system, residents with a gold card could watch a movie on the large TV in the staff conference room and eat treats.⁷³

Runaways
Runaways were a problem throughout the life of the institution. For much of its history, boys were not locked up, so it wasn’t difficult to leave. Usually the boys headed for their families and were easily retrieved. While residents could earn the privilege of a weekend at home, the practice was temporarily suspended in 1958 after twelve boys ran away, and one beat another boy while at home.⁷⁴ Eventually, the privilege was reinstated.

Two young teens escaped from Totem Town in November 1962. Barefoot and wearing only pajamas, they made it three miles to a Kroger’s Food Market on Conway Street, where they jumped into a truck loaded with 240 cases of Coca Cola and drove away. By the time they were caught in Wisconsin, they were wearing bib overalls over their pajamas. They were returned to St. Paul. The newspaper didn’t report the amount of soft drinks consumed while the boys were on the lam.⁷⁵

A statistical report from 1965 shows that 160 boys ran away that year compared to eighty-seven in 1964 and 136 in 1963. A similar report from 1973 showed 168 runaways, while 1976 saw 286.⁷⁶ Sheldon Johnson, a social worker at Totem Town in the ’80s, remembers when about fifteen boys snuck out a dorm window on a warm fall night. The boss wasn’t happy with him the next day.⁷⁷

In its final few years, the number of runaways was almost non-existent, as the Department of Corrections hired staff from within the community who built stronger relationships with the boys.⁷⁸

Ramsey County Begins to Rethink Juvenile Justice
By the 1980s, boys of color were overrepresented at Totem Town.⁷⁹ A decade later, African Americans made up about forty percent of the residents, far above their proportion in the general population. Hispanics, American Indians, and Asians also were over-represented, and yet staff remained predominantly white.⁸⁰ According to longtime Totem Town corrections aide Michael Callender, staff needed cultural competency training when East Asian boys arrived at Totem Town. Telling a boy to “look me in the eye” was asking him to do something rude and disrespectful, Callender said.⁸¹

The thinking behind the juvenile justice system began to change significantly under Michael Belton, the deputy director of Juvenile Corrections in Ramsey County in the 2000s. In testimony before the House Education and Labor Committee, Belton pointed out that Minnesota had disproportionate numbers of youth of color in the juvenile justice system, with black youth nearly ten times as likely as white youth to be detained.⁸²

At that time, Ramsey County began participating in the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI).⁸³ The program brought together judges, law enforcement, prosecutors, public defenders, mental health specialists, teachers, and corrections staff to work with kids in the juvenile justice system. Community members, many of them parents, were also involved.⁸⁴
According to County Manager Ryan O’Connor, together, they asked some basic questions: What is the purpose of detention? What alternatives could be found to detaining a child prior to a judge finding that child delinquent? What was the cause of the racial disparity seen in the kids held in detention? 

Judge George T. Stephenson was the presiding judge for Ramsey County’s juvenile court for three years, handled delinquency cases for five years, and participated in JDAI for more than a decade. He shared this conclusion:

The leadership of Ramsey County’s juvenile justice partners (schools, law enforcement, prosecutors, corrections officers, and judges) agreed that racial disparities could be traced in significant part to bias and the implicit bias that impacts the discretion exercised by justice partner actors at every step of the process that ultimately results in referrals to juvenile court. The discretion exercised by teachers when they refer children to school resource officers; the discretion exercised by school resource officers and other law enforcement officers in referring cases to the County Attorney’s Office; the discretion exercised by county attorneys in their charging decisions and sentencing recommendations; the discretion exercised by probation officers in their sentencing recommendations; and the discretion exercised by judges in detention and disposition decisions were not the only factors, but all contributed to racial disparities and the disproportionate representation of children of color in our juvenile justice institutions. Research and statistics and JDAI have confirmed this conclusion.

With this in mind, the county, Totem Town staff, and the JDAI worked to find solutions. Russell Balenger, who volunteered at Totem Town, credits Belton for hiring people who looked like the boys. Balenger and his wife, Sarah, also helped. Their work in the Rondo community led to the creation of The Circle of Peace Movement in 2010 in an effort to reduce crime and violence and promote healing for youth and affected families. Boys from Totem Town participated in the program.

Still, problems persisted. The facility remained under scrutiny for its treatment program, questionable record keeping, and abuse

The doors to Boys Totem Town closed in 2019. It is unclear what will become of the property in the future. Photos courtesy of Ramsey County, Minnesota.
In February 2016, Ramsey County judges voted unanimously to stop sending boys to Totem Town. The decision was reversed that May after the county made supervisory changes. Most importantly, Ramsey County hired Keith Lattimore as superintendent and Kim Stubblefield as assistant superintendent of Boys Totem Town. They were the first African American leadership team at the facility and within Community Corrections. The pair worked together to upgrade staff training, better understand the needs of the boys, install additional security cameras, and make other pertinent changes.⁹⁰

Over the last six years, Ramsey County, JDAI, and other juvenile justice partners continued working together, improved how youth are treated, and came to understand the harm suffered by juveniles who are detained. They concluded that incarceration should only be used in the most serious cases. In 2014, St. Paul had 140 youth in out-of-home placements. By 2019, the number averaged twenty-six per day, and at Boys Totem Town, only six residents remained, with a staff of forty-two and a facility that cost about five and a half million dollars to run annually.⁹¹

Today, the county relies on community placements in most cases.⁹² These placements, along with cultural programs or family therapists, help keep youth in their schools, where they are more likely to graduate, and in their communities, where they can form stronger relationships with role models and mentors. Kids are provided with structure and the services and support they need and are more likely to age out of delinquent behaviors. With these and other changes, there was simply no place for Boys Totem Town in the mix of treatment options. Although it began as an innovative solution to keeping troubled boys out of Red Wing, society and corrections changed, as did the understanding of what works in treating children and what can damage them further.

A fixture in the community for over a century, Boys Totem Town saw many successes and many failures. Nathaniel Khaliq and Rich DuPaul feel they benefited from their time there so many years ago. Many boys did. Others did not. But that was then, and this is now. In May,
the county board voted to close the facility. A public commemoration for current and former staff, judges, volunteers, and residents was held on August 14, 2019.

**Dr. Bobbie Scott** started her career as an archaeologist studying the Viking settlement of Orkney and Shetland in the North Atlantic. She has worked in public history in Minnesota for more than fifteen years. Her recent research includes the women suffrage movement in Minnesota and the European American women of Fort Snelling in the nineteenth century.

**Acknowledgment:** Many thanks to Charles Rodgers, Shawn Rounds, and Anjanette Schussler with the State Archives and Heidi Heller with the Gale Family Library, (both located at the Minnesota Historical Society) who generously made the Boys Totem Town collection available before it had been completely processed.

---

**NOTES**


2. Khaliq, interview. Donald Brandvold was likely referring to the Minnesota State Training School at Red Wing.


4. “Ramsey County Detention Home—Highwood,” *St. Paul City Directories* (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1913), 1479. Highwood was a more rural area on the east edge of the city.


6. “Historical Establishment and Progression of Boys Totem Town,” unpublished manuscript, 2003, 8. Boys Totem Town archival collection, Minnesota Historical Society. Today sixty years on, the name Boys Totem Town is considered offensive to some, including many indigenous people because it uses a sacred object from Pacific Northwest nations, disconnecting it from its specific cultural and sacred tradition and geographical home.

7. “Compulsory Education—Truant Schools,” Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes 1905 General Laws, chapter 14, 288, accessed January 20, 2020, https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/1905/cite/14/pdf?search=%22incorrigible%22. The law didn’t define “incorrigible,” but the Minnesota statutes stated children who were “incorrigible, vicious or immoral in conduct” could be sent to truant schools. Essentially, incorrigibles were considered unruly, difficult-to-control youth.


25. Minutes of the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners, Book M, June 3, 1907, 147-148; “Historical Establishment,” 2; Minutes, Book M, December 30, 1907, 269; “Board approved of home for children,” *St. Paul Daily News*, December 30, 1907, 2; Records of the Clerk of District Court of Ramsey County, Chapter VII, 286.


30. Minutes, 267.

31. “Mrs. Fox, superintendent, shows county board samples of flowers and vegetables which have been raised on a half-acre tract,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, August 19, 1912, 9.


33. Minutes, Book O, August 19, 1912, 277.


37. “Says boys need a 100 acre farm,” *St. Paul Dispatch*, October 21, 1912, 9. Mrs. Fox was not granted individual rooms.


45. Minutes, Book P, July 26, 1915, 612; Schuldt, 310 with reference cited: Record of Board of County Commissioners, Book Q, October 18, 1915, 50; Also, Committee Report of the Ramsey County Grand Jury, June 20, 1934. Mrs. Fox’s request was apparently ignored, as the problem appeared again in a report in 1934.

46. Minutes, Book P, November 17, 1913, 48.

47. “Agency Background History, 1959-1967,” Minnesota Department of Corrections website, accessed January 24, 2020, https://mn.gov/doc/about/agency-background-history/. State government was reorganized in 1959 when the Department of Corrections (DOC) was formed and the new Juvenile Court Code was approved; “Licensing and Supervision of Facilities,” Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes 2019, chapter 241, section 021. Today the DOC is responsible for inspecting all public and private correctional facilities in the state.

48. “Criminal Procedure,” Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes 1905, chapter 104, 1110. Paragraph 5283 directs that, “The grand jury shall inquire: 1. Into the condition of every person imprisoned on a criminal charge triable in the county, not indicted; 2. Into the condition and management of the public prisons in the county; and 3. Into the willful and corrupt misconduct of office of all public officers in the county.”


51. “Boys’ home conditions held ‘unsanitary,’” *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 15, 1954, 1. However, short manuscript called “A History of Boys Totem Town 1938-1969” (Rita Smith, n.d., in Totem Times) Boys Totem Town archival collection, Minnesota Historical Society, says it was later discovered that the sick boys had been eating green apples.

52. Minutes of the Boys Totem Town Staff, August 26, 1959, Boys Totem Town archival collection, Minnesota Historical Society.


55. DuPaul, interview.
57. “Totem Town helps Ramsey delinquents,” Minneapolis Star, June 1, 1965, 8B.
59. Khaliq, interview.
60. Minutes BTT Staff, September 18, 1968.
61. Khaliq, interview.
62. Khaliq, interview.
63. DuPaul, interview.
64. Gorman, 952.
67. Minutes BTT Staff, April 17, 1963.
73. Minutes BTT Staff, February 28, 1958.
77. Johnson, interview.
83. County Manager Ryan O’Connor, interview by author, November 15, 2019. JDAI is supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
85. O’Connor, interview; Stephenson, email.
87. Russel and Sarah Balenger’s work in the Rondo neighborhood led to the creation of The Circle of Peace Movement in February 2010 as a way to promote racial healing, reduce violence, and build peaceful communities. In recent years, some boys from Totem Town attended the weekly community dinner and circle where they could engage in respectful conversation.
92. O’Connor, interview.
The Ramsey County Historical Society’s vision is to be widely recognized as an innovator, leader, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community, delivering inspiring history programming, and using local history in education. Our mission of preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future guides this vision.

The Society began in 1949 when a group of citizens acquired and preserved the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family had acquired in 1849. Following five years of restoration work, the Society opened the Gibbs Farm museum (listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974). Originally programs focused on telling the story of the pioneer life of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, the historic site also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, building additional structures, and dedicating outdoor spaces to tell these stories. The remarkable relationship of Jane Gibbs with the Dakota during her childhood in the 1830s and again as an adult encouraged RCHS to expand its interpretation of the Gibbs farm to both pioneer and Dakota life.

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine, Ramsey County History. In 1978, an expanded commitment from Ramsey County enabled the organization to move its library, archives, and administrative offices to downtown St. Paul’s Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An additional expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 to better serve the public and allow greater access to the Society’s vast collection of historical archives and artifacts. In 2016, due to an endowment gift of $1 million, the Research Center was redecorated as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

RCHS offers a wide variety of public programming for youth and adults. Please see www.rchs.com for details of upcoming History Revealed programs, summer camps at Gibbs Farm, courthouse and depot tours, and more. RCHS is a trusted education partner serving 15,000 students annually on field trips or through outreach programs in schools that bring to life the Gibbs Family as well as the Dakota people of Cloud Man’s village. These programs are made possible by donors, members, corporations, and foundations, all of whom we appreciate deeply. If you are not yet a member of RCHS, please join today and help bring history to life for more than 50,000 people every year.
Landmark Center, Coalition of Asian American Leaders, and Ramsey County Historical Society

*invite you to a*

Celebration of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month and #MinneAsianStories

*at Landmark Center*

F.K. Weyerhaeuser Auditorium, 75 Fifth St W, Saint Paul MN 55102

Celebration & Reception - Friday, May 1, 2020, 10:00 am - 11:30 pm

Exhibition on display at Landmark Center from Friday, May 1 to Friday, May 8, 2020

Landmark Center, CAAL, and RCHS proudly present this Celebration and Exhibition to commemorate Asian Pacific American History Month and the release of the 2020 issue of #MinneAsianStories, a storytelling campaign celebrating the rich, diverse, and resilient stories about Minnesota’s Asian American and Pacific Islander population. May was designated as Asian Pacific American History Month by Congress to commemorate the immigration of the first Japanese people to the United States on May 7, 1843, and to mark the anniversary of the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869.

For more info and to make reservations for the May 1 celebration:


Landmark Center exhibition open during regular public hours. Visit landmarkcenter.org

---

**Archaeology Presentations with Dr. Jeremy Nienow**

**Fish Creek Archaeology**
Tuesday, March 24, 7:00 pm

*In partnership with the Maplewood Historical Society*
Maplewood Library
3025 Southlawn Dr., Maplewood, MN 55109

**Public Archaeology Projects**
Thursday, June 18, 7:45 pm
Waldmann Brewery & Wurstery
445 Smith Ave N, Saint Paul, MN 55102
Registration requested.

*Programs are free and open to all.*

For more info on these
and our other *History Revealed* programs for 2020
and to make reservations:

www.rchs.com or 651-222-0701
Young Vern Schultz loved everything baseball. Not only did he play the game every chance he could, he also worked as ground crew at Lexington Park for his beloved St. Paul Saints in the 1940s. Courtesy of the Vern Schultz Collection. See story on page 25.