

RAMSEY COUNTY

History

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Fall 2015

Volume 50, Number 3

Building Through
the Crash

*St. Paul's New Directions in
the 1930s*

James A. Stolpestad

—Page 15

Finding A Way. Together.

ALLY People Solutions: 50 Years of Service
to Individuals and the Community

—Eileen R. McCormack, page 3



Photo collage and images used from ALLY People Solutions 50th Anniversary Groovy Gala 1965–2015.

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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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Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr.
and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon*

A Message from the Editorial Board

In this issue, we are pleased to publish Eileen McCormack's inspiring history of ALLY People Solutions, a St. Paul organization that assists and advocates for people with developmental challenges. It began with a dedicated group of parents who sought an alternative to institutional care for their children in the 1950s and has now grown into a comprehensive program that partners with businesses, who hire participants for jobs in a competitive workplace. We also share Jim Stolpestad's fascinating history of St. Paul city planning and development in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s. The spurt of development taking place then reflected the ideas of the City Beautiful movement that originated with the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. St. Paul created a city planning board in 1918, and despite the Great Depression, prior approval of bonding and new government programs allowed construction of some of St. Paul's iconic projects, including the makeover of an outmoded Third Street into the spacious avenue now known as Kellogg Boulevard. Finally, check out our new RCHS website. It is easier to read and navigate, with links to synopses of all of the magazine articles since we began publishing in 1964.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

Book Reviews

The William Marvy Company of St. Paul: Keeping Barbershops Classic

Curt Brown

Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2015

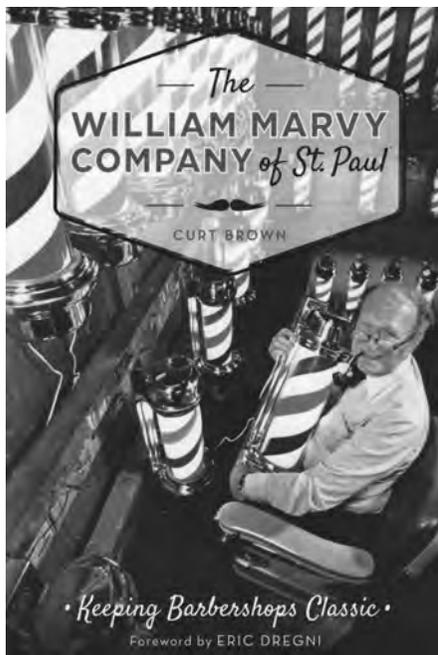
128 pages; photos; \$19.99 paper

Reviewed by John M. Lindley

This book is about the William Marvy Company on St. Clair Avenue. It makes the barber poles with their swirls of red, white, and blue above a rounded stainless-steel base that we know as the iconic signal for a barbershop.

Curt Brown, who is a staff writer and columnist for the *Star Tribune* newspaper, first wrote about the Marvy Company in 1997. He begins this book-length account of the Marvy Company with a brief history of barber poles, which date from the eleventh-century when barbers cut hair, shaved beards, pulled teeth, and did blood-drawing and minor surgery using leeches. Today barber poles rank up there with the three gold balls of a pawn shop or the mortar and pestle of a pharmacist as symbols for a particular profession.

Born in St. Paul in 1909, William Marvy, the founder of the company, got into the business after World War II when supplies of stainless steel and aluminum were once again available for the commercial market. In the 1930s, Bill Marvy drove around southwestern Minnesota selling clippers and hair tonic. Then he got the idea to manufacture a modern barber pole, one that would be lighter, wouldn't shatter, and would be electric. Since that first pole was produced in 1950, this small family business has manufactured more



than 85,000 poles in various models and is the last company making barber poles in the Americas. Its competitors operate in Japan, China, and Europe.

To make his first barber pole, Bill Marvy enlisted the help of his neighbor, Bill Harris, who was an electrical engineer. Both men were Jews living in the Highland Park neighborhood and they spent many nights in 1949 trying various ways to make a pole that was lighter in weight than those made of wrought iron, more resistant to vandalism by using a Lucite plexiglass plastic shell, and electrified so that no keys or cranks were needed to make them operate endlessly, if needed. Their workshop was in the basement of Marvy's home, the same house that Bill's immigrant father, Mair Mairovitz, had built, but never lived in, at 446 Mount Curve Boulevard

(the Mairovitz family legally changed its name to Marvy in 1935). The result of their experiments was the prototype for the Marvy Model 55. In Brown's words, Bill Marvy as "one of those innovative mid-twentieth-century Americans with the creative chutzpah to think he could do better."

Bill Marvy worked hard and was a master at promotion and sales, but barber poles made by the Marvy Company last forever. So today that's only one part of the company's business. When the first Model 55 sold in 1950, there were over 90,000 barbershops in the U.S. Changing hairstyles in the 1960s and other cultural factors led to the demise of many of these shops so that by 1984 there were fewer than 40,000 shops in the country. Today the number of traditional barbershops is less than 30,000. Consequently the Marvy Company diversified into other barber products and supplies. Today barber poles represent only about 30% of the firm's annual revenue, but, as Brown reminds us, "manufacturing and saving barber poles . . . remains at the core of the Marvy mission."

When founder Bill Marvy died in 1993, ownership of the family business passed to his son, Bob, who today is assisted by his three sons, Scott, Dan, and Brad. Author Brown reports that according to the Family Business Institute, only 12% of family businesses survive to be run by a third generation. We also learn that as of the time that Brown wrote his book on the Marvy Company, there were no fourth-generation Marvys.

Along with his history of barber poles and his account of the Marvy family and their colorful business, Brown reports on the various barber poles he has found

in shops scattered across the U.S. When he finds a shop with a Marvy pole, he learns which model it is and interviews the shop owner about the pole and the state of barbering in that area of the country. This is an engaging, yet quirky, business history that's full of interesting photos of Marvy family members and their sturdy barber poles.

John M. Lindley is the editor of Ramsey County History.

*Her Honor:
Rosalie Wahl and the Minnesota
Women's Movement*

Lori Sturdevant

St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society
Press, 2014

268 pages; photos; \$18.95 paper;
\$12.99 E-book

Reviewed by John M. Lindley

Rosalie Wahl (1924–2013) was a pioneer, but not in the usual sense that we in Minnesota associate that term. She was not a nineteenth-century founder of a city or county or business in our state. Instead she was the first woman to serve on the Minnesota Supreme Court. Governor Rudy Perpich appointed Wahl to the Minnesota's highest court in 1977 because she was a woman and she had spent many years as a lawyer defending the disadvantaged. She served on the court for seventeen years, retiring in 1994.

Lori Sturdevant, an editorial writer and columnist for the *Star Tribune* who previously assisted the late Governor Elmer L. Andersen with his biography (published in 2000), has written a very readable account of Wahl that not only tells her story, it also ties her work and views to the Minnesota women's movement. Although Sturdevant writes that Wahl "pushed the legal system to value life's emotional and psychological components" and to take more seriously cases involving acquaintance rape, child and spousal abuse, and the welfare of wives in divorce court, this biography is not



an analysis of the more than 500 opinions Wahl wrote during her tenure on the high court. Thus Sturdevant's book is a biography that concentrates much of its attention on how Wahl's experiences and views intersected with Minnesota politics in the last third of the twentieth century.

Associate Justice Wahl was born in Kansas, where she experienced hardship following the death of her mother and was raised by her grandparents. Engaged to be married, her fiancé died in a training accident during World War II. In 1946 Wahl earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Kansas and married Roswell Wahl. They divorced in 1972.

Sturdevant reports that in 1960 Wahl, who by then was the mother of four, joined several other women and made a presentation to the Washington County Board requesting that the commissioners, who were all men, use some of the county's budget surplus to establish branch libraries in rural areas. Once the women had completed their presentation, they were asked to leave the room. Later the women were told their request was denied.

This experience of how local politics worked spurred Wahl to go to law school. She enrolled at the William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, a law school that at the time had few women students

and even fewer who had children at home. When she gave birth to her fifth child, Wahl missed a total of one week of classes. She graduated in 1967, one of two women in her class.

Initially lawyer Wahl worked on felony appellate cases as a public defender. Later she earned appointment in 1973 to the faculty at William Mitchell to run a newly established legal clinic that focused on practical legal experience. Under the supervision of Wahl and other professors, her students defended low-income litigants. That clinic is today known as the Rosalie Wahl Legal Practice Center. In 1977 at the time Wahl was appointed to the Minnesota Supreme Court, Sturdevant identifies Wahl as "a committed but politically prudent feminist."

A big part of this biography is also a biography of the women's movement in Minnesota during the years that Wahl was getting her law degree, teaching at William Mitchell, and serving on the Minnesota Supreme Court. Whoever undertakes the telling of the history of the women's movement in Minnesota in the future will want to incorporate Sturdevant's account as it's reported in *Her Honor* because Wahl championed both women's rights and civil rights.

Near the end of the biography, Sturdevant identifies three lasting contributions that Wahl made in her years on the high court. She pioneered the way for more women to be appointed as judges and Wahl provided important leadership in court reform as the head of two major judicial task forces, one that dealt with gender bias and the other with racial bias. The former analyzed Minnesota's justice system to "root out sexism in the way the courts treated women" while the report of the latter "raised judicial consciousness of the ways in which Minnesota courts were treating white and non-white people."

Her Honor is a book about a lawyer who happened to be female and who served her state and community with distinction. We all can learn much about Minnesota from this book.

John M. Lindley is the editor of Ramsey County History.

R.C.H.S.
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This 1939 postcard shows the skyline of St. Paul from the Mississippi River following the completion of a period of major public and private construction in the city during the 1930s. For more on how St. Paul changed during the Great Depression, see page 16. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.