

RAMSEY COUNTY

History

A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

*From Streetcars
to Buses to Soccer*
**Creative Destruction
in the Midway**

John W. Diers
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Winter 2016

Volume 50, Number 4

Build Up, Build Down, or Relocate

The West Publishing Company Buildings and Ramsey County's Adult Detention Center

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This is how the south side of Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard) west of the Wabasha Bridge looked between 1908 and 1910. Prominently visible are the buildings of the Booth Company (left foreground) and West Publishing Company. By then West had been publishing law books for over thirty years and had a national clientele. Soon these buildings and the former Ramsey County Adult Detention Center (not built until 1979; located just to the east of the Booth Company) will all be gone from the bluff along the Mississippi River in St. Paul. Charles P. Gibson photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON JANUARY 25, 2016:

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future

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Publication of Ramsey County History is supported in part by a gift from 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

Change is a constant in history. For decades, the Mississippi River bluffs in downtown St. Paul supported the massive infrastructure of West Publishing Company as it edited, assembled, and shipped law books throughout the country. And the bluffs later housed prisoners waiting for trial in a modern jail. Paul Nelson tells both of these stories, as well as how changing needs pushed those entities to new locations. Similarly, John Diers recounts the history of the Twin City Rapid Transit System shops and garages on Snelling and University, which once served as a base for 800 workers. Happily, that site will have another chapter in its history when the new Major League Soccer stadium is built.

William Beyer shares the professional evolution of Herbert Sullwold, the architect who designed the compelling chapel at the University of St. Catherine, along with its state-of-the-art 1926 science building, before he moved to California to finish his career.

Finally, on a more sober note of change, it is unsettling to realize that some early prominent St. Paul settlers used funds from their slaveholding families to help develop the city. Christopher Lehman reminds us that, although slavery was illegal in Minnesota, in practice, St. Paul hotels welcomed southern tourists traveling with their slaves until the Civil War. We can be grateful that today such events are only a distant memory.

Anne Cowie Chair, Editorial Board

From Streetcars to Buses to Soccer

Creative Destruction in the Midway

John W. Diers

St. Paul's Midway is a tale of "creative destruction," what economists and historians call an irresistible, inevitable force that wipes away the old and brings in the new. In the 1840s and '50s it was an empty prairie traversed by the Red River Trail, winding its way along, and near, what is now University Avenue from St. Anthony to the Mississippi River levee in St. Paul. In 1883, James J Hill's Minneapolis St. Paul & Manitoba and eight other railroads arrived and incorporated the Minnesota Transfer Railway Company, building the second largest freight forwarding and classification yard west of Chicago on some 200 acres, west of Prior Avenue.



This aerial photograph is undated but was taken sometime between 1920 and 1925. The camera is pointed southeast. Montgomery Ward (constructed 1921), upper left, opened after 1920 and the large, flat-roofed building in the upper center was a streetcar storage shed that burned in 1925. The intersection of Snelling and University Avenues is at the bottom. The large building at the intersection is the Snelling carbarn, next is the storage yard. Then, going south and parallel to Snelling Avenue is the machine shop, to the east of the machine is a large general repair shop, the powerhouse, (smokestack), the foundry and the forge and structural shop. South of these buildings is an open strip of land for a transfer table that was used to move streetcars and materials to and from the various shop buildings. Further to the south we see a corner of the erecting shop, then a vacant parcel, then the carpenter shop, the lumber shed and dry kiln, the storehouse and the cement and oil storage house. The track department and the overhead wire repair department used the smaller buildings in the upper left. The erecting shop and the carpenter shop were rebuilt and became part of the bus garage after 1954, and are approximately where the proposed soccer stadium will sit. The storehouse survived until 1974 but was demolished by MTC to make room for employee parking. All of the other buildings from the intersection of Snelling and University to Montgomery Ward were razed after 1955 to make way for the Midway Shopping Center. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Streetcar Museum.

That started things, and industry followed the rails. Some 300 manufacturing firms and warehouses with names like Weyerhaeuser; Nash Coffee; Brooks Brothers Lumber; International Harvester; Griggs, Cooper and Company; and Murphy Trucking, among others, filled in the prairie. Retailing arrived, along with auto dealerships, drive-in restaurants, movie theatres, a baseball park, and hundreds of homes in adjoining residential neighborhoods.

The Impact of Streetcars

From the state Capitol to the city limits, the St. Paul-Minneapolis streetcar stitched the Midway together; first in 1881 with horse-cars on University Avenue as far as Dale Street; then, in 1890, with electrification, all the way to downtown Minneapolis. The streetcar's fast, frequent service quickly put the competing steam road commuter trains out of business. Within two years, the Great Northern, Northern Pacific, and Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul drastically curtailed their schedules and would soon, thereafter, discontinue commuter service.

The streetcar won the day. It was christened the Interurban, a term later applied to intercity electric railway lines throughout the industry. The Interurban was the busiest line in the Twin City Rapid Transit (TCRT) system. At rush hours, up to 70 cars provided three-minute service. There was never an empty seat. In 1892 the company built a carbarn at Raymond and University Avenues. It was home to the line until 1908 when the larger Snelling carbarn and shops replaced it.

In 1904 TCRT bought 60 acres of land near the corner of Snelling and University Avenues. Twenty of the 60 sixty acres were subsequently sold to Montgomery Ward in 1920 for its retail store and mail-order warehouse that provided a colossal 1.2 million square feet

of space and employed thousands. The carbarn was the first building on the site. It had six run-through tracks accommodating up to forty-two streetcars undergoing inspections and light repairs. There was a conductor and trainmen's room on the ground floor with lockers, showers, and bathroom facilities along with office facilities for supervisors and dispatch clerks. TCRT's employment office and training bureau were in the building, as well as a locker and lunchroom for car repair personnel, a foreman's office, and parts storage room. West of the carbarn, an eighteen-track storage yard accommodated 224 streetcars assigned to St. Paul local lines, the Selby Lake and the Interurban along with still more tracks for storing work equipment and cars awaiting repairs in the shops.

Other buildings went up on the site; an erecting shop, a large general repair shop, carpenter shop, forge and foundry, storehouse, a powerhouse, and more buildings for storage and use of the track and overhead departments. Except for 140 streamlined cars purchased after World War II, every streetcar in the system, some 1,100, was built at the Snelling Shops, along with cars for Duluth and several other transit systems. Workers at the shops completely rebuilt every streetcar in the system on a five-year schedule. Five hundred people worked in these shops. Another 300 conductors, motormen, and operations personnel were based at the carbarn. Overall, TCRT employed some 4,000 people in all of its operations, making it among the largest employers in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Change

Social and economic changes are usually imperceptible and transparent, evolving and blending one with another. It was so with St. Paul's Midway. However, if there's a symbolic break and a date that marks a sharp transition from one era to another, it was on the afternoon of June 19, 1954. Six streetcars converged on the Snelling Shops bringing the mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul, TCRT executives, and the press. They were there for a funeral and watched as TCRT President Fred Ossanna set fire to a derelict streetcar body, symbolically ending rail transit in the Twin Cities. As the smoke drifted



About fifty years later, a different aerial photo shows the same site at Snelling and University avenues. Montgomery Ward's massive retail store and catalog distribution center with its tower (all razed in 1996) still fronts University Avenue on the left. To the east and next to the tall smokestack is the Brown & Bigelow Company, celebrated printers of playing cards, calendars, and other marketing materials. That plant mostly came down in 1980 and was replaced by a motel and a Target store. Alongside Ward's toward the bottom of the photo is the Midway Shopping Center with its distinctive roof edge and large parking lot. Metropolitan Transit's busbarn now sits at the corner of Snelling Avenue (very bottom of the photo) and Saint Anthony Avenue, which parallels Interstate 94 on the far right. Photo courtesy of the City of Saint Paul.

away, dismantlers and salvagers began the work of ripping up the tracks in the shops yard, taking down the wires, and carting off whatever scrap remained. Within a year, half the site was cleared to make way for what became Midway Center. The former erecting shop, and carpenter shop became part of a new bus garage on the south side of the property, near Snelling and St. Anthony Avenues.

Why?

Transit ridership had been in decline since the end of World War II, peaking at 204 million riders in 1946. But with the resumption of automobile production, TCRT lost almost 62 million riders in just four years. In 1950 140 million rode its streetcars and buses. Financial losses worsened and a new management took over, vowing to convert the system to buses. That same group perpetrated fraud and embezzlement in the conversion process, stealing several million dollars from scrap metal sales and unethical real estate transactions, but it made no difference.

The streetcar was doomed as thousands of veterans came home to start families, buy automobiles, and move to the sub-

urbs, which had plenty of land available for new housing. The vets had new jobs, money in their pockets, and, most of all, they wanted to shake off the Depression. The cities and the neighborhoods, where they grew up, were part of that history. So were streetcars. On the other hand, Richfield, Bloomington, and Roseville and their three-bedroom ramblers with attached garages were a break with that past.

Supermarkets replaced the corner grocer, butcher shop, produce market, and drug store as did shopping centers with names like Har Mar, Southdale, Southtown, and Miracle Mile. As the postwar generation moved away, manufacturing and retail followed. President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highway Act in 1956. Ten years later I-94 linked downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul, taking with it the Rondo neighborhood and much of the intercity traffic that once moved through the Midway on University Avenue.

The railroads were in trouble, and so was the Minnesota Transfer Railway Company. Trucking companies and warehousing were already moving to the suburbs, when the railroads, shorn of their passenger traffic and merchandise freight

business, began a wave of mergers to stave off insolvency. Some didn't make it, notably the Rock Island and the Milwaukee roads. Both fell into bankruptcy, surrendering much of their mileage to outright abandonment. The Great Northern, the Northern Pacific, and the Chicago Burlington & Quincy merged in 1970 to form Burlington Northern, which then built Northtown, a new freight classification yard and locomotive and car repair shop in Fridley. The Minneapolis and St. Louis merged with the Chicago and NorthWestern, which subsequently acquired the Chicago Great Western and was, itself, eventually merged into the Union Pacific. All of this made the Minnesota Transfer and its clearing yard redundant. In a few years it became the Minnesota Commercial Railway and most of its tracks disappeared, replaced by an office park and a new Amtrak Station.

The intersection of Snelling and University Avenues didn't fair much better. Nearby Montgomery Ward closed its doors and was demolished in the mid-1990s. Brown and Bigelow, the giant printer of advertising and marketing materials, moved in 1980 to the Riverview Industrial Park. Although a new building and a parking ramp went up at Snelling and University, Midway Center, built in 1960 on University between Pascal Street and Snelling, was taking on a tired look. In 2002 Metro Transit, successor to TCRT, moved to a new facility near downtown St. Paul, demolished the Snelling garage, left behind an empty lot and a few stored, derelict buses. Several hundred jobs moved with it.

Revival

Then, on June 14, 2014, almost 61 years to the day after the streetcars disappeared, the Green Line opened, returning rail transit to University Avenue, and with it, hopefully, a revival of the once moribund Midway. So far the signs are good. There's new construction. Old office buildings and warehouses are transitioning to apartments and condos. Millennials and ex-suburban baby boomers are moving back to neighborhoods that their parents and grandparents deserted sixty years ago.

With transit as the catalyst, more change is on its way. At a joint press conference on October 23, 2015, Saint Paul

Mayor Christopher Coleman and former United Health Care CEO, and Minnesota United Football Club owner, Dr. William McGuire announced plans to build a 20,000-seat, \$120 million stadium on the former bus garage site, providing a home for Major League Soccer in Minnesota. The team, known as the Loons, and the City of Saint Paul along with the state and partners at the regional and local level, including a community advisory committee, will work together on the project.

Mayor Coleman in a statement noted the stadium would benefit redevelopment of the entire area, "creating jobs, spurring housing and new commercial opportunities and building on our commitment to transit oriented development."

The stadium will be privately financed and publicly owned. Besides Dr. McGuire, investors number some of the sharpest business people in the region among them Glen Taylor, owner of the *Star Tribune* newspaper, members of the Pohlada family, and Wendy Carlson.

The land under the stadium is publicly owned and tax-exempt, as it has been since September 1970, when the Metropolitan Transit Commission bought Twin City Lines. The Saint Paul City Council and Ramsey County have passed resolutions supporting continuation of its tax-exempt status, a measure that will require legislative approval. Legislative action will, also, be needed to exempt construction materials from sales taxes. The Federal Transit Administration, which provided funding for the 1970 TCRT buyout will have to sign off on these provisions, as will the Metropolitan Council and the Saint Paul Port Authority.

United Properties, part of the Pohlada Group, is exploring development opportunities for the Midway Shopping Center site, although nothing formal has been announced and there is no agreement, as yet, with RK Midway LLC, owner of the property. Redevelopment of this site could have more long-term and far-ranging economic impacts than the stadium itself, which will host perhaps 20 games a year.

Construction is set to begin in 2016. Stadium design will be led by Kansas City-based Populous, an internationally regarded sports architecture and design firm, with Mortenson construction as

the general contractor. Mortenson and Populous have partnered on numerous sports facility projects over the years, including Target Field, TCF Bank Stadium, and Xcel Energy Center.

There are unknowns. The city and developers have not addressed parking and traffic issues. Transit and the Green Line were major factors in site selection and it's assumed so far that they will bring most visitors to the games. Redevelopment of Midway Center will, also, be a factor and presumably there will be coordination on traffic management and parking between stadium and redevelopment planners. Sharing and allocation of infrastructure costs remain open issues.

A community advisory committee has been named to pull together all the stakeholders and work through issues and problems that will inevitably come up as the project moves ahead.

According to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, United owner Dr. William McGuire told the members of the advisory committee at a recent meeting that the soccer stadium "has to be a cohesive project. This stadium . . . is forming a catalyst that is real and tangible for the development of the community."

Will they come? That's the question. Soccer is popular outside the U.S. and is growing in popularity here, especially, among millennials and younger people. The stadium's proximity and transit access to the University of Minnesota, Hamline University, and Macalester College are important, but so are ticket prices and traffic and parking. There are risks, true of all development projects, but given city support and the commitment of investors and promoters, the stadium and associated projects will, undoubtedly, bring fresh economic activity and a new era to the Midway. "Creative destruction" is at work.

John W. Diers writes regularly about the history of transportation in the Twin Cities. A member of the Society's Editorial Board, his most recent book is St. Paul Union Depot (2013). He and the Ramsey County Historical Society thank Mayor Christopher Coleman and Dr. William McGuire for their willingness to be interviewed for this article.

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

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A recent aerial photo shows the site at the intersection of Snelling and University avenues where a proposed soccer stadium will be built for the use of the professional United Football Club. Construction of the stadium is expected to begin in 2016. For more on the history of this site and its potential for the development of that area, see John Diers's article on page 13. Photo courtesy of the City of Saint Paul.