

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Fall 2006

Volume 41, Number 3

The 1894 Pullman Strike
and the Death of
Switchman Charles Luth

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A Little-Known Railway That Couldn't
The St. Paul Southern

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Looking west from the Robert Street Bridge, this 1920s photo shows a St. Paul Southern car headed outbound for South St. Paul and Hastings. Between 1900 and 1910 the combined population of these two Dakota County communities increased 38.5%, encouraging construction of the interurban. But the line's ambitions to build on to Cannon Falls and Rochester went unfulfilled, and it eventually succumbed to automobile and bus competition. Photograph courtesy of the Minnesota Transportation Museum. See John Diers's article beginning on page 4.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 41, Number 3

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect,
preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public,
recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make
available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major
responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Transportation is the theme for this issue's two main articles: a history of the short-lived St. Paul Southern electric interurban railway, and an exploration of the social and economic implications of the 1894 Pullman strike in St. Paul. The latest addition to our series, "Growing Up in St. Paul," presents a lyrical account of childhood in the Frogtown neighborhood in the 1930s. And a book review introduces a significant compilation of the letters of Bishop Loras, who sent priests from Dubuque in the 1850s to minister to the population of the new Minnesota Territory.

These articles, with their varying subjects and approaches, illustrate the different ways this magazine addresses its mission to preserve and highlight the many facets of Ramsey County history. We hope you will be able to contribute a little extra this year, through our annual appeal, to strengthen the financial base that allows us to present such great material on a continuing basis.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

Memories of Frogtown in the 1930s

James R. Brown

My father, mother, three sisters, and I lived in an old section of 1930s St. Paul, Minnesota, known as Frogtown. Public schools and churches of all denominations coexisted with houses of prostitution and gambling establishments, where the country's public enemies brazenly mingled with the populace and hoboes of every description roamed the streets like lost souls.

The main artery was University Avenue, a wide, elegant thoroughfare with a streetcar line that connected the capital city with its younger, but larger, sister, Minneapolis. University Avenue, jocularly known as "The Mason-Dixon Line," separated Frogtown from the Rondo Avenue district where most of the African American families lived. Mornings found black workers gathered on corners waiting for the Rondo-Stryker streetcar that wound its way down the slope to the heart of the city nestled in the hollow along the banks of the Mississippi River. These men and women were headed for their service jobs in the downtown hotels or off to the stockyards across the river in South St. Paul.

Amid the hustle and bustle of the Rondo district were restaurants where fried chicken and barbecue dinners were served with chitterlings and greens or black-eyed peas and ham hocks and sold for 15¢ a plate. Black-owned businesses thrived in the neighborhood. Along Rondo Avenue were honky-tonk clubs where the tortured wail of Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday flowed out into the streets like haunted dreams. Lower Rondo Street, called Cornmeal Valley, sat in a hollow east of Dale Street: a neglected section of the city on the doorstep of the State Capitol. Upper Rondo, an area of stately old homes, had a mixture of affluent whites and middle-class blacks who lived in relative harmony.

We were one of the several black

families who lived in predominantly white Frogtown. Our house was on a narrow paved street not far from the railroad tracks. The "N" word flowed from the lips of white kids as easily as rainwater off a tin roof. I was called by the "N" word on my way to and from school almost every day. Before I knew better, I retaliated with my own unique vocabulary: "Spic," "Trash," "Wop," and "Grease Ball." I honestly believed that the phrase, "Sticks and stones can break your bones, but names can never hurt you," was conceived in Frogtown. I avoided most white adults whenever possible, except for a nun whose name I can't recall, but I shall name her "Sister Carrie."

Sister Carrie was a nun with a beautiful smile and was the only white adult with whom I was comfortable. She taught Latin to those chosen to be altar boys. I loved Sister Carrie but couldn't stand Latin. One time when one of the white kids called her a "n----- lover," I put my foot in his butt.

Fighting with neighborhood kids became a natural way of life. The school officials summoned my mother to see the Mother Superior so often people thought she worked there. Sometimes I won and sometimes I lost those fights, but even when I won, I lost, because Momma took a strong view against violence, except when she dished it out.

I remember all the trouble I encountered on my first day of school. I guess the only reason I went to school that day

was because I had promised my mom in the first place that I'd go. When I showed up at the school office, three hours late and a bit disheveled, this tall, scary-looking nun told me to stop where I was and not take another step. Then she grabbed a roster list and asked me if I knew my mother's name. At that time I couldn't understand how a nun (I had always been told that any nun deserved respect because they were so dedicated to their work and among the smartest teachers in the world) could ask me such a dumb question. Heck, to my way of thinking back then everybody knew your mother's name was Momma!

Another time that I gained understanding came when I got all dressed up on my birthday so my dad and I could hang out together only to learn yet another lesson in disappointment. August 22 in the mid-1930s was one of those days that is locked in memory; a beautiful day that my dad and I were going to hang out together for our birthdays. My birthday fell upon the 22nd of August and my dad's was the next day, the 23rd. We had always celebrated them together.

I hadn't slept well the night before in anticipation. I had my hopes set on a Western Auto bicycle, but my mom and dad came straight out and told me they couldn't afford a bike at that time. I sulked and started to cry until my dad promised me a whole day with just him and me hanging out together. We were going downtown to see a Frank Buck *BRING 'EM BACK ALIVE* animal picture set in Africa. I had a real penchant for animals—big or small, wild, or tame, it made no difference. But I really needed a new bike because my old one had been stolen the first week of summer vacation. I had forgotten it over at the Jackson School playground one day, and when I went back to get it, some low-life had

taken it. Ever since then I had to steal my older sister Leah's bike when the urge for exploration came upon me. Sometimes I loved taking off early in the morning and riding my bike down some strange road just to see what that particular road was all about.

My mom let me wear my brown Sunday suit for that particular birthday, the one with two sets of trousers, a pair of knickers and a pair of long pants. It was the first time I was allowed to wear the long pants. I had worn the suit only three times before, and always with the knickers. Up to that time I had argued with my mom, to no avail, but this time I got lucky. "Mom," I argued that morning, "when a boy reaches the age of seven he is no longer a boy. He is a man. And a man ain't got no business wearing some dumb-old, girl's over-sized bloomers."

The long pants had a crease in them sharp enough to cut through day-old bread and went well with my highly polished brown oxfords. I was hot-to-trot that morning, but my dad said he had a few stops to make on the way.

I heard my mom and dad talking in the kitchen as I put on a leather bow tie. My dad always wore bow ties, and I wanted us to look alike on our birthday.

"I hope you're not going to take the boy over to that Pierce's Pool Hall you like to sneak off to every now and then," she was saying. "He'll have plenty of time for that foolishness when he gets older."

I hurried out of the bathroom so I could stick up for my dad the way he always stuck up for me when the women-folk of the house started preaching. We menfolk were outnumbered in our house and had to stick together. When I got to the kitchen, I saw Dad had everything under control. He had on tan slacks and a brown blazer, a pin-striped shirt, and a bow tie that matched his blazer. We were looking good! He kissed my mom on the cheek and patted her on the butt as we headed out of the room.

My three sisters were sitting on the

living room couch like those three monkeys: See Nothing, Hear Nothing, and Say Nothing. They were giggling and jabbing each other in the ribs the way



James R. Brown (right) with his sisters, Doris and Leah (standing, left and center) and Betty, in the early 1940s. Photograph courtesy of James R. Brown.

little girls sometimes do. I was surprised they weren't crying or looking all hurt with their mouths poked out the way they usually did when I got to go someplace and they had to stay at home. I kind of put a prance in my step and stuck my tongue out at them as we went out the door.

Joe the hobo was coming down the alley as we pulled the car out of the garage. He had a bulging gunnysack hung over his shoulder, a black, shabby suit with shiny spots around the elbows and knees, and a cap that sat on top of his bushy hair. He had a "Support The Townsend Act" button pinned on the bill of his cap. I'd heard some of what Dr.

Francis E. Townsend had proposed in 1934 with his plan for ending poverty among the elderly, but I wasn't interested in that now. Joe had his pipe going full blast, and the smoke it emitted made his beard look as if it were on fire.

When I waved at him my dad asked who he was. "That's Joe," I told him. "He lives in a shack under the Western Avenue bridge. He's the one who showed me how to carve animals out of bars of Ivory Soap, like the ones I have on my dresser."

My dad waited until Joe got alongside the car then got out to greet him. I liked old Joe and all that, but I was in a hurry to get on with our day of hanging out together. My dad was leaning against the car, and he and old Joe were talking like they were long-lost friends. Finally I got out of the car to remind Dad that we didn't want the movie to start before we got there.

When old Joe saw me, a big smile broke out on his bearded face, his maroon eyes squinted under bushy, salt-and-pepper eyebrows as he stepped back, held both arms out as if he were dancing with a bale of hay and said, "Good Lord a'mighty! Boy, don't you look all spruced up!" My face beamed in agreement. "Look like you the President of these here United States of America!"

I decided I wasn't in too big a hurry to hear old Joe tell me how good I looked. My dad invited him to come by the house sometime; said he'd also like to learn how to carve animals out of soap. My dad motioned for me to get back in the car so we could be on our way. He and Joe walked around the front of the car and exchanged a few more words before he got into the car.

The first place we stopped was at Mr. and Mrs. Warrick's house. My dad and Mr. Warrick worked together, and while they went off together down in the basement, Mrs. Warrick sat me down in the kitchen and gave me a donut and a glass of milk . . . that is, after she told me how

great I looked. The suit was really doing it for me.

After what seemed like hours, they came up from the basement with a bat and ball and baseball mitts. My dad was in his shirtsleeves and told me to come out in the alley where he was going to pitch me a few balls to hit. Now no one liked baseball more than I did, except maybe my dad, but why he thought I got all dressed up in my Sunday best to go out in some dirty old alley and play baseball was beyond me. He must have sensed my disappointment because he gave me a look he usually reserved for my mom when he knew he was acting like a fool. He said we had plenty of time to get to the movie and we'd only play ball for a few minutes.

Out on the back porch I took off my beautiful suit coat and hung it neatly over the banister. Mr. Warrick sat the lid of a garbage can in the middle of the alley and said it was home plate. My dad was the pitcher and Mr. Warrick the catcher. They told me I was facing the battery that took the Salina High School Mud Hens to an undefeated season back in Kansas when they were in high school. The first couple of pitches were high and way outside.

"You can't do any better than that, Dad?" I said, getting into the spirit of the game. "Ha! You hear that, Jinks?" said Mr. Warrick. "This boy thinks he can handle your pitch. Let's put this one right down the tunnel, the old submarine ball."

"He's pretty good, John. I taught him everything he knows, but you're right, he needs to be taught a lesson. You ready, son?"

My dad went into an exaggerated windup, then let her fly. That ball came zigzagging in there like a fat balloon. I took my time, remembered everything he'd taught me. I kept my eye on the ball, stayed loose, and at the right moment shifted my weight and started my swing. POW! It was a solid hit. Felt great! One of those hits where you don't have to hurry around the bases. A tad too early with the swing, I pulled the ball, and it sailed over Mr. Warrick's garage and out of sight. Then we heard it, that sound that will clear the streets of ballplayers quicker than a neighborhood fire. I had already grabbed my coat off the porch

and was halfway to the car before I realized that older folks don't run because of a broken window.

Our next stop was the Just Right Barber Shop. Mr. Warrick gave me a dollar for my birthday before we left his house, and I really appreciated the gift, but I was getting a little peeved at my dad for making all those stops. He promised we wouldn't be in the barbershop for more than a few minutes. I was beginning to think my mom was right when she used to say my dad didn't know how to tell time.

The barbershop was full of old men my mom liked to call "riffraff." They were sitting around talking and laughing, and some were over in a corner shooting dice. My dad seemed to know all of them, and I knew I was going to have a hard time getting him out of there. My dad told them we were out on the town celebrating our birthdays, and tin cups seemed to appear from out of nowhere. The next thing I knew they were all singing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," and everyone was jolly except me. I was mad as the devil. It was getting late.

After the song, things settled down a bit. The dice game resumed, two guys played checkers on a milk crate, and my dad took a seat in a chair over by the door. It was getting hot outside and the barbershop was stuffy. I worried because the crease in my suit pants was beginning to balloon out a bit. I walked over to where Dad sat in conversation with an old man he called Renfro. I took a seat next to him. Some sort of drastic measure had to be taken. I went into my scowling act, and the look I put on my face was sure to get his attention. Nothing happened. He continued his conversation with the old man in the scruffy clothes and stained beard. I crossed my legs and accidentally on purpose gave my dad a good kick. At first I thought he hadn't felt it, but then he stood up, apologized to Mr. Renfro for my rude impatience, made excuses to the barber and the riffraff, and we finally left the shop.

When we were in the car, he admitted something I had been trying to tell him for the last umpteen hours: that time had slipped away and it was too late for the movies. Tears formed in my eyes as I sat

there and stared out the window. I was too mad to move and too disgusted to say anything. He promised he'd make it up to me the next day, on *his* birthday. We'd get an early start, he said, go out to the fairgrounds where they were putting up the big tents in preparation for the State Fair, then go downtown to see the Frank Buck movie, and visit every ice cream parlor along Rice Street. Tears ran down my face as we headed home. I felt it was the worst birthday I had ever had.

"I know you're disappointed, Son, but disappointment is something we all have to live with." My dad was talking, but I wasn't listening. "The good side of disappointment is, things are never really as bad as they seem."

When we got home there was no room to park directly in front of our house, so we pulled around the corner and walked back to the house. It was dark inside as we entered through the front door. I wanted to go straight to my room and brood, didn't want to see my mom, and surely didn't want to face my sisters. Suddenly the lights came on to a room full of people: my mom and sisters and all my so-called cousins. The Warricks were there, Hobo Joe, and even a couple of my playground buddies. They looked kind of strange with Sunday clothes on in the middle of the week.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" they shouted. My mother was on the piano, and everyone started singing. My tears dried up quicker than sweat on a hot stove and my face beamed with surprise. On the table by the front window were all kinds of packages, large and small, wrapped in different-colored papers. In the middle of the floor stood the beautiful Western Auto bicycle known as "The Green Hornet." It had mudguards, balloon tires, a light for night riding, and a horn. I forgot about downtown, Frank Buck, and the ice cream parlor. I realized my dad knew what he was doing all along, and I loved him and my mom and sisters more than anything on this earth.

A playwright, a poet, and an author of short stories, James R. Brown actively promotes the arts in Minnesota.



This headstone in Oakland Cemetery marks the final resting places of railroad switchman Charles Luth and his wife, Pauline. For more on how Charlie Luth died in St. Paul's labor violence of 1894, see Gregory Proferl's article beginning on page 14. Photograph by Maureen McGinn.

R.C.H.S.
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