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The Other Librarian

Clara Baldwin and the Public Library

Movement in Minnesota

— Page 4



Clara F. Baldwin in 1936, shortly before her retirement from her position as the director of the Division of Libraries in the Minnesota Department of Education. She was a long-time leader in the Public Library movement in Minnesota whose career is profiled in this issue. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 42, 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

The theme for this issue is the creativity of diverse Ramsey county residents as they responded to change. Bob Garland adds an important chapter to Minnesota women's history with his account of Clara F. Baldwin, who headed the drive to build a library system in greater Minnesota as its population grew. From the time she graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1892, Baldwin worked to make books accessible to all Minnesotans. As state librarian from 1900 to 1936, she first oversaw the development of traveling libraries, then a comprehensive system of local libraries. James Brown follows an earlier article for this magazine with more lively reminiscences of growing up in the 1920s and '30s in Frogtown, which was then a vital neighborhood near the state capitol that included African-American residents. His early relationships and activities, followed by his education on racism at the neighborhood barbershop, make a compelling read. And Anne Beiser Allen tells the intriguing story of Rev. Henry B. Whipple's election as the first Episcopal bishop of Minnesota in 1859, as that denomination was expanding in the new state. We hope you enjoy reading it all.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

Frogtown's Arundel Street

James R. Brown

Back about twenty years ago on a rainy weekday morning I was driving around my old neighborhood in St. Paul, located just west and north of the Minnesota State Capitol. They call this area, Frogtown, and at the time I didn't know why. Although I was born in the area and spent the first ten years of my life growing up there, the word *Frogtown* was new to me. Eventually I learned there are several possible explanations all tied in with frogs that supposedly once inhabited the area, a slur on early French settlers ("frogs"), and with the German word *Froschburg* (Frogtown) that was once used to identify the area around Dale and Thomas streets.

But on the rainy day of my return to St. Paul the city was alive with excitement; the Twins had recently won their first World Series. I had retired in 1987 after forty years with the Federal Government. I didn't know what I was looking for, just curiously reminiscing. I thought my life had suddenly slipped away from me and I was lost, confused, and chillingly alone. My wife and I had divorced and my kids were scattered around the country like industrious ants busy attending to their own personal affairs.

Driving east down Thomas Street, past my old school, Saint Agnes, I spied the Jackson School playground and took a quick right turn onto Arundel Street. The old neighborhood had not changed much and the Jackson School playground still took up the entire block. I crossed Edmund Street, pulled over, and parked just before the entrance to the alley that ran from Arundel through to Mackubin. Across the street stood the old house I lived in back in the late '20s and '30s when I was just a little fat dude running around the neighborhood, happy as a lark discovering what this thing called "Life" was all about.

In the rain the house looked remarkably fresh, well cared for, and in fairly good condition. My attention was drawn to the street as two young boys came running down the middle of Arundel guid-

ing bicycles at their sides. They weren't riding the bikes, just running down the street in the rain guiding the bikes with their hands behind the bike seats as if they had just stolen them. They were soaking wet and rain splattered their smiling faces and they seemed to be having the time of their lives. One of these boys was black and the other Asian. The sight choked me up because suddenly it was me and some long-forgotten friend happy to be alive those many years ago.

My attention returned to the house across the street and my gaze went to about thirty feet along the sidewalk toward the house on the corner of Edmund Street. Fifty some years ago my five-year-old, panic-stricken body lay prone on that very sidewalk. At that time and on that particular day I thought for sure I was going to die.

My folks had preached to me and my three sisters that if we obeyed the Bible, listened and respected our elders and teachers, we would always do well in this world. It seemed to work for my sisters, but by the early age of five I had made mistakes the Bible hadn't even thought of, and anyone with a brain the size of a single grain of sand would have learned that the words of my folks were loaded with truth. But not me.

Learning Parental Truth

On the day of the accident I remember my mother wouldn't let me go out and play because a crew of house painters was working on the house next door and she figured I'd be a nuisance and probably cause someone to get hurt. But I was begging and bawling with a sincerity calculated to soften any mother's heart and promised that if she would let me out. . . .

Well, I kept my word . . . for all of ten minutes. Then I moseyed around to the front of our house just to watch, and see what those painter guys were up to. Some neighborhood kids, who lived around the corner, were sitting on the curb across the street watching the house where the painters were.

I started playing hopscotch on the sidewalk in front of my house. Soon the kids came over and joined me in the game. I beat the boys, but the girl that was with them was a professional. One of the boys kept watching the ladder against the house next door. None of the painters was in sight.

"Bet I can climb that ladder higher than any of you guys can," I said, forgetting all about my promise to my mother. I was halfway way up the ladder when I looked down to see if they were watching. To my disappointment they were running up the street and had left me all alone with no one to play with.

"Hey, you little squirt!" Came a voice from the roof above me. "Get the hell down from there!" The voice startled me, and I looked up at the guy on the roof. In my hurry to get down from the ladder, I lost my grip and fell about ten feet to the sidewalk below. I landed on my back. Luckily, my right arm was under me, and it somewhat cushioned my fall. A burning feeling ran through my whole body. Everything was spin-

ning around in my head and the guy from the roof was coming down the ladder hollering his head off. That scared me even more. He helped me up, and when I saw my arm it was shaped like a perfect “S” and was only half as long as it used to be.

“It’s broken,” said the guy from the roof. I could hardly hear him because my whole body was shaking, and I was crying and making so much noise the whole neighborhood turned out. My mother came running down the porch steps screaming. When I saw the look on her face, I knew she also figured I was about to die.

My father pulled up in front of the house with my sisters in the car. They all got out, and my father ran over and lifted me into his arms. “I’ve got to get him to a doctor,” he said to my mother, as he set me in the car. Even my sisters were crying standing on the sidewalk with my mother. They were doing that quiet kind of crying, the kind of crying where they don’t make any noise, just big tears running down their faces and doing a lot of sniffing and snorting. When I saw them

looking at me with sadness in their eyes, I knew I was going to die for sure. The only time I ever saw my sisters act like that was when our dog, Spot, got hit by a milk truck and laid on the side of the road a few minutes before he died.

“I’m going to die, ain’t I, Dad?” I sobbed. “Am I going to die?”

“No!” he said. “You’re not going to die. We’re going to get you to the doctor and he’s going to fix you up just fine.” He tried to smile and told me to hold my arm still and close to my body.

“But it hurts real bad.” I was crying so hard I could hardly talk. “Am I going to die?”

“Hush up, son. We’ll be at the doctor’s office in just a few minutes. You’re going to be all right.”

We pulled across University Avenue and parked on the sidewalk across from the building where the doctor’s office was located on the second floor. He carried me up the stairs hollering, “I’ve got an emergency here!” The word “emergency” enforced my anxiety. I didn’t know what it meant, but it sounded like one of those

words people used when something really bad happened. I was yelling and bawling so loud by then people came out of other offices to see what was going on.

When we got in the office, the doctor said he had to set the arm. The nurse came out of a room with a needle as long a railroad spike. I had a fit! It took my father, the nurse, and the doctor to hold me down long enough to get that needle into me. When I awoke, I was lying on the table in a room where everything was white and all kinds of lights were shining down on me. My dad was standing next to the table I was on, and my arm was all wrapped up in a white cast. It looked as long as it used to be and it didn’t hurt too much, but it felt like it was on fire. I started to ask my father if I was going to die, but from the smile on his face I knew I was going to be all right.

The Back Seat of the Car

About the worst thing that I remember during that phase of my life was sharing the back seat of our family car with my three sisters. My father was one of the



This 1940 photo looks south on Arundel Street from Rondo Street, roughly ten blocks south of where the author grew up on Arundel in Frogtown. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

first black Railway Mail clerks in Minnesota and was out-of-town three or four days at a time. When he was in town, he let me hang out with him. We'd get our hair cut at the barbershop over across the Mason/Dixon Line (University Avenue). He took me downtown to see wild animal movies, and to ball games at the Welcome Hall and Dunning Fields. We'd go feed tidbits to the animals at the Como Park Zoo, and sometimes, out on a deserted country road he'd let me sit in his lap and steer the car.

I figured my father felt sorry for me having to put up with all those women in the house. My sisters had each other, but I had no one. There were white kids I played with, but at the time I couldn't actually see the invisible wall that was between us. No matter how close our friendships became I could not understand the chilling atmosphere that engulfed me whenever white grown-ups were around.

My sisters were bossy drama queens and treated me like I didn't belong in the household. Just because they had to help my mother wash dishes, mop floors, make up beds, and do other chores around the house and I didn't have to do anything, they disliked me immensely—and I loved it that way. You see, I was the perfect klutz when it came to being “mamma's little helper.” When drying dishes too many of them slipped from my clumsy fingers and crashed to the floor. Mopping floors always proved a disaster; the mop handle became a very awkward weapon and knocked pictures off dressers and even busted out a window or two in the process. My mother decided my helping with chores caused more problems than she could afford. Under those circumstances my mother's way of thinking was that it was easier to just let me go out and play so ordinary, everyday, household activities could run smoothly.

I tried to stay out of the house as much as possible when my dad wasn't there. But when he was home and we were in the car together I always rode beside him in the front seat. I can't remember what make of car we had, but it was a four-door sedan. Like I said, that was great, but on Sundays my dad insisted on taking the whole family along, and that wasn't

so great. My mother always took *my* front seat and I had to ride in the back with my sisters, and that was a catastrophe. There was the little matter of who was going to get the window seats. It seemed appropriate that my oldest sister, Leah, and I should get the window seats. But my two younger sisters—Doris and Betty—didn't see it that way at all. They figured they should have the window seats as much as Leah and I. This caused a big



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.

problem. So my father stepped in and decided it was fair that Leah and I have the window seats one time and the next time the younger sisters got the window seats. I know my father thought he was doing the right thing, but he was wrong. My younger sisters wanted the window seats just out of meanness! When it was Leah's and my turn to have the window seats, we enjoyed looking out and taking in all the sights and scenery. The two little ones would get the window seats and before we even got to University Avenue they would be asleep. The thing that really rattled my cage back then was they never seemed to go to sleep when we had the window seats. They were always wide-

awake and tussling in the middle of us, poking us in the ribs, and being a complete nuisance.

There were times when I wished my folks would just let me stay at home on those Sundays.

On the other hand, I knew I would have missed all the many sights and places we got to see on those excursions. We would go watch window displays at Montgomery Ward's and the Emporium department store downtown, visit the zoo out at Como Park, ride around Lake Phalen and over the river bluffs from the Cherokee section of West St. Paul all the way down to Mendota hollows. We would visit the sights at Fort Snelling and sometimes explore all the different parks over in Minneapolis. And to top it off we could always look forward to the Rice Street ice cream parlor on our way home. I have to admit, those were some good times, except for that little problem with the windows.

Race Relations in My Neighborhood

As I pointed out before there were not many other black boys my age in the neighborhood, but it didn't really matter. I was born with an engaging personality and always found something that would peek my interest. Being “nosy” is the best way to describe it. If I saw someone in the neighborhood whom I had never seen before, I would want to get to know this person. I guess that is how I came to know Bobby Lee.

The first time I saw Bobby Lee, he was high-tailing it down Edmund Street with the Crawley brothers hot on his tail. He rounded the corner at Arundel and breezed into the alley that led to his mama's house, jumped the backyard fence, and disappeared into their garage. The Crawley brothers pulled up when they got to the alley, lit up cigarettes, and looked around for a time, like hunting dogs when they lose scent of their quarry. Then they turned and headed back toward Edmund. I watched from our front porch. I waited until they were out of sight, then ran over to the garage where Bobby had disappeared.

Bobby came out when I told him the Crawley brothers had gone. Sweat

streaked down his brown face, his eyes were big with fear, and he strained to catch his breath. "What they chasing you for?" I asked. "You lucky they didn't use their guns on you."

"They don't like it 'cause me and that cousin of theirs, Butch, got in a fight last week over at the school yard," said Bobby between breaths. He kept looking over the fence like he thought they might come back.

"Did you whip him?" I asked.

"Naw," said Bobby. "That Butch is too mean and ugly, but I did get in some pretty good licks. They just mad 'cause I stood up to him in the first place."

"Huh! Them trash is something else, ain't they? All the time walking around treating us like we ain't nothing. My dad said them Crawleys is gangsters and is either going to wind up dead or in the jail."

Bobby and I were about five or six years old, black, and hit it off immediately. The Crawleys were white and in their late teens.

Me and Bobby became friends that afternoon talking about how the Crawleys were always in trouble with the police. "My dad told me to stay away from them guys."

"My ma said them guys hang around with that gangster guy they say is public enemy number one!" said Bobby.

Fortunately for Bobby, not long afterward the Crawley brothers were killed in a gunfight with the police.

Dealing with prejudiced whites was a problem we faced every day. A guy I'll call "Butch Trash" was our nemesis. He was a rat-faced, thick-browed, cousin to the Crawley brothers who thought of himself as the leader of the Jackson school yard. Me, Bobby Lee, and another friend, Old Clyde, were the only kids of color who frequented the schoolyard at that time and that put the three of us at odds with Butch from the start. He let us know we weren't welcome around his crowd but knew better than to call us "n . . . s" to our faces. Some of the friendlier kids from the schoolyard told us how Butch talked about us when we weren't around.

Butch had a strong dislike for Old Clyde, even more than he hated me and



Welcome Hall Day Nursery in 1928. Photo by the St. Paul Daily News, Minnesota Historical Society.

Bobby. One reason was Old Clyde was almost as tall as Butch—who was about a half a head taller than me and Bobby—and Butch couldn't look down his nose at him whenever they had something to say to one another. But the thing that really angered Butch was that Old Clyde was only a half-white boy, and yet, his skin was whiter than Butch's. Of course, in the normal everyday exchange of barbs between us and Butch Trash's ilk we planted an idea into the minds of anyone within earshot that if Butch were to use a little soap and water every now and then he wouldn't look so much like a n . . . r! That really used to set Butch off. For the life of him, Butch couldn't figure why a white boy wanted to hang around me and Bobby and have nothing to do with him and his crowd.

Although Old Clyde never started anything, he never backed down from anything either, and Butch learned the hard way that Old Clyde wasn't to be messed with. This happened one time when Old Clyde was on his way over to my house and Butch caught him crossing the schoolyard. We were sitting on

my back porch when Old Clyde told us what happened.

"Butch and a few of his gang were shooting marbles behind the field house when I was on my way over here," said Old Clyde. "When Butch spotted me he came walking over and got in my face. He called me a n . . . r-lover."

"That lousy Butch ain't nothing but poor white trash," said Bobby, as he jumped up from the steps and stamped around us like he was doing some kind of war dance. He had a real serious look on his face. "He needs a good whoopin', that's what he needs. Let's go teach him a lesson."

"Yeah," I said, and I jumped up and tried hard to look even meaner than Bobby. "He's scared to say something like that in front of us, but he ain't got no right talking to Old Clyde that way. Let's go get him Bobby!"

"Hold it!" said Old Clyde, still seated on the steps. "You don't need to do that; besides, he ain't over there right now."

Me and Bobby looked at Old Clyde and noticed him rubbing his right hand. His knuckles were all red and bruised.

“What happened, Old Clyde? What’d you do?” Bobby asked.

“I busted his face up good,” said Old Clyde. “His nose looked like a squashed egg, all full of snot and boogers and blood.”

After that Butch was real careful about what he said when any of us were around; he even tried to act halfway friendly at times . . . in a nasty sort of way.

The Blue, Cat’s-eye Marble

Old Butch also had the biggest mouth on the Jackson schoolyard, and used to brag about his two cousins who were killed with several of the notorious Dillinger gang. He also made it clear that he was the best marble shooter in the neighborhood. I know, for a fact, that he could shoot a tough game of marbles because he beat me out of a pretty, blue, cat’s-eye marble I borrowed from my sister, Doris. When I asked Doris where she got such a good looking marble, she said from a friend she’d met called “Tommie” over at the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center. She said this Tommie won it at a marble shooting contest at Dunning Field.

My sister Doris was one of those people who wouldn’t give you the time of day without some kind of negotiation. The whole family figured she was going to grow up to be a politician. She wasn’t stingy or anything, just wouldn’t let you get anything from her before she set down some sort of parameters. That’s why I really hated to lose that particular marble, because I had to go through so much to come by it.

First I tried to steal it from her. I hung around the house for days until my mom took Doris and my other two sisters shopping with her. Soon as they left the house, I raided their room. What a mess that was. My mom was a stickler about me cleaning my room, but I bet she never looked into my sisters’ room. I went through their stuff but wasn’t able to locate where she had hid the marble.

Then I made the biggest mistake a guy could make when dealing with one’s sister. For over a week I tried the hardest I possibly could to act like we were friends . . . and I’m here to tell you, it was the worst week of my life. For some reason Doris always liked my yellow Cub

Scout scarf. She used to beg me to let her wear it with a green dress made of some kind of shiny material. Normally I took great pleasure in telling her to go jump in the lake whenever she asked me for it, but since I was pretending to be her friend-for-a-week, I put a smile on my face and let her borrow my yellow scarf.

I even put my friendship with my running buddy, Old Clyde Wells, on the line. I knew she kind of liked him by the way her knees always got to buckling and her eyes went all googly whenever he was around. So one day I says to her: “You know something, Doris, I think Old Clyde kind of likes you.”

Her eyes got all moony and she screamed, “Me! You mean Old Clyde likes me!”

“Yeah,” I lied. “He’s always talking about you. He thinks you’re kind of cute.”

Gee-eze! If he’d ever found out I told that lie on him we’d of had a fight for sure.

But the worst thing of all, the thing that almost made me give up on getting that blue cat’s-eye was, she made me carry her books to Catechism Study on Sunday morning. My other two sisters thoroughly enjoyed the torture she put me through. In front of all her friends she flaunted the dominance she held over me. At church she’d strut around like she was the sepia Shirley Temple.

Cousin Margie was the worst of all. “What you guys doing with this puppy dog following you around?” she said when we walked into church. There was no love lost between me and cousin Margie because I had nicknamed her “Chubby.”

And even after that, after all the trouble she put me through, she wouldn’t trade the marble for the scarf; she’d only lend it to me. And when I hadn’t returned it when she figured I should have, she hounded me relentlessly, even threatened to tell my dad.

Then one day when I came in for lunch and sat down at the kitchen table, my sisters, all three of them, came prancing down from upstairs. They had this funny looking guy they called Tommie with them. This guy wasn’t much bigger than I was, but there was something strange about the way he looked: his face was too clean and he had a funny kind of walk, took short, quick steps, and had a baseball mitt hanging from his knickers. Something about Tommie puzzled me, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. He didn’t say much during lunch, so afterward I asked him why he wore the baseball mitt around his waist. He looked at me like I was stupid or something. “Because I’m a ballplayer, that’s why!” he said in that funny-sounding voice of his.



Ice skating on the frozen pond at Dunning Field playground in 1927. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

I asked him if he wanted to come outside and play with me and some of the guys. He didn't seem the least bit interested, and I figured he was some kind of mamma's boy for sure. But when I mentioned we could go over to the schoolyard and hit a few baseballs, he shrugged those puny shoulders of his and said, "Why not?" My sisters got up from the table and said, "Have fun," and up the stairs they went.

I took Tommie down to the basement to show him my Lionel Train set and some of the badges I had won over at the schoolyard pitching horse shoes and arm wrestling. He still didn't seem impressed, so I figured I'd have to show him who was the boss around the house.

"Do you know how to arm wrestle?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders like he could take arm wrestling or leave it, so I told him to sit down on the other side of my dad's workbench, and I explained how the game was played. Well, to make a long story short, the guy must of had some kind of bionic arms. As soon as we put our elbows on the bench and clasped hands to start the contest, I noticed his fingers were longer than mine, and rough, and cold as icicles. It felt like I'd grabbed hold of a iron rake. He had no strain on his face as he pinned my arm before I could say Jack Spratt! I tried to beat him three or four times, and he even used his other arm, but I couldn't beat him.

But then came the shocker! My mother came down from the kitchen with this Girl Scout dress in her hand and told Tommie to go up to my sister's room and try it on. Whoa now! I'd had a few surprises in my life like finding out the truth about Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, but finding out that Tommie was really a girl . . . and had beat me at arm wrestling! Well, that hurt me to the quick, and even now, when I think about it, I have to chuckle with embarrassment.

After my mother and Tommie finished with the dress business and the shock had time to sink in, a plan began to form in my mind about how I could get my sister's cat's-eye marble back. Old Butch had beat me arm wrestling several times, but he always had a hard time doing it, and sometimes I'd even beat him. So I say

to this girl with a hand like a rake who looked like a boy, "Lookee here, Tommie," I says, "why don't we go on over to the schoolyard where we can shoot some marbles and maybe do a little arm wrestling with some of the guys over there? This one guy, Butch, is a loudmouth cracker who's always bragging about how good he is at everything."

haven't forgotten about my marble, have you?"

"No I haven't . . . Damn!"

"Oooo! I'm going to tell Ma," she said. "You said a bad word!"

"Soon as I get back you can have your darn old marble." I turned and ran down the stairs to get Tomboy, and we headed for the schoolyard.



A 1936 class at the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

"I thought you said we could play some baseball," Tommie says.

"Yeah! Yeah," I said a little too quickly, trying to keep the irritation out of my voice. "We can do that, too. I'm supposed to meet Bobby and Clyde, a couple friends of mine, over there after lunch, so maybe we can get us up a team."

"OK," she says, "but let's get something straight right now. Your sisters can call me Tommie all they want, and that's all right with me, but I'm known as 'Tomboy' over where I come from, OK?"

I was shocked again when I realized why Tommie looked familiar to me. This was the famous first baseman my dad always took me to see play at the Welcome Hall Baseball Field. I thought it was just some guy's nickname and had no idea "Tomboy" was really a girl.

I ran up to my room and grabbed my bag of marbles. Doris cornered me before I could get down the stairs. "You

When we got there, Bobby and Old Clyde were watching Butch beat the other guys out of their marbles behind the field house. I told everybody that Tomboy was my cousin and the marble champion of Dunning Field. Tomboy gave me a look that told me she didn't much like the lie I was telling. Butch stood up, pushed out his chest and slowly circled around us, sizing up Tomboy. I figured Butch and the other guys were as puzzled as I was about the way Tomboy looked, so I came right out and told them he was a girl.

"She don't look much like no damn girl to me," said Butch, as he raised his hand toward Tomboy's cap to snatch it off. But, quick as a snake, Tomboy caught his wrist in midair and held it there. Butch's face turned plum red. He tried to push her backward and release his arm, but Tomboy's other hand came up and grabbed Butch's hand above where she held his

wrist and forced him down to one knee. Everyone was surprised at how quick this happened and jumped back to see what Butch was going to do. Butch was so mad he couldn't even cuss. His eyes got big and his mouth opened to say something, but Tomboy let go of his arm, looked him straight in the eye and said, "Keep your nasty hands to yourself!"

Me, Bobby, and Old Clyde gathered around Tomboy in case Butch and some of his pals wanted to fight, but I guess Butch and I knew something those other guys didn't know: Tomboy had a grip like a vice.

Butch stood up and held up both hands, palms outward, and said to no one in particular, "I don't go around fighting no girl." Then he turned to Tomboy, "But I'll whip your tail in a nice friendly game of marbles."

I realized things weren't working out the way I'd planned. I was sure Tomboy could take Butch arm wrestling but had my doubts about her beating him at marbles.

"We didn't come over here to shoot no marbles," I said. "We come over to play a little baseball, but I'll tell you what, if you're afraid to arm-wrestle Tomboy because she's a girl," I hesitated just long enough to let that *she's a girl* bit sink in, "I'll wrestle you two out of three to see if we play baseball or shoot marbles."

"Who said I was afraid to arm wrestle!" Butch blurted out, falling neatly into my trap. "I ain't afraid of nobody!"

"Well then," said I, "if you ain't afraid to arm wrestle a girl, why don't we settle this thing once and for all. If you win I'll let you pick five of the best marbles from my bag, and if Tomboy wins you let me pick five of the best marbles from your bag, and the winner chooses the game we're going to play."

"Jim!" butts in Old Clyde. "You know that ain't fair. Ain't no girl going to beat no boy at arm wrestling, especially Butch, as strong as he is." Old Clyde added a little sweetening to the pot and didn't even know it.

"You guys the ones that's sounding scared," said Mikey, one of Butch's pals. "I'm putting in five of my marbles against anybody that says Butch can't beat some old girl."

Bobby jumped to the challenge, trying to support Tomboy as best he could . . . with his doubting self. "I got me a couple unchipped, brand-new, brown agates," he says to Mikey. "I'll take that bet."

Everything was working out according to plan, but then the unforeseeable happened, Tomboy steps up in front of Butch, and says, "I'll shoot you some marbles if that's what you want, because

I reluctantly moved with the others over to the marble circle behind the field house. Butch and I put five marbles apiece in the center of the circle. Mikey drew a smaller circle in the dirt a few feet away for all the side bets. Butch and Tomboy pitched to see who took first shot. Tomboy won the pitch and in ten cleared the circle without a miss. Butch did the same when it was his turn. They played two



In 1930 these young people took time out from shooting marbles to pose for a photographer from the St. Paul Daily News. Photo by the St. Paul Daily News, Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

I think I can beat you."

I shook my head in disgust, and thought to myself: Girls! They're all alike. Why can't they just keep quiet and let us men do the talking.

Tomboy just stood there waiting to see what Butch decided to do. She had her arms crossed over her chest like it didn't make any difference to her one way or the other. Several of Butch's pals patted him on the back to give him all the support they could muster.

"You're on for the marbles," said Butch with a voice rich in confidence.

more rounds, and the same thing happened, although Tomboy looked a little tight. It was all tied up.

On the fourth round, Butch cleared the circle again. Things didn't look too good. Tomboy knelt down to begin her run. The first nine marbles she cleared like the champ she was supposed to be, but before her tenth shot she stood up, stretched, and took a long look at the last marble in the circle. It was my sister's blue cat's-eye, right in the center of the circle. I remember sweating bullets. Tomboy walked around the circle

and studied the situation. She looked for the best position to make her shot. The sun had sunk down a bit and I figured Tomboy was trying to put herself in a position where her shadow would keep the glare off the blue cat's-eye. No one said a word. The only sounds were the flies that buzzed around our heads and the clop-clop of a horse's hoofs on the cobblestones as it pulled a milk wagon down Thomas Street.

Tomboy knelt down, positioned the steely in her right hand, using her forefinger with the thumb as the trigger. Slowly, she rolled her wrists and took aim. The whole world seemed to have come to a stop. I held my breath. Tomboy seemed frozen in her pose, then made her shot. The steely hit an eyeblink short of the target, bounced up and clipped my sister's blue cat's-eye . . . but not hard enough to send it out of the circle. I almost died.

Butch let out a sigh of relief and tried hard not to look pleased. His pals collected their bets and Bobby gave me the old "I-Told-You-So" look. Tomboy walked over to Butch and held out her hand. He looked at her, the hand, then back to her. The frown on his plum-colored face was mixed with suspicion, but he raised his hand. She shook it, congratulated him, and said he was the best player she had ever played against. Butch's face brightened up like freshly fallen snow does when the sun hits it, and his grin spread from ear to ear.

Then she said, "You want to arm wrestle?" The plum look came back like that sun had slipped behind another cloud.

Hope leaped from my heart to my brain! I saw my chance and jumped at it: "Nice going, Butch," I said and patted him on his back. "I'll tell you what, ten of my choice of marbles against ten of your choice, same bet, that she takes you in one match."

All Butch's pals rallied and urged him to take the bet. Bobby and Old Clyde looked at me like I was crazy. Butch looked at his pals and made some remark about his arm being a little sore, but he agreed to accept the challenge.

Well, I got my sister's cat's-eye back, and Butch didn't lose too much face. "If my arm hadn't been sore, you never

would have beat me," he said. Then he did something none of us had ever seen him do before: he held out his hand to Tomboy and said, "Next time it'll be different." Tomboy took his hand and patted him on the shoulders.

Then, we all choose sides for a game of baseball; some of Butch's pals played on my team and Bobby pitched on Butch's team; and something wonderful happened. We all had the best time ever as we played baseball together that afternoon under an August sun at the Jackson schoolyard.

Learning about Life

Somewhere around that time my parents separated and my dad was rarely around the house. Therefore I stayed outside the home as much as possible. Crossing University became an everyday ritual and I got a job shining shoes at a barbershop over on Rondo and Western streets.

The barbershop was an old, dilapidated, two-room building in the heart of Cornbread Valley. It had a bay window with a crack that ran diagonally from top to bottom and had wide strips of tape to secure the glass. A claw-footed wood stove sat along the back wall to provide heat in the winter and serve as a trash receptacle in the summer. When the door of the stove was open, it looked like a ravenous black bear. Faded yellow linoleum covered the floors and curled up along the edges like worn shoe leather. Empty gunnysacks (the kind used to deliver coal) were bunched around the door during the winter to keep out the harsh Minnesota weather.

The barbershop was a gathering place where black newcomers to the city learned important information about where one could find lodging and jobs, meet the right people, and get acquainted with the social climate. Most of them were railroad men who often told stories about their lives and experiences. Their stories were humorous and enlightening, laced with truths, half-truths, and out-and-out lies, but they always amused me. The conversations I heard opened a window to an outside world I had no idea existed; tales woven from black cultures scattered around the United States, and

in some cases far-off places I had never heard of.

The barbershop was my personal library of knowledge, a museum for learning the latest styles in clothing, the newest slang, and juicy gossip, local and otherwise. It was there I first heard about the hilarious Signifying Monkey and his antics with The Lion. I learned what the game called "Playing The Dozens" was all about. And I began to understand the meaning of black culture and how it differed from other cultures and that black people were somehow different from white people.

When I first came to the barbershop words like *discrimination* and *prejudice* were foreign to me, but soon I began to understand things that had puzzled me as I grew up across University.

My barbershop education was candid and brutal. The railroad men often brought with them Negro newspapers published in cities like Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, and other areas with large black populations. Those newspapers reported the plight of black America in shocking detail. I saw pictures of lynchings where black people hung from trees by their necks, their bodies beaten and mangled. I saw the charred remains of black people who had been shackled in animal cages and burned alive. I saw pictures where hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan burned crosses on the lawns of black homes and churches around the country. From those publications I began to understand what the notorious "Jim Crow" was all about. I felt the first pangs of pain, distrust, and terror.

That barbershop education changed my whole outlook on life. My happy-go-lucky childhood ended when I found out the true meaning of discrimination and prejudice. At home my parents had been overly protective of my feelings. At the barbershop I learned the shocking truth about what being black truly meant here in these United States.

A playwright, poet, and an author of short stories, James R. Brown actively promotes the arts in Minnesota. The Fall 2006 issue of this magazine carried another reflection on his youth in Frogtown.



A postcard view from about 1909 showing the Carnegie Library in Spring Valley, Minnesota. For more on Clara F. Baldwin and her role in the Public Library movement in Minnesota, see Robert Garland's article beginning on page 4. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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