

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

The Bungalow Craze
And How It Swept
The Twin Cities—

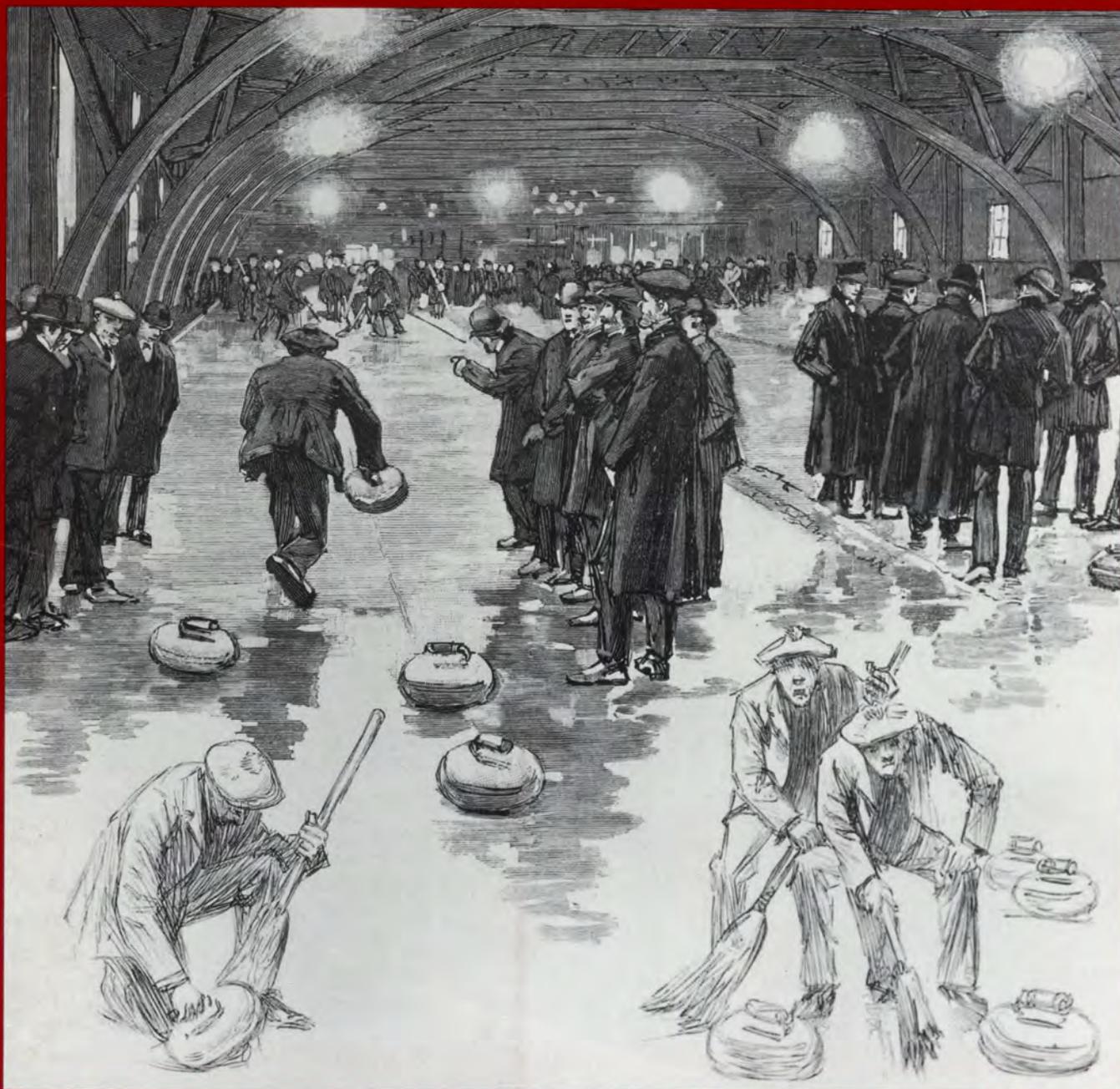
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St. Paul Curling Club's Colorful History—

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The St. Paul Curling Club in 1892, a sketch by T. de Thulstrup for Harper's Weekly. See page 4 for the history of curling in St. Paul.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Family roots are an important part of the texture of history in St. Paul and Ramsey County. Recently the Board of Directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society learned that the late Mary Daggett Sheehan (Mrs. Cyril Sheehan) made a bequest to the Society in her will in memory of her grandparents, Daniel W. and Mary Collins Kelly. Born in Ireland in 1839, Daniel Kelly came to the United States about 1844. Initially he and his brothers lived in New Jersey, but four Kelly brothers, including Daniel, migrated to St. Paul in 1856. There Kelly completed high school and then worked as a contractor hauling supplies to the West. Later he was successful in the hotel, real estate, and insurance business. Daniel Kelly died in 1922.

The Ramsey County Historical Society greatly appreciates the generosity of Mrs. Mary D. Sheehan. The lead article in this issue of our magazine tells the story of the St. Paul Curling Club. Given the population of St. Paul in the 1880s, many of the early members of the Curling Club probably knew Daniel Kelly as a business associate. Together the memory of Daniel Kelly and our article recall a prosperous era in St. Paul's history that could enthusiastically support the formation of a sporting institution such as the Curling Club just over a century ago.

John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

WARREN SCHABER 1933 - 1995

The Ramsey County Historical Society lost a good friend when Ramsey County Commissioner Warren Schaber died last October at the age of sixty-two.



A thoughtful Warren Schaber at his first County Board meeting, January 6, 1975. Photo courtesy of Jan Geisen, Ramsey County Records manager.

The Society came to know him well during the twenty years he served on the Board of Ramsey County Commissioners. We were warmed by his steady support of the Society and its work.

We remember the big things: the long series of badly-needed restoration projects at the Gibbs Farm Museum, which

he steadfastly supported, both as chair of the County Board's Finance Committee and as chair of the board itself. We also remember the little things, such as the time squirrels, trapped in the schoolhouse, chewed through the window sills and emergency funds were desperately needed for repairs. That brought a chuckle from Commissioner Schaber as he supported our request.

While he was skilled at directing the County's budgetary process, he also was a warm, generous man who understood the role history should play in the community he served so well. One of his great loves was the City Hall/County Courthouse, and he was the driving force behind the \$48 million restoration of that art deco jewel where he spent his political life. For our part, we documented the restoration, as well as the history of the Courthouse itself, in the Fall, 1993, issue of *Ramsey County History*.

He also was instrumental in negotiating with West Publishing to have the current Government Center West building donated to Ramsey County. The center houses Ramsey County's records, whose preservation is of immense importance to historians.

Warren Schaber was, in the words of John Finley, his fellow commissioner, "... the best of what you see in Ramsey County and St. Paul." He epitomized what people think of Minnesotans, and he will be missed. V.B.K.

Growing Up in St. Paul

Down St. Albans Hill in a Wooden Coaster Wagon

Arthur C. Mc Watt

My elementary school years were spent on the edge of St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood, in a house on Sherburne Avenue near Grotto. It had been built by my grandfather in 1900, and since my mother had the most children in her family, grandmother sold it to her when grandfather died.

Ours was a predominantly German Catholic neighborhood, and we were surrounded by Becks, Orths, Kellers, Rocklitzs, Schmidts, Winslades, Ruperts, and Zellers. I was the third child, with two sisters, Martha and Carolyn, who were nine and five years older than I, and a brother, Randolph, who was four years younger.

My earliest recollection was riding in an old wooden coaster wagon down the St. Albans hill, between Central and Fuller Avenues, with my younger sister sitting behind me steering and yelling. She didn't seem to have the slightest concern as to how we were going to stop at the bottom of the hill. We would careen around the corner on two wheels, or zoom across Fuller, hoping no traffic was coming.

I also had concerns for my safety when I rode up that hill with my father. At the top there was a through stop sign. Dad would hold his foot on the brake, then shift into first. The car would balance momentarily, then start rolling backward before it finally roared over the top. That precarious pause always seemed to make my heart beat faster.

I started kindergarten at Benjamin Drew school in 1931 and basked in the warmth and kindness of Mrs. Harholdt, our teacher. Her story-telling was wonderful. I enjoyed singing and getting stars for good work, and I remember the many hours we spent building structures with large cardboard blocks. There were two other African American children in the class: a girl named Leatrice, who didn't

seem too friendly, and a boy named Hugh. At recess, Hugh informed me that he was going to "pull those curls right out of your head after school!" When school was out, I hit the playground running, and he was right behind me. I took a direct route home through yards and between houses. My mother called the school the next day and the bullying ended. Later, Hugh and I became friends, and I often visited his house on University near St. Albans. Our sisters were good friends.

My first girlfriend, Alice, lived next door when I was five. We played in each other's backyards, but one day we crossed Grotto to chase butterflies and grasshoppers in the empty lot on the corner of University. After our run, we relieved ourselves and satisfied our curiosity in the tall grass, then raced back across Grotto to watch flies die on the electric screens on the windows of Consumer Milk Company. The screens sparkled and crackled as they did their murderous work. The following week-end Alice was nowhere to be found. I had enjoyed our afternoon gambol and wondered why her mother ended our friendship.

In the second grade I found that I was a good student but was challenged as class leader by a boy named Roger. We took school very seriously and we began a competition to see who would be the smartest boy in the class. I decided I needed some help, so I sought divine guidance and prayed every night that I would be the smartest boy in school. The next year I was further encouraged by Mrs. Lavoit, who wore silk dresses and heavenly perfume. I was love-struck, and sought her assistance at every turn as I enjoyed the fragrance that enveloped me when she bent over me.

Between the ages of eight to ten, I was kind of a "fair employment" member of the Sherburne Aces. Besides me, the

Aces, in 1934, included Buddy, who was eleven; Louis, who was ten; and Bennie, who was nine. We had a few honorary members we called upon for special assignments, such as make-up ballgames, but at eight, I was the youngest, the only person of color, and probably the weakest. I was always the last picked for make-up baseball teams and once when there was a tie, my so-called friends simply "gave me" to the other side.

Most of our games were played on an empty lot on University between Milton and Chatsworth. It really was out of our territory, and one day some older boys chased us with rotten fruit, and a special epithet for me, back to the east side of Victoria. I was hit with a rotten cantelope and Louis got part of a watermelon. After that we played in an empty lot or walked to the Minnehaha Playgrounds.

Sometimes Louis, Benny, and I would hang out at Engine Company #18 on the corner of St. Albans and University. We'd run errands for the firemen. If everyone left when the alarm bell rang, we'd close the doors, race up the stairs, and slide down the poles. There was an art to that; you had to wrap your arms around the pole but not let your tennis shoes touch it. Then we'd run down, open the doors, and wait for our returning heroes.

In the fall we played football on Mr. Phillip's lot. His twelve-year-old daughter, Patty, often joined us. In the winter we skied down the slopes of the huge sand pits on Victoria, between Blair and Minnehaha, and sometimes we'd sneak over the fence to ski down the slopes of the House of the Good Shepherd. Often we'd skate twice a day—on the week-ends sometimes three times a day—at Minnehaha Playgrounds. In the evening, when the older boys had finished practicing on the hockey rink, we'd put magazines in our stockings so we could play

hockey, too. I'd often come home with frost-bitten fingers and toes.

I remember my mother getting up around six o'clock every winter morning and shuffling down to the basement to shake down the furnace fire that had been banked for the night. She'd shovel the ashes into large corrugated tubs. Then she shoveled in new coal. By 7 a.m. the house had warmed up and all of us crawled out of bed to dress.

In the summer, with our windows open, I'd be awakened by the banging of milk cans as farmers brought their milk to be processed at Consumers Milk Company. I'd lie in bed and listen to the cans being trundled into the building on their roller chutes and emerge again empty to be loudly stacked in the trucks.

Of course the Depression was in full bloom in 1934. I remember being sent to the butcher on Edmund Street to buy a soup bone for fifteen cents or a quarter—and hope there was a little meat on it. Soup, made with peas, carrots, and potatoes, was one of our main meals and my mother would often supplement it with a piece of lemon or peach pie or apple cobbler. Weekly fare also included stew, spaghetti and wieners, macaroni and cheese, and cabbage and carrots. On Sunday we might have chicken, or something my father brought home, such as salmon from Seattle, or various parts of the pig. Our evening meal would be peanut butter sandwiches, a piece of cake, and a glass of milk.

The Sherburne Aces spent part of their summers during those Depression years "junking"—collecting aluminum, brass, copper, even paper. Their worth was in descending order and prices, of course, fluctuated with the market. The returns represented most of our spending money during those hard times. We would explore alleys and search through trash we found behind business firms and people's homes. We would strip the coating off copper wire to prepare it for the junk man, who usually came once a week with his old horse and wagon. He would haul out his scale, weigh our metals and pay us our nickles and dimes according to the going rate (which we usually checked).

Once we climbed a telephone pole to enter a recently abandoned night club on



First grade classmates at Benjamin Drew School in 1932. The author is on the left, top row. Next to him is Hugh. The not-too-friendly Leatrice is third from left in the third row. All photographs are from the author.

University Avenue looking for junk. We came down through the skylight and found a large cache of old wire and brass fittings and some aluminum, which was highly prized. Looking behind the bar and wondering if the electricity had been turned off, I opened the switch box and pulled down the lever. The next thing I knew I was thrown five feet backward against the bar. I must have touched some of the metal. After a few anxious minutes, I recovered and we left hastily the way we came—through the skylight.

Some Saturdays we went to the Como Theatre on University, between Kent and Mackubin and watched Tim McCoy, Buck Jones, or the latest chapter of "Rintin-tin." Sometimes there was a promotion, and cereal tops or coffee can covers would get us in on a special Saturday morning show.

At least one Sunday a month, we'd take the Model A down University Avenue, past Seven Corners to Washington Avenue, over the First Avenue bridge and onto Sixth Avenue North (now Olsen Memorial Highway). We'd visit my Aunt Bridie, Aunt Bessie, Aunt Ethel, or Aunt Rebecca, and our only cousin, George (who was rarely there). We'd spend most of the afternoon there and sometimes

have ice cream and cake.

My father had been a British subject in Guyana and had never quite become completely Americanized, so I missed going to baseball and football games with him. We did go swimming a lot, and fishing occasionally. Since he was a Pullman porter, I missed him a good deal of my life. He seemed to be on the road more days than he was home.

The Sherburne Aces, however, were avid baseball fans. Some weekdays we'd arrive at the Lexington Ball Park an hour before the game, climb to the roof of the Coliseum and lie there motionless, surveying the park. Then one-by-one we'd walk the wall adjoining the ballpark. It had barbed wire projecting out on each side. When we reached the bleachers, we'd jump down and go under them to the grandstand tunnel, flatten ourselves against the wall and walk quietly through to the grandstand. There we would wait until about the second inning when we would seek out a box or reserved seat. On Saturdays, of course, we were charter members of the Knot Hole Gang and broiled in the bleachers. From 1934 to 1937, the St. Paul Saints' standings were in the American Association basement, but they were still our heroes. Our idols

were catcher Angelo Guiliani, first baseman Phil Todt, and centerfielder Larry Rosenthal.

Bob Boken, the third baseman, lived on the corner of Sherburne and Avon and we made him an honorary Sherburne Ace. After the game we'd hang around the door of the locker room and collect autographs. Vince DiMaggio, who played with Kansas City, was my favorite.

By July 15 I was putting cardboard in my tennis shoes and by the end of August there usually was more cardboard than there was sole. Some Saturdays we hitchhiked on trucks from Victoria to the Midway area and back. In the winter I would hitch cars coming out of our alleys and slide down Grotto to Thomas hanging on their bumpers, my thick-soled clodhoppers acting as skids.

During State Fair Week we would hitch trains north of Minnehaha Playgrounds, where they sometimes slowed down at the Dale Street bridge, and ride them out to Snelling Avenue, where they usually slowed down again. We'd jump off and walk to the fairgrounds. We could sneak in and because we were so thin we could squeeze through the bars. In 1934 we sneaked into the grandstand as well, and that required agility, speed, and split-second timing. It was one of my finest moments as an eight-year-old.

Our goal was to see the tremendous race car duels between Gus Schrader and Emory Collins, who always thrilled the crowds with their daring driving skills. The following year, security was increased and we had to pay to see the races. Another important event that year was seeing John Dillinger's get-away car on display.

The hitching of trains also ended in 1935 when a train failed to slow down at the Dale Street bridge. One by one we jumped and rolled in the gravel, but Buddy continued to hang on. Finally, he flung himself down an embankment just before the train reached the bridge. He rolled over and over in the gravel. He had some scratches and small cuts, but otherwise he was all right.

One Saturday a month I would accompany Louis and Benny to St. Agnes Catholic Church for their monthly confession. It was a German-speaking parish,

and I would wait outside until they were finished. Some of the things they should have confessed to was walking over the forty-foot arches of the Robert Street bridge and climbing on the backs of the golden horses on the Capitol dome—according to what they told me, at any rate.

Some Sunday afternoons we visited the used car lots behind our houses on University and listened to "Swing and Sway with Sammy Kaye" and "The Smooth Rhythms of Guy Lombardo" on



The house on Sherburne Avenue, near Grotto.

the car radios. We found we could move the cars back and forth by putting them in gear and stepping on their starters. Of course, both maneuvers ran down their batteries and sometimes a watchman would try to catch us, but we always eluded him. One Sunday morning, Bennie and his cousin, Eddie, decided to upgrade vehicular movement. They ran two streetcars together at the car barns on University and Snelling. They were caught and took an involuntary trip to the Boys Farm. Fortunately, while they were doing this, I was serving at the altar at St. Philips Episcopal Church.

The Rocklitz brothers were the two "mad scientists" on our block. They were about fifteen and seventeen years old and spent a great deal of time in their basement carrying on chemical experiments.

Both of the brothers were very intelligent and loved science. Most of their chemicals came from Chicago via mail order. Their father had died and left their mother a 1932 Packard that sat in the

garage because it wouldn't start. Freddie Rocklitz told us that if we could get some gasoline and a battery, he thought he could get it started. Benny and his cousin managed to "find" a new battery and some gasoline behind a motorboat store, and we talked Freddie into a Saturday afternoon alley cruise. Freddie didn't have a license, and the car's license plates were three years old, but he insisted on driving.

After installing the battery and pouring in the gasoline, we all piled in. Freddie started the motor and eased out of the garage. The motor stalled after about a hundred feet, right behind the St. Paul Police Dispatcher Station behind Engine Company #18. We dropped to the floor while Freddy and Buddy jumped out and opened the hood. After a seemingly endless wait, they got the engine started again and off we went, bouncing along the alley until we reached Western Avenue.

After some discussion, we decided to take the Charles Avenue alley as the return route. Back home, Freddie's mother was sweeping her back stoop. When she saw us, her mouth dropped open and we sensed that Freddie was in big trouble. We helped him back the car into the garage and quietly disappeared. It was the last we saw of Freddie that summer.

On those long summer evenings, we'd play "Duck on the Rock," a version of "Cricket" and "Two O' Cat," in our alley until it got dark and a cacophony of mother's voices filled the air. I'd be in by 7:30 and we'd be allowed to read for an hour, or listen to the radio.

Wedding receptions were big events for all the neighborhood kids because of the possibility of a chivaree. To save money, many receptions were held at the bride's home and after the ceremony the children would gather outside with cans filled with stones and pots to bang on to make a racket. The shaking and banging would increase until the groom and best man threw coins and candy to the throng outside.

Every summer I retained my racial identity by attending a two-week summer camp sponsored by Hallie Q. Brown Community House on Kent and Aurora. My first camp, when I was eight, was Camp Rock, somewhere on the St. Croix River. We had a wonderful leader, Joe

Harpole, and our swimming instructor was Rudy Gmitra, star halfback for the Golden Gophers, national champions that fall. Much of the day was organized, but we often had afternoons to ourselves. Once we found a five-foot bull snake which two instructors could barely hold. On a hike, we came across a dead man lying beside the trail. A blanket of secrecy was immediately thrown up and we never heard a word about it.

The next two years I spent at St. John's Landing near Shakopee. It wasn't as nice a camp as Camp Rock, but I had good friends there from St. Philips Church: Larry, Norm, and Gene.

That fall when I was ten and entering fifth grade, I was called to the office by the principal, Mrs. Dunne. She told me she and her staff had decided that both Benny and I—the two smartest students in school, she said—should skip fifth grade because we were academically ready for sixth. I had mixed feelings. My immediate regret was that my prayers had been restricted to gender. My mother felt I might miss something by skipping a grade, but she went along with the recommendation. I later found, in math, that I had indeed missed something and my mother had been right.

The 1936 new year ushered in a year of extremes, with temperatures plunging to 36 degrees below zero that winter, rising to above 100 for ten days straight that summer, and topping off at 114. The ice house on Grotto was soon sold out and my sister and I ranged far and wide with our coaster wagon trying to find ice to keep our food from spoiling in our ice box. I'd try to sleep with pajamas and sheets soaked with perspiration. The Faust Theatre, which was cooled by artesian water, provided a haven for some. Three hundred people in Minnesota died that summer from heat-related causes.

In 1937 the Sherburne Aces disbanded and I began to spend time with Larry, an African American boy who lived on Charles, between Dale and Kent. We both were altar boys at St. Philips. I'd often go home with him after church as he had a nice pool table and all the newest games. After our games, the pool table would be converted into a dining room table where I ate some of the most



Sherburne Aces Louis and Buddy gardening.

delicious dinners of my life.

Larry and I played basketball at the Hallie Q. Brown House the following summer. That fall we joined the Cub Scouts, who were led by a man named Duke Corum, a pleasant, conscientious, caring man. He took us on hikes and camp-outs and we swam at the YMCA (but only on Wednesdays because the "Y" was still segregated). The boys all admired Duke Corum. Our den became one of the best in the city and we always had to turn away boys who wanted to join.

When I was twelve, I joined the Boy Scouts and again I was blessed with a wonderful leader—Mr. Manning, dedicated, fair, always willing to lend a helping hand, and the kind of man I wanted to be when I grew up. A good judge of character, he also chose good patrol leaders. We learned camping skills, and we had overnights and camp-outs. We learned knot-tying, compass-reading, map-reading, and how to build a fire without matches.

That summer I got my first two-wheel bike, and it certainly expanded my range of activities. My friends and I took trips to Indian Mounds Park, the Battle Creek ski slide, Harriet Island, and the Como Park Golf Course where we occasionally caddied.

At school that fall, romance arrived. Ardyce was from Czechoslovakia, and I began walking her home. Her father was concerned about getting his parents out of Europe, and this really sparked my first interest in the study of history. I

eagerly awaited the publication of John Gunther's *Inside Europe*.

After Ardyce there was Ruthie. Our romance had lasted only a month when a Golden Glove aspirant named Cyrus lay in wait for me one night and warned me to stay away from her. I knew Cyrus from the Boy Scouts, from which he'd been expelled. We walked toward St. Albans hill discussing the matter. When I told him she had a right to decide, he threw a left hook on my blind side and the lights went out. When I came to, I told him it was a cheap shot and went home. I decided that, in the interest of good health, I should look elsewhere for companionship.

In 1939, when I was thirteen, we spent a lot of time at the movies. That was the year for some of Hollywood's greatest films. One of my favorites was "Tarzan." I was thrilled by Johnny Weissmuller's daring feats, and my curiosity was aroused by Maureen O'Sullivan's costume, which I suspected had certain inadequacies. After a third viewing of the film, I felt my suspicions had been confirmed. I left the theater feeling that it was a matter I should immediately bring to the attention of my fellow patrol leaders.

In front of the theater was a police car with two officers leaning against it. They asked me my name. I soon discovered that my mother had been worried about my prolonged absence and had asked the police to conduct a neighborhood search. I rode home that night in the squad car.

At the end of the summer, I thought of the nine A's I'd received in June and how little that would mean when I entered Mechanic Arts High School. I would no longer be "big man on the playground" but a lowly freshman in a huge school. I realized my formative years were almost over but, as I looked back on them, I felt they had truly been happy days.

Arthur Mc Watt went on to graduate from the University of Minnesota with a bachelor's degree in education and social studies and a master's degree in history. He also did graduate work at the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii. He retired in 1989 after teaching history and social studies for thirty-three years in the St. Paul school system, twenty-five of those years at Johnson High School.



Easy to build. This is a partially finished bungalow in St. Paul in 1906. Minnesota Historical Society photo. For more about the bungalow craze of the early years of this century, see page 15.

R.C.H.S.
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Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

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