

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Architect to Kings:
Wigington and His Ice Palaces

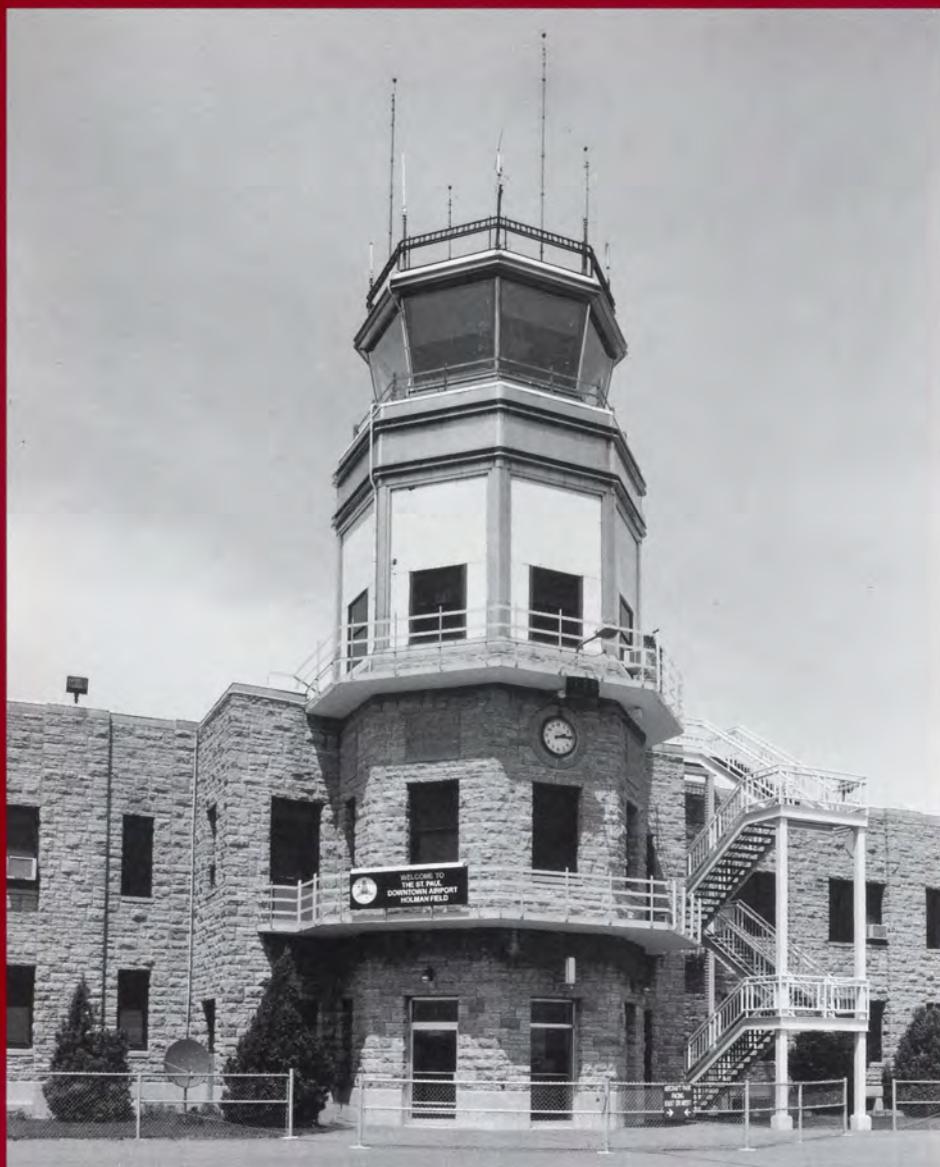
Page 12

Winter, 2000

Volume 34, Number 4

Three National Historic Sites
Clarence Wigington's Architectural Heritage

—Page 4



The Holman Field Administration Building designed by Clarence W. Wigington in 1939 and built with resources provided by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This is one of the three Wigington buildings that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Photograph by Don Wong, Don F. Wong Photography, Bloomington, Minnesota.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Executive Director
Priscilla Farnham
Editor
Virginia Brainard Kunz

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Laurie A. Zenner
Chair

Howard M. Guthmann
President

James Russell
First Vice President

Anne Cowie Wilson
Second Vice President

Richard A. Wilhoit
Secretary

Ronald J. Zweber
Treasurer

W. Andrew Boss, Peter K. Butler, Charlotte H. Drake, Mark G. Eisenschenk, Joanne A. Englund, Robert F. Garland, John M. Harens, Judith Frost Lewis, John M. Lindley, George A. Mairs, Marlene Marschall, Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Linda Owen, Marvin J. Pertzik, Vicenta D. Scarlett, Glenn Wiessner.

EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chair; Thomas H. Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Pat Hart, Virginia Brainard Kunz, Thomas J. Kelley, Tom Mega, Laurie Murphy, Vicenta Scarlett, G. Richard Slade, Laurie Zenner.

HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

Elmer L. Andersen, Olivia I. Dodge, Charlton Dietz, William Finney, William Fallon, Otis Godfrey, Jr., Robert S. Hess, D. W. "Don" Larson, George Latimer, Frank Marzitelli, Joseph S. Micallef, Robert Mirick, Samuel Morgan, Marvin J. Pertzik, J. Jerome Plunkett, James Reagan, Rosalie E. Wahl, Donald D. Wozniak.

RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Rafael Ortega, chairman
Commissioner Susan Haigh
Commissioner Tony Bennett
Commissioner Dino Guerin
Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt
Commissioner Janice Rettman
Commissioner Jan Wiessner

Paul Kirkwold, acting manager, Ramsey County

Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102 (651-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 2000, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors. Fax 651-223-8539; e-mail address admin@rchs.com.; web site address www.rchs.com

RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 34, Number 4

Winter, 2000

CONTENTS

- 3** Letters
- 4** A Water Tower, A Pavilion, and Three National Historic Sites:
Clarence W. Wigington and the Architectural Heritage
He Left to the People of St. Paul
David V. Taylor
- 12** Architect to the Kings of the Carnivals
'Cap' Wigington and His Ice Palace 'Babies'
Bob Olsen
- 16** Transplants from Europe
Germans, Poles, Italians—Settlers on the Levee
Greg Schach
- 21** Growing Up in St. Paul
First a Tiny Stucco Starter Home; Then a New
Post-War Suburb Beckoned
Joanne Englund
- 24** Books

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

Message from Editorial Board

The Editorial Board of *Ramsey County History* is delighted to publish in this issue two fine articles on St. Paul's Clarence W. Wigington, who is believed to have been the first African-American municipal architect in the United States. Dr. David Taylor, dean of the General College at the University of Minnesota, is currently working on a biography of Wigington. His article gives us a sense of Wigington as an architect and as a pioneering civil servant at a time in this country when African-Americans faced many obstacles and handicaps to achieving professional careers. Wigington not only rose to a leadership position within the city's Office of Parks, Playgrounds, and Public Buildings, he also was a leader in the local African-American community throughout his working career.

Expanding upon David Taylor's discussion of Clarence Wigington's accomplishments as an architect of many St. Paul buildings, Bob Olsen, the author of our second piece on Wigington, examines the architect's work as a designer of St. Paul Winter Carnival Ice Palaces between 1926 and 1942. Both articles feature photographs of buildings Wigington designed. Olsen's article includes photos drawn from the author's own collection of Ice Palace memorabilia.

John M. Lindley, Chair, Editorial Board

Architect to the Kings of the Carnivals

'Cap' Wigington and His Ice Palace 'Babies'

Bob Olsen

In the early 1960s, I spent many "early release" days from school with my dad, Jim Olsen, at his office at Juran and Moody, a municipal bonding firm. His office was a great place for a fifth grader with a wild imagination to explore: it had lots of nooks and crannies, outer-space-looking machines like a mimeograph and a Burroughs Electric Calculator, rows of display cases with important looking documents and trophies, and this really cool stairway that swept up to the balcony, which was where his office was located.

When dad's firm got the word that the building was to be razed for the new American National Bank building, employees were given permission to remove anything they wanted before the bulldoz-

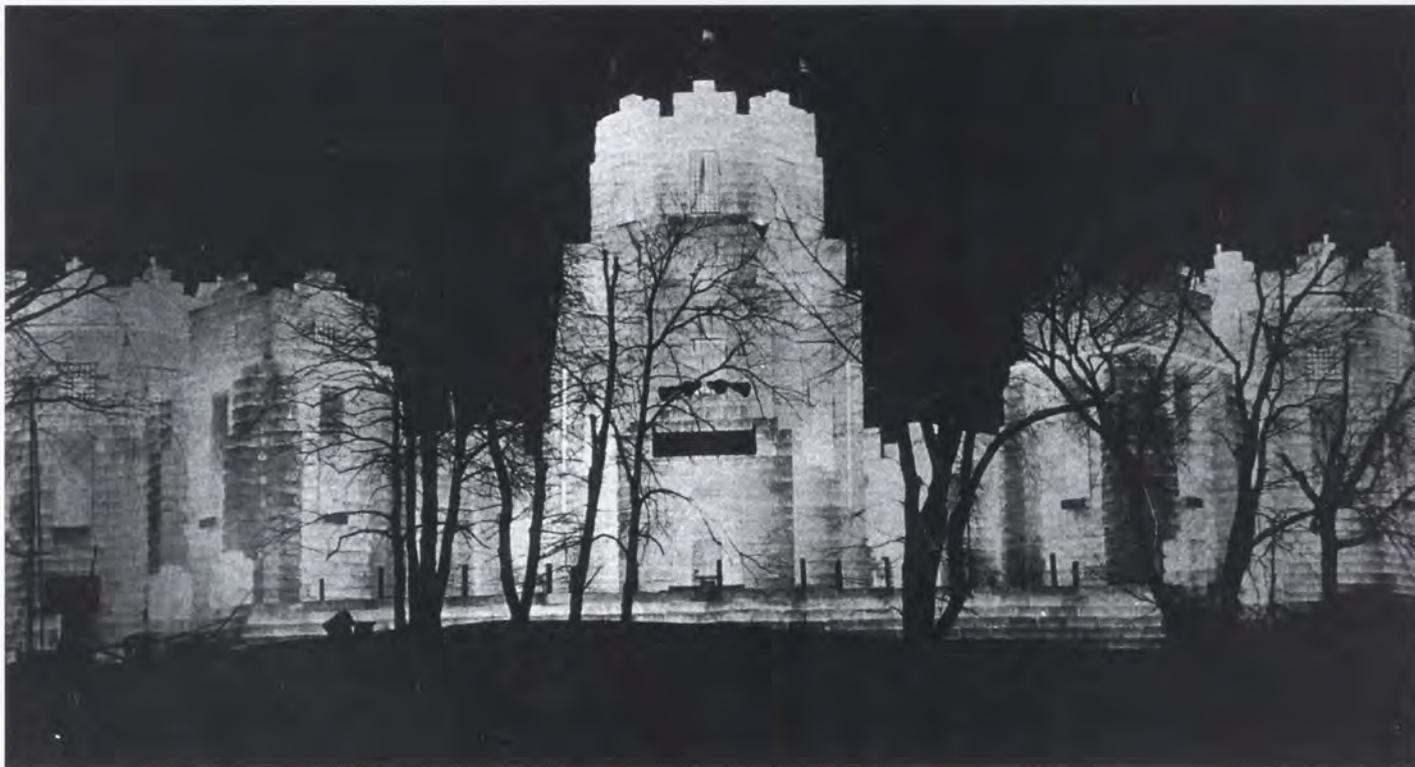
ers did their job. Dad and I spent a long weekend removing light fixtures, cabinets and mahogany paneling. While pulling off a piece of mahogany, I discovered that the paneling had been installed directly over an earlier wall, upon which a significant photograph hung. "Look, dad, here's a giant picture of the Cathedral!" Gingerly, we removed the next panel, exposing the three-by-six foot photograph. "No," said my dad, "that's the 1941 ice palace!" Wide-eyed and awed by this treasure, I helped load the photograph into the pickup, and we brought it home.

Years later, I discovered that this great crystalline castle, and others as well, were the work of Clarence (Cap) Wigington, the same architect responsible for so

many of the schools and playground buildings for children in St. Paul. Like his more permanent structures, Wigington conceived the ice palaces with a certain degree of magic, ennobling them with vertical lines reaching skyward, compelling children of all ages to look up and beyond who they were to what they could become.

It was in the ice palaces that the full expression of Wigington's creativity flourished. The string of WPA-financed ice palaces gave him the latitude to explore his individual architecture while achieving the mission of the Work Projects Administration: to undertake to build big, inexpensive buildings and employ a lot of skilled and unskilled laborers.

Wigington's first Ice Palace was born



The 1941 Ice Palace in Como Park. This photograph and that of the 1940 Ice Palace on page 14 are from the author's collection.

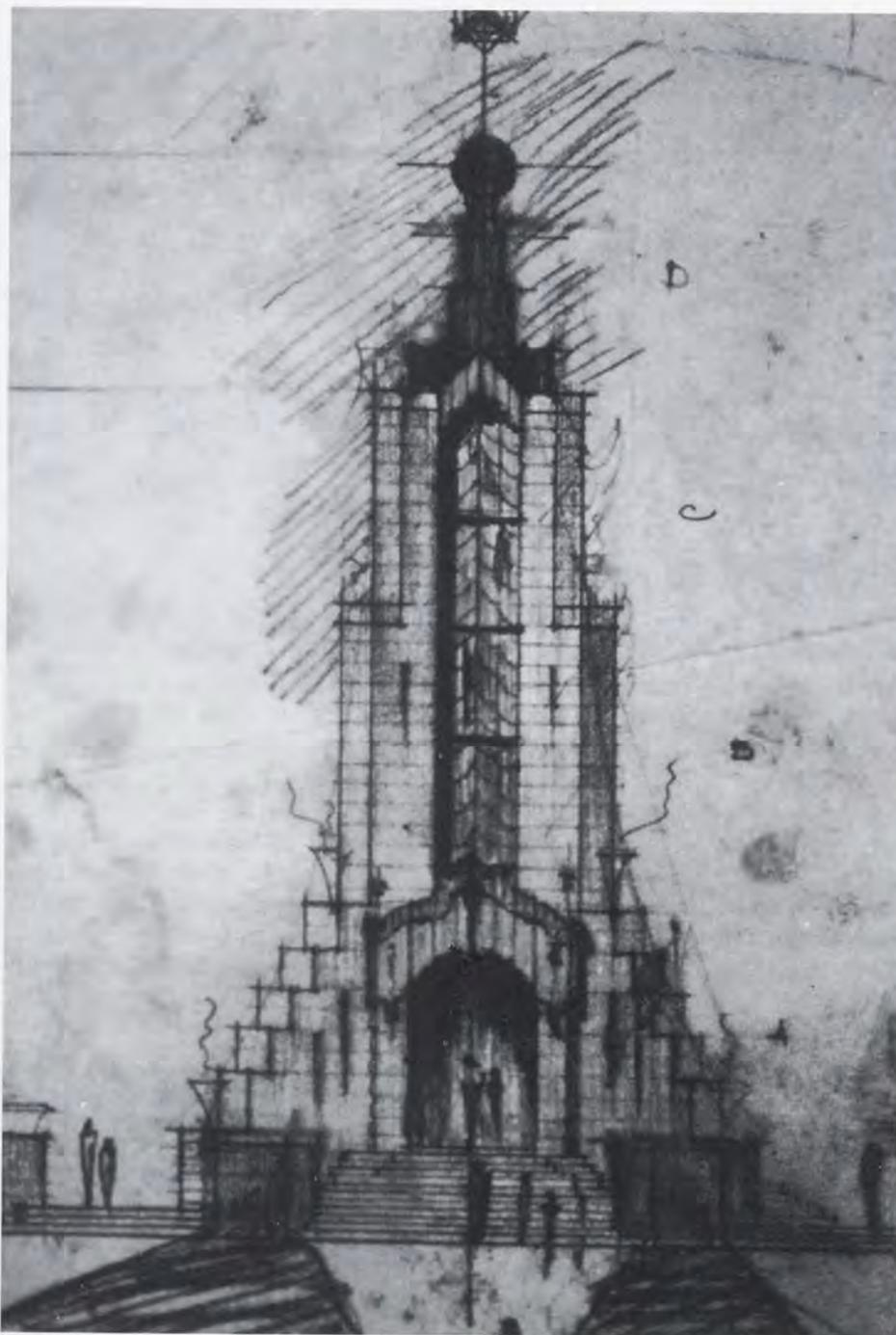
hastily in the last days of 1936 for the St. Paul Winter Carnival of 1937, a civic celebration embraced by key city leaders. With the backing of major downtown employers like Field-Schlick, Great Northern Railway, and Minnesota Mutual Life, city leaders persuaded people that working hard and playing hard in the dead of winter was the best cure for the economic doldrums of the times.

Downtown businesses sponsored employee marching clubs, which swirled up like snowdrifts across the city. Each of these clubs sported marching uniforms paid for or subsidized by their employer, creating a demand for quality blankets from woolen mills across the state. Time off was granted to employees to practice drill and marching routines in company warehouses and storage facilities in preparation for the Carnival parades. After marching practice, hundreds of employees filled local social establishments in search of drinks and sandwiches.

Building Ice Palaces for the Winter Carnival was an inseparable part of this civic tradition. In each of the previous Carnivals of 1886, 1887, 1888, 1896, 1916 and 1917 there had been a palace, with the '88 edition being the largest structure of its kind ever made—55,000 blocks of ice soaring with a massive central tower 127 feet tall.

The task of creating an Ice Palace landed on Wigington's drawing board in Parks and Recreation just before Christmas 1936. With just a few weeks left before builders would need to begin laying up 20,000 blocks of ice with building techniques yet to be determined on a site yet to be selected with plans yet to be developed, Wigington took the job home.

He conceived the idea of a symmetric moderne ice pavilion, whose undulating walls, 193 feet long by 86 feet wide, were spiritually akin to other civic buildings of the era. Here, however, Wigington had artistic license to use a bountiful and cheap building material, leading him to exaggerate architectural details to take advantage of shade, shadow, and the transparent properties of ice. Atypical design elements, like battlements and embrasures, were freely woven around the central court, infusing them with a spirit of aspiration and dignity that would befit a king.



The "Ice Throne" designed by Wigington for the 1941 Winter Carnival. Both drawings used with this article are from the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department.

Years later, Wigington's children spoke of the ice palaces as a labor of love. Like the modulating tune he whistled around the single note intoned from a boiling teakettle kept nearby, Wigington's "baby," was the first St. Paul Ice Palace in twenty years.

The site chosen for the Palace west of the State Capitol was appropriate for sev-

eral reasons: the first three Ice Palaces occupied a similar location in what was then Central Park; the land was publicly owned; and the Palace aligned itself in both scale and location to buildings Cass Gilbert had planned for the Capitol Mall a quarter of a century earlier.

Hundreds of people worked around the clock to get the Palace ready for



The 1940 Ice Palace, also in Como Park and the first in the country to house a federal post office.

opening day of Carnival. An elevator was used to lift several ice blocks up at a time and deliver them to a position where workers could drag them off quickly onto the structure. When completed, the 1937 Ice Palace shone like a jewel over St. Paul, only to create a traffic-jamming quagmire of slush and mud as it melted in February and March.

The success of this first Carnival convinced people to repeat the event in 1938. They chose an open spot in Mounds Park for the Ice Palace. Wigington drew two schemes, calling them Windsor Castle and Fort Belvedere. Conceptually both buildings shared the design precepts of the 1937 Palace, with the addition of a large enclosed ice skating rink.

Neither plan satisfied the Carnival planners, however: central to their plans was the highlighting of Olympic figure skating celebrity, Vive-Anne Hulten, and an open-ended, modernistic plan by White Bear architect Jack Horner prevailed. Skating around in her faux fur jacket—one of the first—Miss Hulten was charmed by a city that embraced her fame, and chose to make St. Paul her home rather than return to Sweden.

The 1939 Ice Palace would also elude Wigington's input. Built on the shores of

Como Lake near the Pavilion, the "Arabian Nights"-inspired structure was designed by St. Paul architect Milton Bergstedt, with labor provided by the WPA city youth work program. This whimsical building's appeal suffered significantly due to its proximity to the much larger Pavilion, and the parking lot in front of it.



The uncompleted Ice Palace of 1942, its construction halted by unseasonably warm winter winds.

In 1940 the job of designing palaces returned to Wigington. Como Park was again chosen as the site, but Wigington avoided design pitfalls of a lake shore location, and placed the structure on top of the hill above the Como Pavilion. This was critically important to the sense of what the Palace was; 150 by 42 by 75 feet tall, the \$14,000 Palace needed the height of the site to be seen. In this location, too, a steady flow of traffic could be directed around the building, freeing up valuable parking space.

A federal post office, the first to be housed in an ice palace, was a central design feature. Visitors could walk into the palace, purchase picture postcards of Carnival activities, and have them post-marked with a special cache. As with any federal building, the palace post office was secured by a floor, roof and lockable door.

The plans for a pinnacle palace Wigington created were completed on November 23, 1940. Built on the same Como Park site as the 1940 Ice Palace, the 1941 edition was 123 feet square and rotated 45 degrees on its axis to put a truncated corner front-and-center of the plan. Thus, the diagonal of the square became the longitudinal spine around which Wigington developed seven towers named King's Tower, Queen's Tower, Federal Tower, Wabun Tower, Kabeyon Tower,

and simply Round Towers #1 and #2, giving a subtle historical nod to St. Paul as the new Rome of America.

Building on his experience with previous palaces, Wigington masterfully assembled multiple ideas and design experiments in this one building. The diagonal orientation allowed the various tower elements to seemingly walk down the hillside site, adding tremendously to the allusion of height. Clever corbelling drew the square floor plan of the King's Tower into an octagonal peak 75 feet high from the ground, but nearly 100 feet from the lowest block course to turret top. By accentuating the structural pilasters on the outside of the building, strength and safety were achieved while giving a strong, overall vertical sense to the building. To contrast the daytime viewing experience for the nighttime visitor, Wigington used multiple lighting effects. A double exterior wall allowed an impressive array of lights to be sandwiched between the walls and glow outward unseen; large plywood window box inserts painted silver metallic shone with an indirect shimmer; and strips of exposed incandescent lamps outlined the tops of the towers like jeweled crowns and tiaras.

Building the Palace attracted national attention. *Popular Mechanics* noted the challenges of ice architecture, and detailed the use of chicken wire as corner reinforcement and sawdust as mortar enhancements.

A colorful story of child heroics was recorded in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. Early on in construction of the Palace, a warm spell caused significant melting, with water literally running out from between the newly laid blocks of ice. Children from throughout the city were urged to bring their newspapers to the ice palace at night and plaster the latest editions to the lower levels to stem the flow long enough for colder night air to freeze the mortar solid. It worked! Although visibly less attractive than ice added after the January thaw, the first third of the palace masonry held 3,580 tons of ice together for the remainder of the Carnival.

The uncompleted Ice Palace of 1942 marks Wigington's last indulgence in ice

architecture. Halted by warm winter breezes and a heating up of international conflicts, its significance is again notable, for in it we see Wigington as the thorough urban planner, inserting a fitting temporary building amidst the permanent structures of the Highland Park golf course in design, scale, and context.

Wigington's work in Highland had begun with the design of the Water Tower a generation earlier. This very early building, built in what Wigington himself called the "Spanish" tradition, was the source building design for other key structures around the golf course which were designed by, attributed to, or most certainly influenced by Wigington, including the Randolph Heights Elementary School, Highland Golf Clubhouse, Edgumbe School and the golf course flagstaff.

The 1942 ice palace was designed to "fit in." Symmetric around a central tower and court, this palace was to sport a glowing lantern at its peak, much like a lighthouse beacon. The two wings were conceived as actual rooms, with semicircular window bays at each end, invoking the circular arch elements of nearby structures. Window detailing almost copied the details of the clubhouse.

Unfortunately, warm weather halted its construction when the palace was about two-thirds completed. The ice that remained suffered greatly from both relentless sunlight, which turned the ice opaque, and winds, which blew mortar out from between blocks, turning the building into a white honeycomb. Acting as any responsible monarch of the time would, King Boreas called upon the forces at Fort Snelling to come fend off the assault of the intruder. Unable to save what was left, the palace was dynamited into obscurity.

In the end, Wigington designed more palaces than anyone ever has. His creative output reached its zenith as he sat whistling with a teakettle at his drafting board, drawing his "babies." By reviving the ice palaces for the WPA, Wigington also revived the pride we have in ourselves as northern people, no matter where we came from, but knowing where we want to go.

By the end of World War II, Wigington had retired from the City Architects

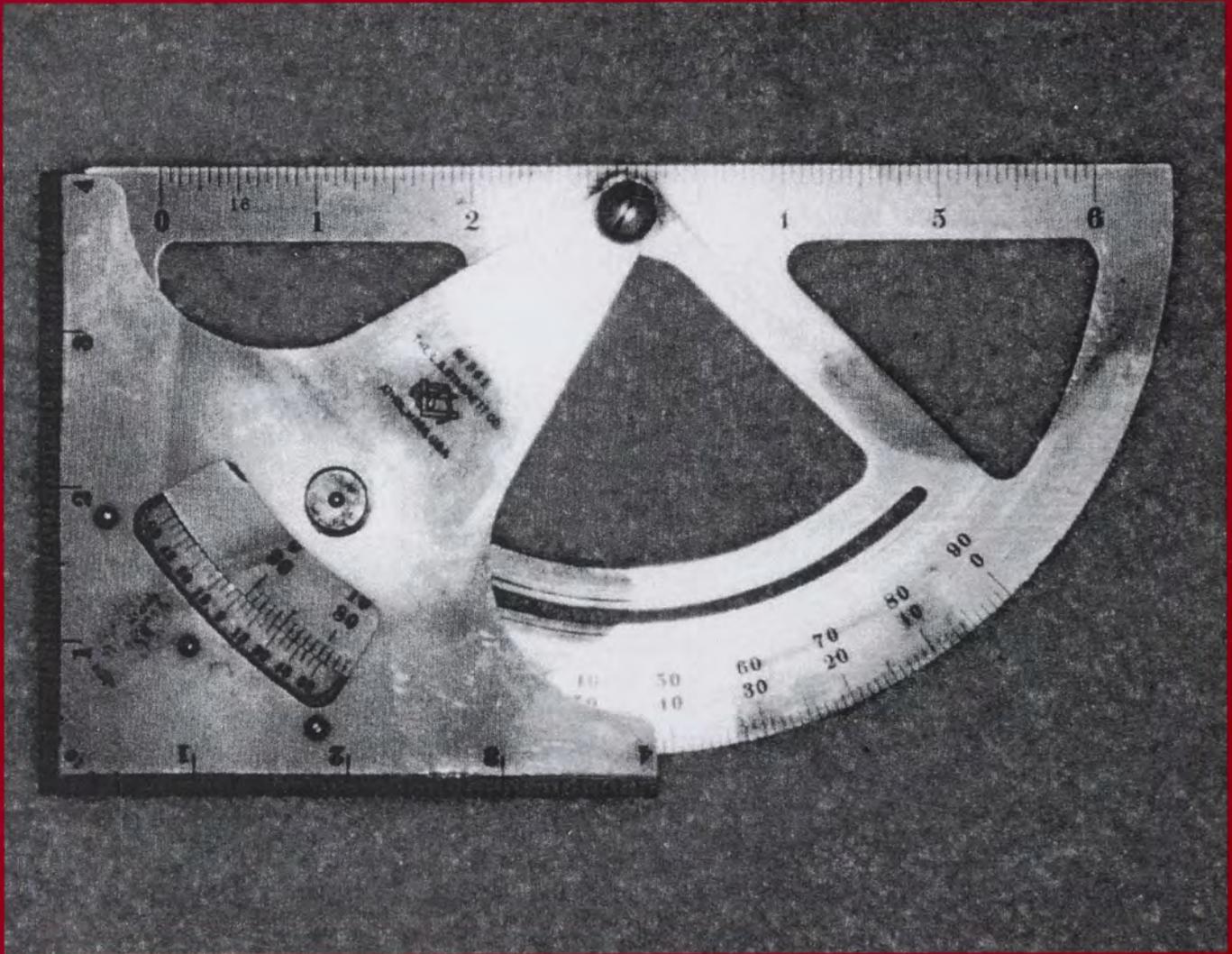
office, and was on his way to California to work on housing for movie stars. The 1947 Palace was begun just after his departure, once again on the Highland Park golf course. Like the ill-fated Palace of 1942, the 1947 Palace melted with less than a third of the building completed. Wigington commented that the 1947 Ice Palace didn't measure up to his "babies."

It's not known if Wigington thought of himself as particularly a vanguard of an architectural form, but there is no doubt that this was the case. Wigington designed six Palaces, and saw four of them built. He pioneered design elements and building techniques that cut construction time in half.

Thirty-three years after the last Wigington Palace was built, a college student in Northfield decided that the best way to earn a music education degree was to build an Ice Palace. Luckily, the college faculty agreed. With its central tower turned 45 degrees and double walls filled with lighting equipment, the 1975 Ice Palace shared Harriet Island with the Wigington-designed Pavilion. Over the course of its ten-day run, the Ice Palace attracted many old-timers to the site, sharing stories about cutting ice, rigging lighting equipment, working with steamshovels, and watching parades filled with uniformed marching clubs.

The longtime ambition to build a Palace like Wigington fulfilled, I turned my attention to gaining some recognition for my boyhood hero. I never forgot what that old draftsman told me the first time I peered at Wigington drawings in the City Architect's office: "Remember, Mr. Wigington was a black man." The color of his skin didn't matter to me: what mattered was that he designed buildings that helped me define myself as a Minnesotan. Like my unmet mentor, I believe that sometimes it's best to whistle elaborate tunes around the single notes of teakettles.

Bob Olsen, assistant vice president of Western Bank and a former member of the Ramsey County Historical Society's board of directors, has amassed generations of information, stories, photographs, blueprints, and souvenir items from every St. Paul Ice Palace.



An architectural drafting instrument owned and used by Clarence W. Wigington, the first licensed African-American architect registered in the State of Minnesota. See the article beginning on page 4.

R.C.H.S.

RAMSEY • COUNTY • HISTORICAL • SOCIETY

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

Address Service Requested

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Paul, MN
Permit #3989