

ABOVE AND RIGHT: *The St. Paul Women's City Club building, 1931 etching by Theodore G. Haupt, and Alice M. O'Brien, 1930*

ALICE M. O'BRIEN

and the Women's City Club of St. Paul



Thomond R. O'Brien

In early 1931, despite the Great Depression, a jubilant group of women attended the groundbreaking for an architecturally notable clubhouse in downtown St. Paul. Under the leadership of Alice M. O'Brien, these members of the Women's City Club had raised the funds, secured the lot, engaged the architect, and



supervised the planning and interior design. Now they were about to oversee construction of a \$255,000 building that carried no mortgage. O'Brien, the daughter and granddaughter of prominent St. Croix valley lumbermen William O'Brien and John O'Brien, was a woman of many talents, some of whose accomplishments have been explored elsewhere.¹ Deserving more consideration is the story of her contributions to the Women's City Club and its landmark building.

Born in 1891 and raised in St. Paul, Alice M. O'Brien expressed an early interest in social issues and volunteered in women's organizations, such as the Woman's Welfare League, that promoted feminist causes. Stirred by the great issues of the First World War, she wanted to contribute directly to the United States effort in France. Although her father at first objected, she persuaded him that she would be safe serving with one of the American volunteer organizations. In March 1918 she left New York for Paris with three other young women. After working as an auto mechanic and an auxiliary nurse, she finished out the war in an American Red Cross canteen directly behind French lines.²

It was in France that O'Brien first discussed the idea of forming a women's club with her friend, Marguerite Davis, one of the St. Paulites who had volunteered with her. The two women pursued the idea upon their return home after the armistice.³

St. Paul, like many other cities, had a strong tradition of women's organizations associated with charitable or religious causes. These groups typically met at the sites of their activities or in members' homes. In a thesis on the women's-club movement in St. Paul, Kara Marie Korsgaard discusses more than 20 such organizations, including "mutual improvement societies" and those devoted to the poor, charity, working women, and moral

reform. In these groups, women "began to think of themselves as a unit rather than powerless individuals." Although not suffragists, they displayed "a sense of pride in womanhood and took advantage of the opportunity which clubs provided to improve themselves and to change their role in society. Although they rarely carried banners or created a stir, they were feminists."⁴

O'Brien was familiar with these types of activity through her own volunteer work. What she saw the need for in St. Paul, though, was different: an organization that would appeal to a large number of women and provide a meeting place to socialize, share experiences, work on common projects, lunch together, or just relax.

By 1920 St. Paul had several men-only groups ensconced in buildings of their own, such as the Minnesota Club, the St. Paul Athletic Club, and the University Club. In addition, there were all-male golf clubs, fraternal organizations, and service clubs, many of which had imposing edifices as well. Minneapolitans had founded the Woman's Club in 1907, but there was no similar organization for women in St. Paul.

In the fall of 1920, seven friends met at the home of Marion Furness, daughter of Minnesota governor Alexander Ramsey, to explore the idea of starting a club: Alice O'Brien, Furness and her daughters Anita and Laura, Marguerite Davis, Helen Bunn, and Sarah Colvin. These women, all prominent members of St. Paul society, decided to invite others to join their discussion. Soon thereafter they formed a Committee of Thirteen.⁵

Recalling these early meetings years later, Bunn, who became the club's first president, declared: "Many of us had worked downtown during the war. During those months we noticed that we had no place to eat or talk. After the war we remembered this and there was some discussion of it in an informal, indefinite way. The idea took hold gradually and it came to seem less impossible to us."

The women opened up a temporary headquarters downtown in the St. Paul Hotel and began to seek others to interest in forming a club. As their numbers approached one hundred, the committee decided to hold a general membership

Mr. O'Brien, a nephew of Alice M. O'Brien, has a special interest in the history of St. Paul and the St. Croix valley. He is a member of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society and the board of directors of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

¹ See Eileen M. Michels, "Alice O'Brien: Volunteer and Philanthropist," in *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays*, ed. Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977), 136-54. Around 1900 William began large-scale lumbering in Florida and Louisiana. In 1945 Alice gave to Minnesota 150 acres of land along the St. Croix River for William O'Brien State Park.

² *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Dec. 6, 1914, 3rd sec., p. 1; Michels, "Alice O'Brien," 138-44.

³ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 29, 1936, p. 13.

⁴ Kara Marie Korsgaard, "'The Meeting Adjourned and Tea Was Served': The Organizational Lives of Elite Women in Late Nineteenth Century St. Paul" (M.A. thesis, Hamline University, 1988), 14-15.

⁵ Here and two paragraphs below, see *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 11, 1931, 2nd sec. p. 3, Oct. 29, 1936, p. 13.

meeting. Each committee member was asked to invite ten other interested women to the hotel on February 5, 1921.

More than 850 attended this meeting, at which the Women's City Club of St. Paul was formally incorporated "to provide for women a center for organized work and for social and intellectual intercourse." Proclaiming themselves charter members, the attendees passed a constitution and set of bylaws and elected a board of 21 directors, including early planners O'Brien and Davis. The charter members agreed to work toward a membership goal of 1,000. They also raised \$7,850 in cash and pledges on that day, the start of a \$100,000 loan-and-gift fund deemed necessary for operations and a future clubhouse.⁶

The bylaws set club dues at \$10 a year, a reasonable sum that would not burden middle- and upper-income families, from whose ranks most members came. At that time, high dues were not the only barrier to joining many clubs. Organizations nearly always had membership committees whose principal function was to pass judgment on applicants and exclude those deemed unacceptable. The Women's City Club, however, publicly and aggressively solicited new members.⁷

In an article written a decade later, O'Brien explained exactly what kind of club she had envisioned in those early days:

At [the] time the conventional function of a Women's Club in the life of a city was well defined. It should have a civic department, an English department for the promotion of culture, a history department, a welfare department for the good of the city; it should do this; it should do that, but as someone else has said, "St. Paul is not like other girls," so the St. Paul Women's City Club, reared in a tradition of individuality, incorporated with only one purpose in view—the maintenance of a club house for the comfort and intelligent diversion of its members. It was rightly supposed that this type of organization appealed to open-minded women and our power lies in the strength of our 1,000 free thinking members.⁸

Beginning in 1924, the group's monthly newsletter proclaimed, "The Women's City Club has no political, economic, or social platform."

Women's City Club of St. Paul: EARLY OFFICERS

"On the first board of directors were

Mrs. L. M. Benepe
Miss Georgia Borup
Miss Helen Bunn [president]
Mrs. Pierce Butler
Mrs. A. R. Colvin
Miss Sarah Converse
Miss Marguerite Davis
Mrs. W. A. Dorsey
Mrs. Foster Hannaford
Mrs. Louis Hill
Mrs. Dawson Johnston
Miss Lily Long
Mrs. G. R. Metcalf
Mrs. C. R. Noyes
Miss Alice O'Brien
Miss Hester Pollock
Mrs. Walter R. Ramsey
Miss Clara Sommers
Mrs. Charles Weyerhaeuser
Mrs. Frank D. Williams
Mrs. Frances B. Olso
Miss Carolyn Krieger

"Miss Lily Long was the second president and following her were Miss Laura Furness, Mrs. John I. H. Field, and Miss Alice O'Brien." — *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 11, 1931, second section, p. 3



⁶ Women's City Club of St. Paul (WCC), *Constitution and Bylaws* (St. Paul, 1921), 1; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 11, 1931, 2nd sec., p. 3.

⁷ Dues were raised to \$25 annually with the opening of the clubhouse in 1931; Mrs. Reuel D. Harmon to members, Sept. 10, 1953, in WCC scrapbook. Four such scrapbooks, documenting events from 1931 to 1956, are in the author's possession. The *Consumer Price Index* equates \$10 in 1920 to \$72 in 1994.

⁸ Alice M. O'Brien, "1,000 Free-Thinking Members," *Saint Paul Magazine*, Spring 1931, p. 25.



The first clubhouse, Fourth and Cedar streets, about 1929, shortly before demolition. The large sign heralds construction of a new building on the corner site; the smaller one, in the window below, announces bookstore-owner Mabel Ulrich's moving plans.

The club needed "a center for organized work," as its bylaws specified. Soon after the first meeting, members rented space at the corner of Fourth and Cedar streets in a three-story Richardsonian-style building designed by Cass Gilbert. The structure had already housed the Minnesota and St. Paul Athletic clubs while each built its own new facility.⁹

The Women's City Club's first *Bulletin* described the fledgling organization's home:

Imagine an old building which had stood empty for years except when it was occupied by exuberant service-men on leave! Pipes had frozen and burst, plastering was down, walls discolored, the electric system out of date, the

floors defaced, and the kitchen and basement so heaped with debris of all kinds that it was difficult to make one's way through the mess.

The clubhouse formally opened on May 7 and 8, 1921, with 871 members. Three months' worth of work had transformed the space into a clubhouse deemed "homelike, daintily feminine, and even distinguished in effect." On the main floor were a small kitchen, a dining room, and an auditorium for larger meetings. Above were sleeping rooms for overnight or short-term use by members, a small library, and several small meeting rooms.¹⁰

While members were glad to have a clubhouse, they were uneasy about having to rent

⁹ Here and below, see *Bulletin of the Women's City Club*, June 1, 1921, p. 1 (name later changed to *Women's City Club News*).

¹⁰ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Nov. 12, 1936, p. 9; *WCC Bulletin*, June 1, 1921, p. 1-2. After some years, the first president glossed over the extent of the work that had been done; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 11, 1931, 2nd sec., p. 3.



Unpacking after moving to the Minnesota Club, September 1930

space. Their fears proved well founded. In October 1927, six years after moving in and long before their lease expired, the women were stunned by a rumor that a new office building might be constructed on the site. Although the landlord soothed them, the club's president, Carolyn S. Field, queried in her annual report the following May: "Is this to be ours for much longer? . . . We must be prepared for the future and laying our plans well in advance. Like Rome, a Club is not built in a day. She recommended that the board appoint a committee "to canvass the situation and our possibilities."¹¹

In October 1928 the Building Investigating Committee was formed, only shortly before the

dreaded news came. On a cold morning in December, Field was notified that the building had been sold. The club would have to be out within 90 days.¹²

Fortunately, the committee had been working "indefatigably" and had taken a 15-month lease nearby in the Casey Building, 345 Minnesota Street. A farewell supper on March 21, 1929, closed the chapter of club life that began on Cedar Street. Unneeded furniture and other items were sold at auction. The new clubhouse, which members called "The Speakeasy," officially opened at noon on April 1. Little more than a year later, the Minnesota Club, "in a friendly spirit of cooperation," offered space in its clubhouse

¹¹ *WCC Bulletin*, Oct. 1927, p. 1, May 1928, p. 2.

¹² *WCC Bulletin*, May 1929, p. 2, which names the committee: "Mmes R. M. Weyerhaeuser, J. L. Mitchell, R. S. Kennedy, W. F. Peet, H. E. Smith, C. L. Spencer, Edwin White, B. W. Day, Chas. Park, A. H. Savage, and the Misses Mary Wheeler, Helen Bunn, Louise Schutz, Eleanor Mitchell, Alice O'Brien, Margaret Webster, Hester Pollock, and Anita Furness."

until the women could construct a building of their own. Thus, in September 1930 the club moved to its third temporary location.¹³

Alice O'Brien's dream, which all the members shared, was that the club would own its clubhouse. Instrumental in starting the group, she had served on its executive board since its beginning. In May 1924, however, family concerns required her to resign her position and withdraw from club activities. Following the death of her brother in that month and her father less than a year later, she assumed the presidency of her father's business, the Putnam Lumber Company, in Shamrock, Florida. She was caught up in personal and business responsibilities and was often absent from St. Paul for long periods of time. Most likely, what called her back to the Women's City Club after a four-year hiatus were the first rumors that the group would have to leave its original building. In April 1928 she was reelected to the board.¹⁴

At the age of 37, O'Brien had years of experience running a large private company and had used her fund-raising and organizational skills to benefit numerous social and cultural projects. As her work on the clubhouse would demonstrate, she possessed energy, intelligence, a sense of humor, a flair for publicity, and great talent as a public speaker.

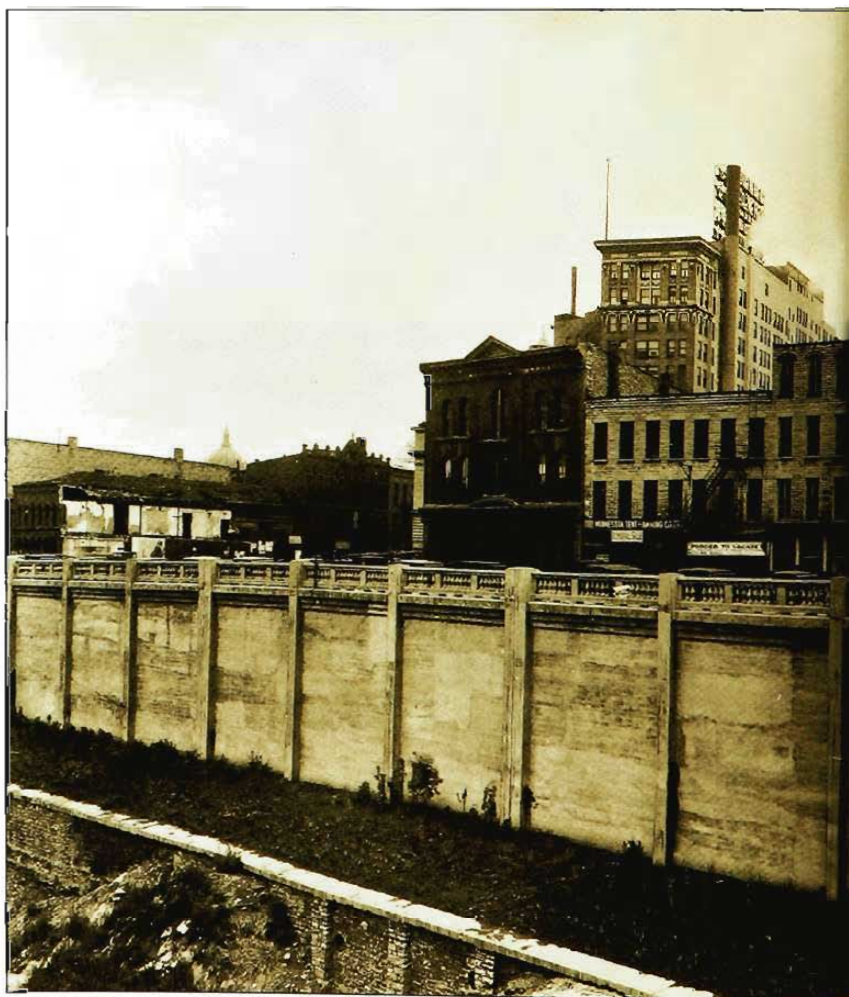
O'Brien had launched the campaign for a new building even before the Cedar Street eviction notice arrived. She was appointed to the Building Investigating Committee in October 1928 and by the April 1929 annual meeting had become its chair. As the *Bulletin* noted, her report electrified the membership: "A very evident spirit of optimism was in the atmosphere . . . and when Miss Alice O'Brien . . . announced the Club's option on the corner of Third and St. Peter Sts. at a price of

approximately \$40,000, a real climax was reached."¹⁵

The committee's choice of this small piece of land was helped by some large-scale public redevelopment projects recently completed in downtown St. Paul. In the late 1920s, city residents had voted in favor of a \$15 million capital-improvement bond issue. Part of the funds were used to open up the view along old Third Street overlooking the Mississippi River. From Seven Corners to James J. Hill's enormous railroad station, both sides of the street were lined with red-brick commercial buildings from the late nineteenth century. The city acquired most of those on the bluff side, tore them down, and renamed the street Kellogg Boulevard in honor of the distinguished hometown statesman, Frank B. Kellogg.¹⁶

Public and private development boomed along the newly opened corridor, the centerpiece being the zigzag-moderne City Hall and Ramsey

Kellogg Boulevard from the Wabasha Street bridge, about 1930, with condemned buildings soon to make way for the new city hall and county courthouse



¹³ *WCC Bulletin*, Feb. 1929, p. 3, Mar. 1929, p. 3; *St. Paul Daily News*, Nov. 25, 1936, p. 9; lantern slide, in author's possession; *A History of the Women's City Club* (St. Paul: The Club, 1949), 4. From 1921–29 the WCC paid approximately \$7,500 annually in rent; *WCC News*, June 1, 1929, p. 1.

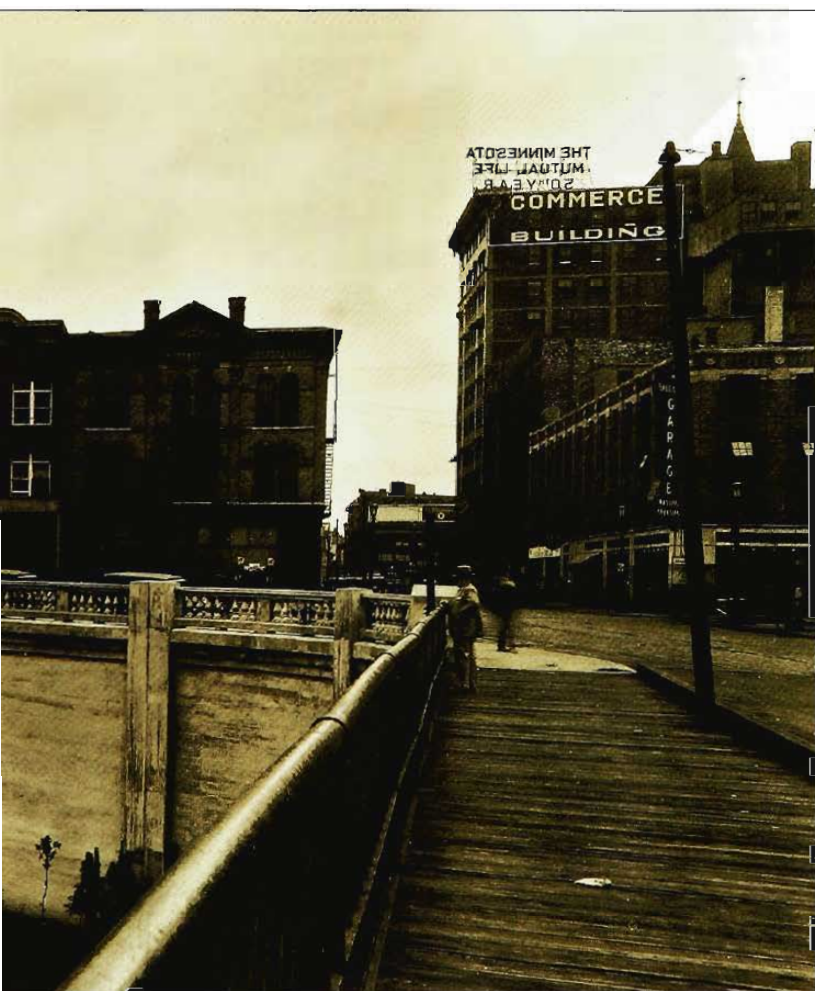
¹⁴ Michels, "Alice O'Brien," 360n3. The monthly *WCC Bulletin* listed all of the club's officers and their terms of service.

¹⁵ *WCC Bulletin*, Feb. 1929, p. 3, May 1929, p. 2. The land cost \$39,384.00; *History of the WCC*, 4. O'Brien remained the chair of the building committee until 1937 when the construction debt was retired.

¹⁶ *St. Paul Daily News*, Feb. 2, 1931, p. 6.

County Courthouse on Kellogg Boulevard.¹⁷ Directly across St. Peter Street was a small, irregularly shaped lot. For the Women's City Club, its main advantages were the boulevard location and view of the Mississippi River. It was also close to the business section of downtown, the public library, and the area's many fine shops and department stores.

But there were also serious difficulties with the site. The lot was painfully small—only 71 feet deep, 66 feet along its north boundary, and little more than 95 feet to the south line along Kellogg Boulevard. Although well served by streetcar lines, there was no room for on-site parking, a problem that became more acute as the years wore on. Furthermore, the location was, as all knew, right across the street from the county jail. An old, run-down hotel stood on one side, and after Prohibition was repealed in 1933, a saloon was built on the other.¹⁸



The costs of a new building for the Women's City Club, including the land and furnishings, were estimated at \$215,000. This was a daunting figure, made more so by the onset of the Great Depression in October 1929, but the women threw themselves into a fund-raising campaign with resourcefulness and enthusiasm. According to Mary Rossum, the club manager for many years, "Rummage sales, auctions, bazaars, luncheons, just about every money-making project conceived was attempted."¹⁹

The club promoted many schemes. It convinced two major department stores to hold special days when members staffed selected departments and the club took home a portion of the day's receipts. The group regularly supported concerts and performances, receiving a percentage of ticket sales. The Make-Money Committee collected commissions on cigarettes, newspapers, and books sold at the clubhouse. O'Brien, who loved Packard cars, persuaded the local dealer to pay the club a commission on sales to its members. A local home-oil company likewise gave a 10 percent commission when members purchased fuel. By May 1931 the Make-Money Committee reported more than \$32,000 in earnings.²⁰

These efforts, however, would not be enough to finance the new building. Then, at O'Brien's suggestion, the club undertook an unusual and ambitious project: It invited the German Grand Opera Company to perform in St. Paul in February 1930. The renowned company had never before visited the region, and sponsorship presented a major challenge, for the club had to advance the \$20,000 performance fee. The venture would only succeed if the new St. Paul Auditorium were filled to its 3,100-seat capacity for several performances. An Opera Committee was formed with O'Brien at its head, and the entire membership got to work selling tickets.²¹

¹⁷ Other downtown construction included the post office farther down Kellogg Blvd., additions to the Lowry Medical Arts Building and St. Paul Auditorium, the Northern States Power Co. building, and the 32-story First National Bank building. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Mar. 15, 1931, 1st sec., p. 7.

¹⁸ Lantern slides of architectural drawings, in author's possession.

¹⁹ Mildred Planthold, "Women Own This Club—And It's Debt Free," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 5, 1948, p. 10B.

²⁰ *WCC Bulletin*, Nov. 1929, p. 2, Dec. 1, 1930, p. 2, May 1, 1931, p. 2.

²¹ *WCC News*, Jan. 1, p. 2; Feb. 1, p. 1, Mar. 1, p. 1—all 1930.



Twelfth Night revelers, 1934: Alice O'Brien, ringmaster; Alexandra Kalman, assistant to the strongman; and Adelaide Enright, P. T. Barnum.

A month before the opera arrived in town, the Women's City Club held its annual members-only Twelfth Night party. At these festivities, the women customarily put on elaborate skits and wore fanciful costumes, many disguising themselves as men with beards and mustaches. Twelfth Night parties always garnered good coverage in the society pages of the local newspapers, and an extensive article in the 1930 *St. Paul Pioneer Press* contained a reminder: "That there is to be a season of German Opera in St. Paul, under the auspices of the Club, February 10 to 13, was made apparent by Mrs. Edward R. Sanford and Miss Alice O'Brien. In silver fishnet, leather boots, gleaming helmets and carrying shields and spears, 'Brunhilde,' in the person of Mrs. Sanford and Miss O'Brien as 'Siegfried' did a number from the famous 'Ring' opera of Wagner."²²

O'Brien loved to dress in costume, knowing that such shenanigans garnered useful publicity for the club. Over the years, she appeared in newspaper photographs as a bearded lumberjack, a mustachioed circus ringmaster, a British naval

tar, a farmer, a dog trainer, a Cossack, a London policeman "riding a horse," a radio broadcaster in flapper dress, a cowboy, a marching bass drummer, and an aviator, complete with helmet and parachute.²³

The 1930 opera season was a success, adding some \$8,730 to the building fund. The club repeated its sponsorship in 1931, netting an additional \$12,000.²⁴

Still, such events simply did not provide money quickly enough for building purposes. Thus, club leaders decided to ask members to underwrite expenses by signing voluntary pledges, to be paid back through future fund-raising activities. Although the membership agreed to the plan, the economic realities of the Great Depression meant that not all women were able to participate. By the time the building was under construction in 1931, somewhat more than half the membership had pledged—enough so that no commercial mortgage was placed on the building. A local bank provided straight financing on long-term notes, using the pledges as collateral.²⁵

The 1931 Twelfth Night party, held just days before signing the construction contract, provided the occasion to mark the progress made over the preceding year. The event again featured an operatic theme, with members encouraged to dress as performers or spectators. A giddy spirit of victory emerges from details of the celebration preserved in a club scrapbook. During the evening, women sang parodies that hinted at an insider's perspective on the process leading to the triumphant groundbreaking ceremonies. The program began with a tribute to O'Brien, the only member singled out by name: "We're sure that you'd much rather fight a tiger/That roams upon the River Niger/Than fight with us,—Than fight with us—So Hail! Hail!/O'Brien, Hail!"²⁶

Later in the evening came another song, set to the tune of the "Pilgrims' Chorus":

Once more, dear Club, I with rapture behold thee
And greet these walls that so sweetly enfold me;
The noble Board may rest them now
Since they to us have fulfilled their vow;

²² *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 7, 1930, p. 11. Some men's clubs held Twelfth Night parties as well, with members sometimes dressing as women. Pictures displayed in the University Club of Denver show such parties dating back before World War I.

²³ WCC scrapbooks, in author's possession.

²⁴ *History of the WCC*, p. 4.

²⁵ *St. Paul Daily News*, Nov. 22, 1931, 1st sec., p. 7.

²⁶ The song referred to an expedition O'Brien led across Africa in 1927: Michels, "Alice O'Brien," 145–47. The lyrics, here and below, are from the party program, WCC scrapbook.

By work galore they have atoned,
At last both ground and view are owned.

Members then sang a rousing version of the "Anvil Chorus," which went in part:

The County Jail across the way
Is much too near, most members say,
[Chorus]: Knocks, knocks, knocks we hear
About the Building Committee!
The Flop House on the other side
Is another thing I can't abide!
[Chorus]
The outside walls are far from right
The entrance is an awful fright,
[Chorus]
The Theatre floor is much too flat,
We won't, we won't, we won't stand for that.
[Chorus]
And lots of windows give a view,
Gol' darn the view if we shiver too.
[Chorus]

There's no bedroom for the girl
Who lives alone—no social whirl,
[Chorus]
In summer time we can't keep cool,
Because there is no swimming pool.
[Chorus]

The long-awaited construction project commenced when Alice O'Brien, who became the club's fifth president in 1930, signed the contracts on January 10, 1931. At that time she announced that excavation would start within the week and the building would be completed, down to its furnishings, on September 1. The board had determined not to start construction until \$135,000 was on hand. At a membership meeting several months before the groundbreaking ceremony, Helen Bunn, chair of the finance committee, announced that gifts and contributions had pushed the sum to \$137,560; of this, \$15,000 had been raised by the Make-Money Committee.

O'Brien signing the construction contract, 1931, surrounded by (seated) Russell Baker of Lovering-Longbotham contractors and Anita Furness, building-fund treasurer; (standing) W. L. Darling, building adviser, Cleon Headley, legal adviser, Harry Lovering, contractor, and Magnus Jemne, architect.



\$117,000 in pledges of 530 members, and the rest from donations of seven persons not members of the club.²⁷

These efforts did not go unnoticed. An editorial in the *St. Paul Daily News* commented:

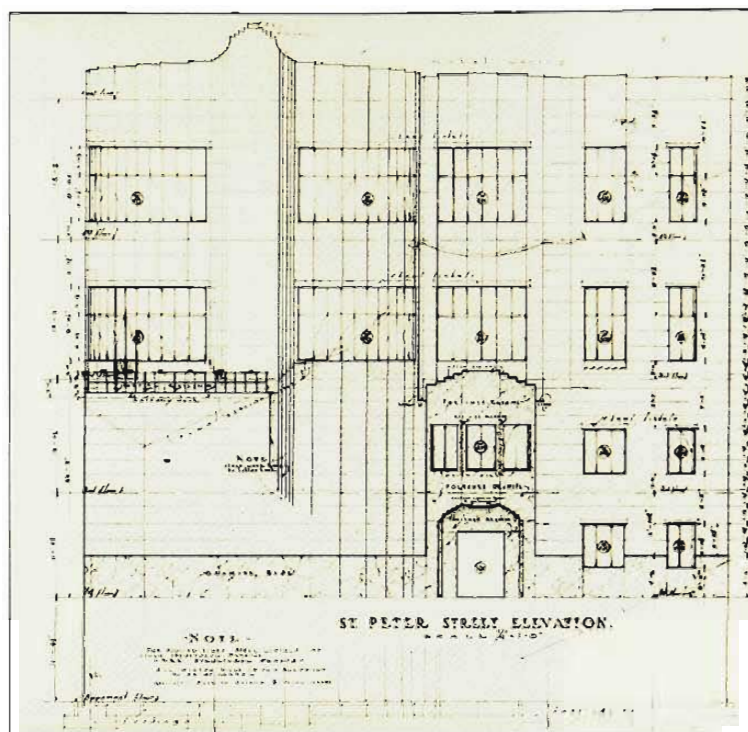
Few women's societies anywhere have equaled the record set by this club. [The] start of its new building has been rushed in order to aid the unemployment situation. Financing of the project was carried on without masculine aid and completion of the building will find enough cash on hand to pay for the whole structure. We know of no better example of the new St. Paul spirit which is accomplishing so much for the community.²⁸

At the groundbreaking, January 15, 1931, the new governor, Floyd B. Olson, made his first public appearance, lifting a spade full of dirt as O'Brien stood casually nearby. She took a lump of the first shovelful and put it in a box set into the cornerstone of the building. Also included in the box was an honor roll of current and charter members.²⁹

A *Dispatch* photograph showed O'Brien high in the cab of the nearby steam shovel, "manning" it, the caption pointed out, a satisfied smile on her face. The accompanying article went on to quote her: "It is our big moment, the day we have lived and worked for." At the foot of the machine, four smiling members of the club proudly stood.³⁰

The constraints of the site presented a difficult challenge. Yet club members had adapted to less-than-ideal clubhouse arrangements in the past, and they knew very well what they did and did not want in a new structure. A few months after selecting the location, the building committee engaged a well-known local architect, Magnus Jemne, as well as the interior decorator Frank Post. Committees were formed to supervise each element of the design. The collective effort produced a building of exquisite form and function.³¹

The clubhouse building has been considered the finest example of Jemne's work. The architect



St. Peter Street elevation, specifying granite trim and metal window sills

(1882–1967) was born in Norway and moved to Ashland, Wisconsin, at age 17 to live with a married sister. He eventually relocated to St. Paul and worked as a draftsman in Cass Gilbert's architectural office. By 1917 he had become a partner with Thomas G. Holyoke in the succeeding firm. In the same year, he married Elsa Laubach, the gifted artist who later designed the clubhouse's elegant inlaid terrazzo floor and wall murals. A club member, she had chaired the art committee that decorated the first clubhouse.³²

Jemne was not noted for modern work. Mostly, he designed private homes for wealthy clients. But the clubwomen had requested a "modern and functional building," and Jemne approached the commission with an open mind. At the time of the clubhouse opening, he revealed:

We had certain requirements to meet, and we started out with conservative examples of architecture. We wanted simplicity and econo-

²⁷ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 11, 1931, 1st sec. p. 7; *History of the WCC*, back cover; "Work To Start Soon On Club Structure," *St. Paul Dispatch*, Jan. 16, 1931, WCC scrapbook.

²⁸ *St. Paul Daily News*, Jan. 20, 1931, p. 6.

²⁹ *St. Paul Daily News*, Jan. 15, 1931, p. 1; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Apr. 16, 1931, p. 9.

³⁰ *St. Paul Dispatch*, Jan. 15, 1931, 2nd sec., p. 1.

³¹ Michels, "Alice O'Brien," 150–51; *WCC News*, June 1, 1929, p. 1.

³² Magnus Jemne biography, untitled, 2 p., files of the Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul; on Elsa Laubach Jemne, see *WCC Bulletin*, June 1, 1921, p. 2.

my and we were not to be held down by any ancient ideas of architecture.

The building grew with suggestions, and while I was influenced by modern trends in architecture, the new Women's City Club is not a copy of any building. We had a special type of building to design and we went ahead and designed it in a simple, straightforward way.³³

Jemne later evinced surprise when his building was proclaimed to be so advanced.

The exterior walls strongly suggested the abbreviated bow of an ocean liner. Black granite trimmed the sidewalk level, and a curving facade of smooth, yellow Mankato travertine rose in three steps. The many lines and angles represented trends in modern German and French architecture.³⁴

The first floor featured an angular entrance lobby and a 500-seat auditorium. The auditorium, as well as the two dining rooms on the second floor, were available for rent to other organizations. Over the years, local chapters of the American Red Cross, League of Women Voters, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and American Association of University Women, as well as the Schubert Club, St. Paul Institute, and numerous other social, church, and charitable organizations used the clubhouse extensively.

The upper floors were for club members only.

Women's City Club members relaxing in the second-floor lounge, mid-1940s



On the third level were the members' lounge, library, and an exercise room complete with lockers, showers, a bath, and two small rooms for resting. The fourth floor featured the brightly styled dining room with enormous windows overlooking Kellogg Boulevard and the Mississippi River. Another small dining room, a card room, and a dressing room were also on this floor. Two small elevators with elaborate grille doors and a curving staircase connected all levels.

The primary interior colors were silver, gold, and bronze, with brilliant flashes of reds, blues, greens, and pinks. A description of the gymnasium said it was "carried out in tomato red and lettuce green furniture suggestive of the slogan 'Eat and grow thin.'"³⁵

Alice O'Brien had suggested choosing the Minneapolis designer Frank Post. Considered "the most fashionable decorator in the area," he worked with Cornelia Morgan, the head of the decorations committee, making detailed watercolor sketches to scale of every room, plus floor plans with each rug and piece of furniture numbered. Post designed the furniture, lamps, and lighting fixtures, which were then built by local firms.³⁶

At the 1931 annual meeting in April, three months after the start of construction, the members were treated to some musical commentary on their clubhouse's progress. Six women dressed in white sheets sang a lighthearted oratorio praising O'Brien's efforts as "high priestess of the City Club." In part, it went: "without Thee/We'd all be in the soup. . . /When trials beset us; when Good Fortune frowned upon us./We looked to you in all our troubles. . . /When our home was taken from us and we were forced to wander on the face of the earth./We looked to you, but not in vain." Following this, O'Brien, dressed as "an artisan," gave a detailed building report. The executive committee met two days later and unanimously reelected her club president.³⁷

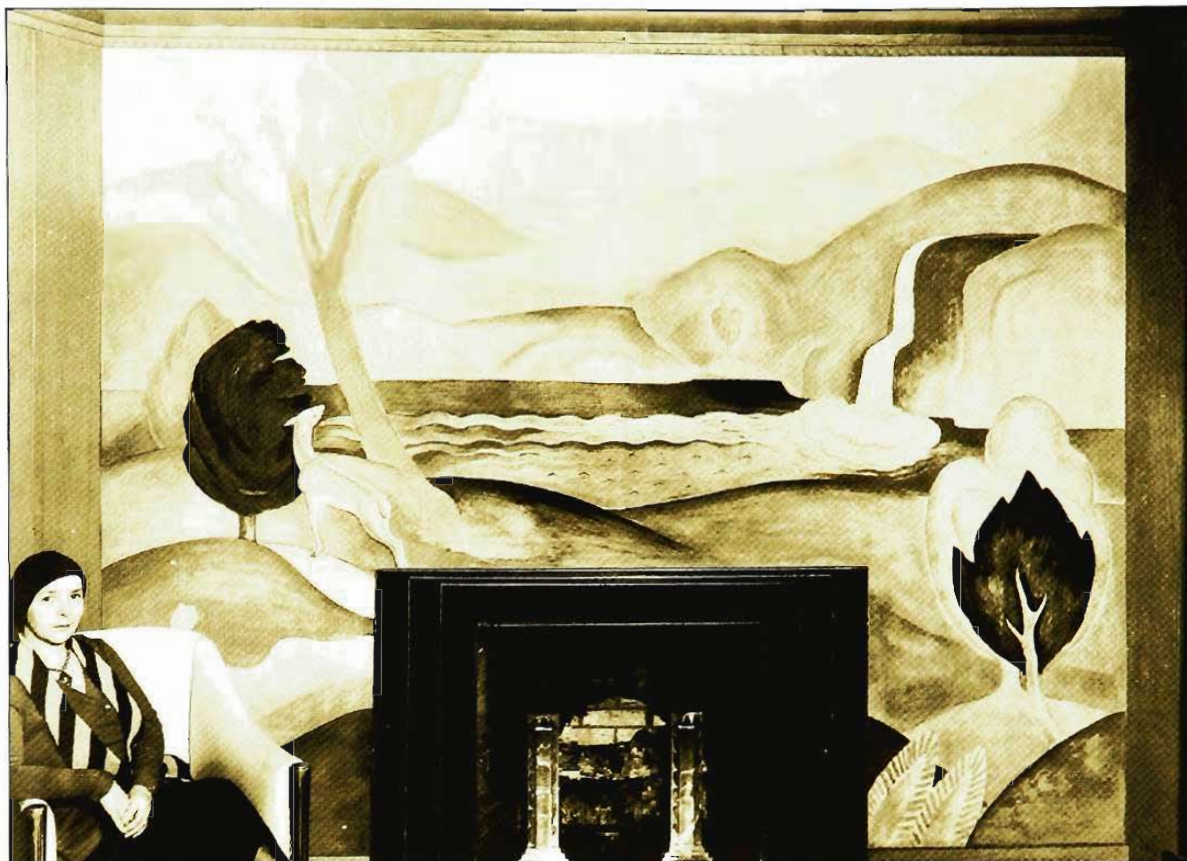
³³ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 11, 1931, 2nd sec., 3.

³⁴ Here and two paragraphs below, see *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 11, 1931, 2nd sec., p. 3. For renters, see reports of House Committee in *WCC News*, for example, Feb. 1937, p. 9.

³⁵ Cornelia H. Miller, "Regardez Les Femmes!" *Amateur Golfer and Sportsman* (Minneapolis), Nov. 1931, p. 54.

³⁶ Michels, "Alice O'Brien," 151; Miller, "Regardez Les Femmes!" 23.

³⁷ For complete lyrics see stationery embossed "Women's City Club of Saint Paul, Temporary Location, Minnesota Club Building, 4th and Washington Sts. Saint Paul, Minnesota," in WCC scrapbook; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Apr. 16, 1931, p. 9.



Elsa Jenne, artist and club member, posed by one of her vibrant Women's City Club murals, 1932

During this time, O'Brien also wrote an article for *Saint Paul Magazine* that spelled out the unique nature of the Women's City Club and its arrangements to finance construction costs:

The flexibility of our organization permits us to take part in the city life of Saint Paul when we are so inclined, but does not bind us to any interest that may become worn out or lacking in vitality; in fact, WE HAVE NO POLICY, and whatever we do . . . is decided upon by the vote of our executive committee, which is in turn elected by our members.

One year and a half ago we concluded to buy property and build a club house. . . and on or about October 15, 1931, we will move into our new building.³⁸

Heralded with much advance publicity, the clubhouse opened with three days of receptions—October 16, 17, and 18, 1931.

On the first day, Alice O'Brien, as club president, greeted the members at the door. With her were the other officers and Magnus Jenne. One approving newspaper report quoted Cornelia Morgan of the decorations committee: "We have a novel experiment in this clubhouse. . . This is the first women's club in the country to be built with modernistic ideas expressed throughout."³⁹

When the receptions were all over, several thousand men and women had toured the clubhouse. Accolades for the building and the club's leadership poured in. Harry D. Lovering of Lovering-Longbotham, the general contractors that erected buildings of varying types and designs throughout the nation, proclaimed, "St. Paul should be proud to have a structure like the Women's City Club building. . . one of the most outstanding buildings of its kind in the country."⁴⁰

Saint Paul Magazine quoted Stuart Chase, eminent economist and author, who gave the first program in the new clubhouse: "Of all the mod-

³⁸ O'Brien, "1,000 Free-Thinking Members," 25.

³⁹ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 16, 1931, p. 11. For advance publicity, see *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 11, 1931, photographique souvenir section and accompanying articles.

⁴⁰ *St. Paul Daily News*, Oct. 18, 1931, 5th sec. p. 4, Nov. 22, 1931, 1st sec. p. 7.

ern buildings that I have visited in the United States and Europe this is by far the most beautiful I have ever seen. This is the only building of which I can truly say that it has arrived!" The magazine also noted the clubhouse's "arresting, stimulating, vital" appearance and the value to various groups "of a building designed exclusively for women's activities." The article continued:

At a meeting recently where men were present the Women's City Club came in for discussion. One business man remarked: "I wish I could get into my organization the spirit the women have in that club. There's executive genius there when you find 1,000 women working without friction and putting things over as they do."

A second speaker remarked: "What you wish is that we could all have Alice O'Brien running our business as she runs that club." The first speaker sighed with regret before he replied: "Yes, but there's only one Alice O'Brien." And the best of that statement is that there isn't a member of the Club who's not willing to doff her Empress Eugenie [hat] as she murmurs a reverent assent.⁴¹

Alice O'Brien continued her strong support of the Women's City Club after its building opened, focusing her attention on reducing the construction debt, which stood at \$85,000. Among its many fund-raising strategies, the club in 1934 again sponsored a major cultural event: the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. O'Brien served as the general chair of the event, which was such a success that the club repeated its sponsorship the following year, again with O'Brien at the helm. The 1935 performance netted the club some \$8,410, reducing the debt to \$34,000.⁴²

Besides the ballet, O'Brien also chaired the committee responsible for bringing the Salzburg Opera Guild to town in December 1934. This event, as well as summer trips to Glacier National Park and the Rocky Mountains in Canada and house tours at Marine on St. Croix and White Bear Lake further reduced indebtedness to \$30,000 by January 1, 1936.⁴³

The women decided to retire the entire debt that year. By October some \$8,000 had been paid off. Then it was announced that there would be a series of six weekly luncheons entitled "The Club Marches On," featuring talks by O'Brien and other founding members. "Do You Remember" quizzes, door prizes, and committee reports augmented presentations. These special gatherings attracted the largest crowds ever to attend a Women's City Club luncheon. A replica of the clubhouse was set up in the lobby, and as each \$1,000 was raised, a new brick was added. More than \$12,000 was collected during November alone.⁴⁴

The last of the luncheons was held on December 16, 1936. Several weeks later, the *Daily News* printed the good news on a special insert page with bold headlines: "FUND RAISED! NO MORE DEBT." Elsewhere in the paper, an editorial noted: "The new club building will always be a monument to their energy and initiative and an enduring contribution to the growth, development and appearance of St. Paul. Congratulations." A small, undated clipping from the *St. Cloud Times* in the club's scrapbooks perhaps said it best of all: "The Women's Club of St. Paul has paid off its debt. Maybe we need a women for president." The final cost of the land, the building, the furniture, and the fixtures was \$255,588, equivalent to \$2.8 million in 1994.⁴⁵

The Women's City Club enjoyed the use of its building for many years. Continuing the traditions established early in the group's history, members invited singers, writers, historians, fashion designers, public figures, and other celebrities to entertain and enlighten them. The clubwomen themselves often gave recitals or lectures. The building also housed numerous parties and receptions. During World War II, the club supported home-front activities such as the American Red Cross and women's military service organizations.⁴⁶

In 1951 the women celebrated the club's thirtieth anniversary with a renovation on which it

⁴¹ "On Third Street," *Saint Paul Magazine*, Fall 1931, p. 5-6.

⁴² *History of the WCC*, 5; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Feb. 14, 1935, p. 10; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 5, 1948, p. 10B. For a list of the many committees appointed to handle the ballet, see *St. Paul Daily News*, Jan. 21, 1934, 3rd sec., p. 1-2.

⁴³ "Great Dances Carry Tickets," *St. Paul Dispatch*, Dec. 1, 1935, WCC scrapbook; Grace Flandrau, "The Women's City Club of St. Paul," *WCC News*, Feb. 1937, p. 8. On fund-raising trips, see WCC scrapbooks.

⁴⁴ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 29, 1936, p. 13, Dec. 6, 1936, 2nd sec., p. 2.

⁴⁵ *St. Paul Daily News*, Jan. 6, 1937, p. 4. Ethelwyn Power, chair of the building finance committee, reported the cost at the 1932 annual meeting; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Apr. 21, 1932, p. 6.

⁴⁶ On home-front activities, see *History of the WCC*, 5-6; for monthly programs, see *WCC Bulletin/News*.

was reported that O'Brien, then 60, worked "assiduously." Eight years later when the interior was once again renovated and the building air conditioned, O'Brien was called back to head the effort. She asked many of the early members to help her and delighted in saying that when the club needed real help, the membership called on the "old guard." In the summer of 1961, she organized a house tour in Marine on St. Croix to help pay for the improvements.⁴⁷

Alice O'Brien died in 1962. She was a realist, yet she would have been heartbroken had she seen the end of the club and the decline of the building that she and her friends had worked so hard to create. The Women's City Club became an early casualty of the declining fortunes of St. Paul as the nearby suburbs were developed. When the clubhouse was built, the city's downtown was the shopping and entertainment center for the entire eastern Twin Cities metropolitan area. In 1928, for instance, there were 63 restaurants, 60 clothing stores, 28 barber shops and beauty parlors, 24 jewelers, 24 food stores, 20 shoe stores, 20 tailor shops, 9 banks, 7 gas stations, 17 hotels, 11 music stores, 11 theaters, and 7 department stores. By the 1960s, however, most of the businesses were gone. Many of the members lived in the suburbs and desired more convenient parking near the club when they drove downtown.⁴⁸

In addition to these physical and economic conditions, the social changes occurring throughout the nation also affected life in St. Paul. Women continued to reassess their role in city life. Among other things, they joined previously all-male clubs, causing a corresponding decline in the Women's City Club, which maintained its women-only policy. Despite attempts to increase membership, the excitement and can-do attitude of the early members could not be recaptured.⁴⁹

In 1971 the group's leaders sadly decided that the Women's City Club could no longer continue to maintain the building. The sale of the clubhouse to the Minnesota Museum of Art was final-

ized in early 1972, and the proceeds were distributed among the members, who met for a time thereafter at the American Association of University Women's clubhouse. The new owner wanted a cleared building. Nearly all of the art deco furnishings and fixtures were sold at auction: built-in cabinets, special lamps, tables, chairs, and fireplace andirons. Sold too were the new draperies, immaculately maintained kitchen utensils, and the club's monogrammed plates and dishes. Later, the structure was marred when a large window was driven through the front facade to admit natural light into the director's new office.⁵⁰

In 1978 the St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission designated the Women's City Club building a city historic site, and in 1982 it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as "one of St. Paul's earliest and finest examples of the Art Deco (Moderne) style." Three years later, the museum's board of directors initiated some restorations to the Jenne Building, as it came to be known. The window was filled in and the damage repaired. The institution also mounted a small exhibit featuring photographs of the clubhouse and a few pieces of original furniture. In 1994, however, the structure's future is uncertain. The art museum holds its exhibitions and events elsewhere. The building, used for storage, is closed to the public.⁵¹

The Women's City Club was always more than a clubhouse. Unquestionably, Alice O'Brien's vision, leadership, and personality were essential in developing the club and its building. Yet what made the group special was the exuberant spirit of women working together on the many projects they felt were important to themselves, their city, and their nation. O'Brien and her friends took great satisfaction in their club's accomplishments. For more than 40 years, many in St. Paul found the Women's City Club to be a place of delight and fulfillment. Times have changed, but it is interesting to ponder what these women might have done in today's world.

⁴⁷ *WCC News*, Jan. 1951, p. 3; personal recollections.

⁴⁸ Michels, "Alice O'Brien," 136; Larry Millett, "1928 Map Shows Golden Era of Downtown," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Apr. 11, 1993, p. 1-2E.

⁴⁹ WCC, membership list 1955-67, in Adelaide E. Loomis Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Dec. 5, 1971, Family Life sec., p. 3.

⁵⁰ WCC, Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting, Aug. 1, 1972, and flier, "Auction . . . Saturday Mar. 25, 1972," both in Loomis Papers.

⁵¹ National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, and Entries in the National Register of Historic Places, 1982, copies in State Historic Preservation Office, MHS. The Alice M. O'Brien Foundation paid for the building repair.

The illustrations on p. 54, 62, 63, 64, and 65 are courtesy the author; all others are in MHS collections.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).