

IN THE DECADE OR SO AFTER WORLD WAR II, before suburbia and misguided attempts at urban renewal began to suck the life out of it, downtown St. Paul could still be a lively place—even after dark. This scene from Thursday, September 4, 1952, shows a bustling Seventh Street (now badly malled—pun intended—into the dreary Seventh Place) looking west from Wabasha. People crowd the sidewalks, theater marquees and other signs light up the night, and there’s even a policeman keeping the traffic moving. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this *Pioneer Press* photograph represents a typical Thursday in the early 1950s.

What drew the crowds was a promotion labeled “family night” designed to bring more people to what newspapers liked to call the Loop. The promotion offered free bus rides to downtown between 7 and 9 P.M. (Buses had only recently replaced streetcars on Seventh.) Riders also received a number, and if it turned out to be “lucky,” the holder got a free ticket to any of downtown’s numerous movie theaters.

The two largest and most lavish theaters, the Paramount and the Orpheum, were among the chief attrac-

tions near this corner. The Paramount, built as the Capitol in 1920, was the city’s first true movie palace, offering 2,500 seats, a gracious lobby, and a wildly ornate terracotta facade pasted onto one corner of the Hamm Building. Like so many other downtown theaters, the Paramount died a slow death and finally closed in 1965. The façade and interior were then demolished. The somewhat smaller and more restrained Orpheum, opened in 1917 as the New Palace, still stands, but today only its lobby is used for live theater while its big auditorium stands vacant, awaiting an angel with deep pockets.

About all that remains of the world shown here is the Walgreen’s Drug Store that still, albeit remodeled, anchors the corner. While downtown St. Paul has become a bit livelier in recent years, it’s unlikely that the corner of Seventh and Wabasha will ever again be the center of the city’s nightlife.

—LARRY MILLETT

Larry Millett recently retired after 30 years as a reporter and editor at the St. Paul Pioneer Press. He is the author of Lost Twin Cities, Twin Cities Then and Now, and five mystery novels featuring Sherlock Holmes.



Grand Army of the Republic Hall *Litchfield, Meeker County*

AT THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR, hundreds of thousands of soldiers returned home to an uncertain future. Although Confederate veterans expected little reward, Union victors anticipated at least modest compensation. When the parades and speeches were over, however, soldiers discovered that, in the government's view, "thank you" sufficed. Veterans felt otherwise, especially since unemployment was obscenely high. Some vets responded by rioting. Others organized.*

Among the groups formed to lobby for soldiers was the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), established in Decatur, Illinois, in 1866. As its membership grew, the group successfully pressured Congress to provide pensions to veterans. Besides its political purpose, the GAR sought to "preserve fraternal feelings, aid needy or disabled comrades, and provide for support and education of soldiers' orphans and maintenance of their widows." It was also a patriotic voice, encouraging respect for the Constitution.

Membership in the GAR waned in the late 1870s, then increased to about 230,000 in the 1880s when soldiers realized that Congress was again ignoring them. By mid-decade, when Litchfield vets established Frank Daggett Post No. 35, the fraternity had become the nation's dominant veterans' group. Daggett, a former lieutenant in the Sixth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, was also a local newspaper publisher who had helped bring the GAR to Minnesota.



MHS COLLECTIONS

Founded in 1883, the Litchfield chapter built a meeting hall two years later on Marshall Avenue, just north of the business district. Since the GAR would die with its last member, the Litchfield group ensured its immortality with this arresting building. About 28 feet by 60 feet, the cream-colored brick structure resembles a miniature medieval castle complete with turrets. An arched entrance punctuates its dominant central tower.

With wonderful foresight, the Daggett post deeded its monument to the city. In return, Litchfield has maintained the structure since the GAR chapter faded into history in 1949.

Most of the country's GAR halls are now gone, but, thankfully, the castle in Litchfield, 65 miles west of

Minneapolis, remains. Operated as a museum by the Meeker County Historical Society, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.

—DENIS GARDNER

Denis Gardner is writing a book featuring many of Minnesota's National Register properties.

*Sources: John J. Hackett, "G.A.R. Hall," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 1974, State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; Mary R. Dearing, *Veterans in Politics: The Story of the G.A.R.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1952); "Grand Army of the Republic Hall and Meeker County Historical Society Museum," pamphlet, copy in "G.A.R. Hall" file, SHPO.



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