

Open House *Journal*

Meeting at the Doorstep

On the snowy afternoon when translator Fong Heu and I first knocked on Pang Toua Yang's door, he thought he had won something. Actually, we were there to tell him that his house would be the subject of an upcoming Minnesota Historical Society exhibit. *Open House* will tell the story of a single, existing dwelling—Pang Toua's on St. Paul's East Side—and the people who have lived within its walls, from the German immigrants who built it in 1888 to the Italians, African Americans, and now Hmong who have followed. The exhibit will be at the Minnesota History Center—Pang Toua's house will remain un-

BENJAMIN FILENE

touched—but we wanted his support and feared he would tell us the Hmong equivalent of “Hit the road.”

Instead, Pang Toua told us that he and his wife, May Vang, had recently become citizens. The previous week they had voted for the first time, helping to elect Mee Moua, the first Hmong legislator in America. Was it their ballot that had led us to their house, they wondered? “They think this is how American democracy works,” smiled Fong after translating their question. Awkwardly I ex-

plained that no, their house had been chosen because of its location in St. Paul's history-rich Railroad Island neighborhood and because, by chance, we had a 1925 photograph of it in our library collection. I waited apprehensively for Pang Toua to say thanks but no thanks. Instead, he led us into his house and, even more generously, shared with us his life story—a story of family, farming, war, and forced migration, of Old World and new.

At a glance, Pang Toua's house looks nothing like its 1925 incarnation. The single-family home that pharmacist Albert Schumacher had



Three-story Victorian house at 470 Hopkins Street in St. Paul's Railroad Island neighborhood, with members of the D'Aloia and Cocchiarella families, 1925

built at 470 Hopkins Street in 1888 was a duplex by 1910; today, it's a triplex, and Pang Toua and his family enter through a side door. The spacious front porch shown in the photo has long been enclosed. The third floor, where Italian families cured sausages, is gone, destroyed in a 1970 fire. And every remnant of Victorian ornament, flourish, and gewgaw on the facade has disappeared, replaced by smooth pink siding.

The house's interior furnishings, too, would seem foreign to the German and Italian immigrants who lived there before, but perhaps the stories these objects tell of relocation and adaptation would resonate. On the wall are two framed documents—Pang Toua's U.S. citizenship certificate and a record of his service in the CIA-supported army of General Vang Pao in Laos. In 1975, after the American army withdrew from Laos in defeat, Pang Toua and May were forced to flee with their parents and their six young children. As they tried to escape into the forest, the Communist Pathet Lao troops opened fire on them. Pang Toua and May surrendered, but their parents did not emerge from the woods. Presumably they were killed. After their capture, Pang Toua, May, and their children spent four years on a Pathet Lao work farm and two more in a Thai refugee camp before the family faced a choice: stay in the camp—with its continual food shortages and cramped conditions—until it closed, return to Laos and face likely persecution, or go to America. Reluctantly they left their homeland, arriving in Minnesota in 1986.

Settling in St. Paul has been a mixed blessing for the family. May finds life easier here. She and Pang Toua grow vegetables in their garden and in a community farm plot, but the work of putting food on the table

is not as taxing as it was on the farm in Laos. Pang Toua and May's children have embraced America. Their oldest daughter, Mee Yang, has become an entrepreneur. Tired of people pronouncing her name as if it rhymes with "sang" instead of "sung," she changed it to Elizabeth Young. She now owns 14 properties, including the house on Hopkins Street, part of which she rents to her parents. When I meet her, she teases me for owning "only" one home.



470 Hopkins in 2002

Pang Toua himself is struggling to navigate between American and traditional Hmong cultures. He tells me he would be happy to help on the exhibit project because "In Laos, I was a useful person—my own farmer, my own blacksmith. Here I can't do anything." Compounding his feeling of dislocation, he recently suffered a terrible accident. He had a dream that some children were poking a bee's nest with a stick and that the bees swarmed out and stung his whole body. The next week, he recounts, he was grilling in his backyard. His bottle of lighter fluid had a hole in it, causing flames to shoot up and burn him severely. To Pang Toua, the dream and the accident are connected. And so he has consulted both western doctors and Hmong shamans to treat the injuries he suffered. The first thing one sees upon entering the Hopkins Street house is

a shaman shrine. "If it's a disease," Pang Toua tells me, "then doctors can cure it, but if it's spiritual, then you need shamans."

Pang Toua and May's tale is only one of many wrenching, buoyant, comic, and tragic stories we've uncovered in researching the 50 families who passed through 470 Hopkins Street between 1888 and 2003. Strikingly different in their details, these life stories share a rich and idiosyncratic humanity that could never be scripted. As we delve into census, birth, marriage, and death records, page through faded family photo albums, and talk to anyone who might have known someone who once lived in this house, we are gaining a sense of the texture of history and of home: how ordinary people build their lives within four walls and within circles of family, ethnic group, neighborhood, city, and nation. The house has become a vessel of dreams, a stage for successes, setbacks, tragedies and transformations. 470 Hopkins Street has led us into worlds richer than we could have imagined—worlds where the boundaries between Old World and New World blur, where "American" takes on layers of meaning that transcend any dictionary definition, and where a knock on the door can open up conversations that reach across cultures, geography, and time. □

Both images are in MHS collections; the 2002 photo is by Eric Mortenson, MHS.

Benjamin Filene is an exhibit developer at the Minnesota Historical Society. This essay about developing the exhibit Open House, which opens at the Minnesota History Center in 2005, is excerpted from a longer article in the April 2003 issue of the online journal Common-Place.



Secretary Nicolay's Souvenir Album, 1862

BONNIE WILSON
Introduction by Richard Moe

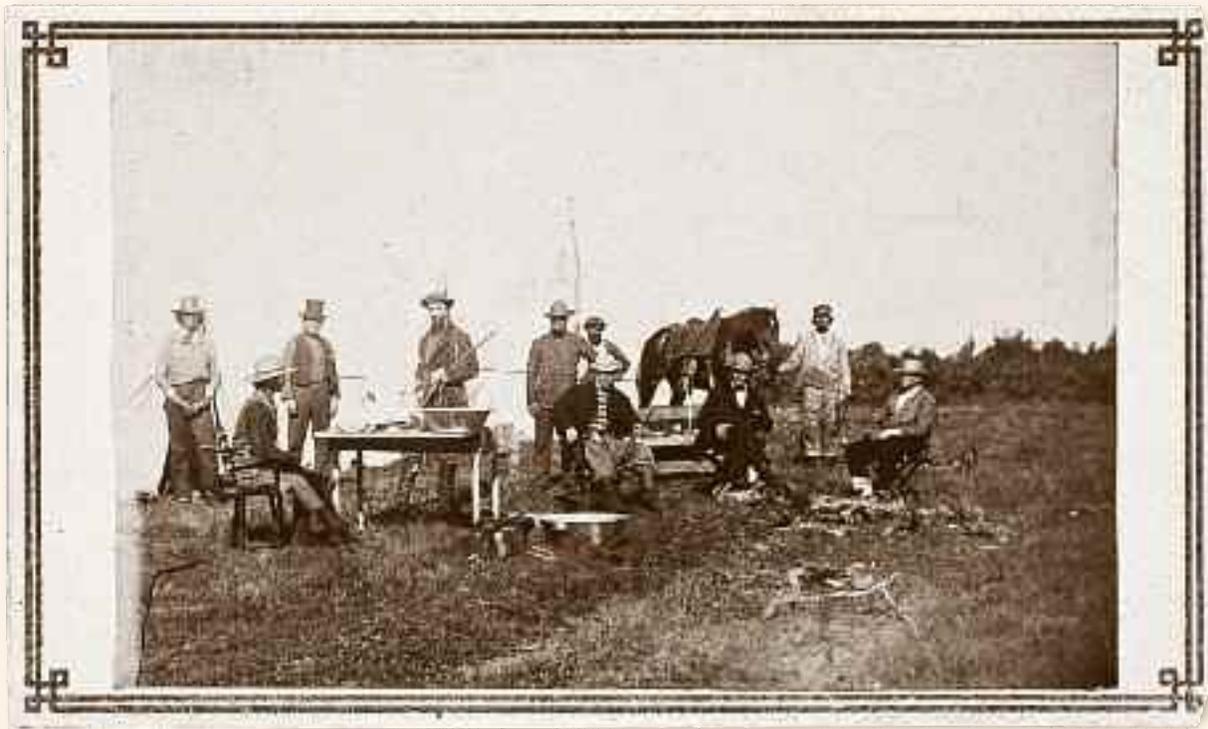
My mother, Virginia Palmer Moe, had a lifelong love affair with photography. She had been taking pictures for as long as anyone could remember, sometimes developing, printing, and framing them herself, always ensuring that the family archive was complete and up to date. At the age of 60 she turned professional and during the next two decades helped pioneer a style—color outdoor candid portraits of children and families—that is so popular today. Some of her early award-winning works are now in the photography collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Along the way, she became an avid collector of daguerreotypes and other historical images. She methodically compiled the most complete collection of the works of Edward Gurney, a very significant contemporary of Mathew Brady. That collection now resides at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

A native Minnesotan, she acquired important images of Minnesota history, and many of these are now in the Society's permanent collection. She and I, in fact, shared an interest in Minnesota history, and it was because she knew how drawn I was to Abraham Lincoln that she

purchased the remarkable album of Joel Whitney images displayed on these pages. This album of Lincoln's secretary John G. Nicolay's 1862 expedition to Minnesota was one of her most wonderful gifts to me, and it has been my privilege to own it for the better part of two decades. It belongs, however, at a place where it can be properly cared for and appreciated by a wide audience. For those reasons, and to honor my mother's remarkable career, I have given it to the Minnesota Historical Society.

—RICHARD MOE



Members of the treaty party encamped at Big Lake, including central characters such as Nicolay, fourth from the left with his rifle, and support staff such as the man holding the reins of the horse at right. It is clear that the expedition carried only basic supplies, such as portable chairs and tin pans. (Third image in the album)

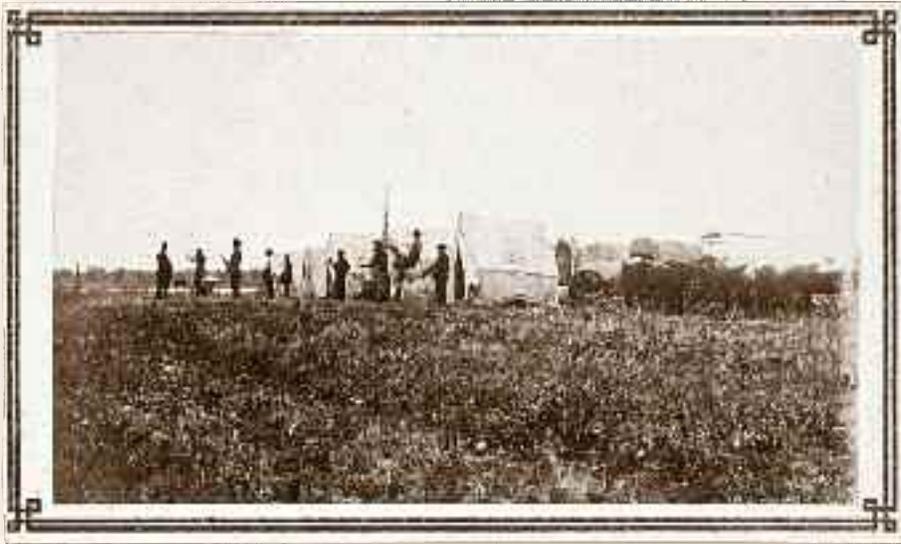
As tumultuous times swirled around them, 15 men left St. Paul in August 1862 to make a treaty with the Red Lake Ojibwe. None among them guessed that they were about to enter the storm of the Dakota War, Minnesota's tragic clash between new settlers and native peoples.

Abraham Lincoln's personal secretary, John George Nicolay, had come to St. Paul on August 9 to investigate and report back to his president on the precarious Indian situation. Annuity payments to Minnesota tribes had been delayed, causing great hardship and anger. Shortly after arriving, Nicolay joined the party of

treaty personnel led by U.S. Indian Commissioner William P. Dole. The group, which included Senator Morton S. Wilkinson, Superintendent of Indian Affairs Clark W. Thompson, A. S. H. White of the Indian Bureau, and a photographer, intended to meet with the Red Lake and Pembina Ojibwe near the Red River Valley. The men left St. Paul on August 18 but got only as far as St. Cloud when

they were urgently called back. The Dakota had attacked the Lower Sioux Agency 85 miles to the southwest that very day. "The dispatches say that the Sioux believe the party going to make the treaty have their annuity money and intend giving it to their ancient enemies, the Chippewas, and have sent out a war party to intercept and massacre the Commissioner and party," the *St. Cloud*

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Overview of the encampment at Big Lake near St. Cloud showing nine members of the party, their tents, wagons, and horses. The edge of Big Lake appears as a distant white pool on the left, behind Nicolay, who is posed with his rifle raised. (Second image)



The main figures in the album, William P. Dole (left) and John G. Nicolay (right), pose by a tent with one of several dogs that accompanied the expedition. Perhaps the travelers originally contemplated some hunting. (Fourth image)

Democrat reported. The treaty group hastily returned to St. Paul.¹

It is extraordinary that these colliding circumstances have given us a visual record of Secretary Nicolay's visit. The rare album recently donated to the Minnesota Historical Society shows Nicolay encamped at Big Lake near St. Cloud and posing at various tourist locations around Minneapolis and St. Paul. Most visitors to Minnesota at that time did not

have the notoriety or the means to record their travels in multiple views in a keepsake album. Typical tourists purchased ready-made scenes at a bookstore or photographer's gallery. But Nicolay and Dole were not everyday visitors. They were nationally important personages whose comings and goings were reported with fanfare in the local papers.

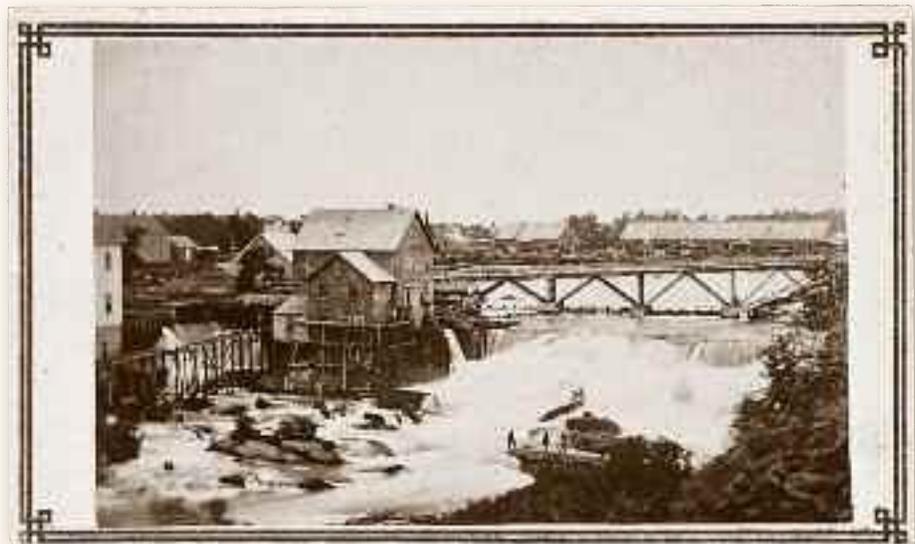
The album shown here contains 12 "carte de visite" views, playing-

card-sized photos printed by the albumen process. Cartes de visite, most popular from the 1860s through the 1880s, were small so that they could be easily sent, carried by soldiers, or left with friends. Marked on the back with the maker's name, most were collected in small albums with windowed pages. All of the Nicolay images have premier St. Paul photographer Joel Whitney's mark, although he may not have been the



Fifteen men are shown in the most complete record of who set out for the Red River. The expedition may have included additional support staff, but there are no detailed reports telling how many actually traveled. Nicolay, balancing his rifle on his shoulder, is on horseback, while Dole stands at far right. The men of Native American heritage were probably guides and translators. (Seventh image)

Three men perched on a rock look over the east channel of St. Anthony Falls and its flour mills on Hennepin Island. Nicolay is on the right with the gun. (Eighth image)



photographer, as he also published views taken by others. Only two albums of this trip were made. The second, identical but for one image, is preserved at the Lincoln Museum in Fort Wayne, Indiana.²

Because Nicolay is featured in most of the photos, it may be that he commissioned a photographer to follow him on the expedition and to record him sightseeing around St. Paul and Minneapolis. When

magnified, these views reveal Nicolay posing at St. Anthony Falls and again at the nearby Chalybeate Springs. The distant views of Minnehaha Falls and Fort Snelling show people, too, one of whom may be Nicolay.

Although two of the photos are inscribed, "In camp, Big Lake Minn. Aug. 24, 1862," they must have been taken sometime between August 18 and 22, since the party was back in St. Paul from August 22 to 27. On

August 27 it left for Fort Ripley up the Mississippi River "with a mounted escort of 25 picked men" to meet with Hole-in-the-Day and his followers. This time, the mission was peacekeeping; it was feared that the Ojibwe might start another rebellion against the settlers and the government.³ They didn't, and based on this trip, Nicolay published an engaging description of Hole-in-the-Day in the January 1863 *Harper's Monthly Magazine*.



LEFT: A party of tourists at Chalybeate Springs near St. Anthony Falls includes Nicolay, third from right. Chalybeate means iron-bearing, and the springs were thought to have medicinal properties.

Secretary Nicolay, who had some health problems, may have been hoping for help. (Tenth image)

RIGHT: Studio portrait of the Dakota leader Little Crow, a major figure in the Dakota War of 1862.

As the twelfth and final image, it is a fitting coda to Secretary Nicolay's souvenir album.

The 12 small images in their compact 4 x 5¼-inch leather-covered album provide an important visual document of a watershed time in Minnesota history. They can be viewed on the Society's Visual Resources Database: <http://collections.mnhs.org/visualresources/>. We are exceedingly proud to add this generous gift to the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. □

Notes

1. *St. Cloud Democrat*, Aug. 21, 1862, p. 2; *St. Paul Daily Press*, Aug. 24, 1862, p. 1.

2. The views in the Minnesota Historical Society album are: 1) Camp at Big Lake, seven men and four tents, similar to photo 2; 2) Camp at Big Lake, nine men and four tents; 3) Camp at Big Lake; 4) Dole and Nicolay in front of a tent; 5) Camp at Big Lake, ten men, four horses, two dogs, similar to photo 7; 6) Looking east at Fort Snelling, wood barracks on the left, group of people under a tree in center; 7) Camp at Big Lake; 8) St. Anthony Falls; 9) View of Big Lake and shoreline, five men on a raft on the lake; 10) Nicolay and others at Chalybeate Springs; 11) Minnehaha Falls, with a small group of people overlooking the top of the falls; 12) Studio portrait of Little Crow. Numbers 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 10 appear above.

The views in the Lincoln Museum are the same, except for numbers 9 and 12.

Number 9, the raft photo, has one man on shore and four on the raft, although the shoreline is the same. Number 12 is a studio portrait of Hole-in-the-Day. In addition, many of the views in the Indiana album are shifted slightly to the right or left, indicating that they might have been taken with a stereograph camera. Thanks to Cindy Van Horn of the Lincoln Museum for providing detailed information.

3. *St. Paul Daily Press*, August 28, p. 1.





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