

Camera Club



“HOLD IT, HONEY.” Snap! “Good, I think I’ve got you.” Thus, another exposure was made at a picnic of Minneapolis amateur photographers 65 years ago. Taken on the eve of America’s entry into World War II, this image tells us much about the popular camera-club movement that was sweeping the nation at the time.

During the 1930s and ‘40s, thousands of amateurs banded together in local camera clubs to further their own photographic skills and to mingle with others of similar interest. The clubs usually met monthly for demonstrations and other educational activities and also organized social events like this outing to Taylor’s Falls. Most American cities had at least one camera club, but the Twin Cities boasted more than twenty. Among them was the Minneapolis Photographic Society, to which Monroe P. Killy, the maker of this picture, belonged.

Killy snapped this image of an unidentified club member wielding her medium-format camera on a wooden tripod. Rather than using small-format, hand-held cameras, most enthusiasts demonstrated how serious they were by using relatively substantial equipment, as seen here. In addition, they processed their own film, handcrafted their own prints, and carefully mounted them for club-sponsored exhibitions and competitions—all as an outlet for their creative energies.

Women began to infiltrate camera clubs at the turn of the twentieth century, and by the late 1930s they were



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common on the scene. In 1938, for instance, three of the four officers of the Minneapolis Photographic Society were women, one of whom could well have been the subject of Killy’s image. Unfortunately, we’ll never know who the subject of *her* picture was.

—CHRISTIAN A. PETERSON

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Prospect Park Water Tower Minneapolis



USEFUL STRUCTURES do not always have to look utilitarian. Case in point: the Prospect Park water tower. Familiarly known as “the Witch’s Hat,” it has become the neighborhood’s architectural mascot not for its function but for its singularity. More than once over the years it has also galvanized neighborhood pride and determination on its own behalf.

Erected in 1914 on Tower Hill, the highest elevation in Minneapolis, the tower was built to increase water pressure in the area and thereby enhance firefighting efforts. The functional structure, however, was given a whimsical appearance by city engineer Frederick William Cappelen. To the delight of generations of Minnesotans to come, he topped the building with a fanciful brimmed “hat” of green ceramic tile, and hence its nickname was born.

The Witch’s Hat and the Prospect Park neighborhood have enjoyed a love affair of sorts over the years. From the beginning, the tower and surrounding parkland attracted neighbors, young and old, who picnicked under shade trees in summer and sledded down the hill’s icy slopes in winter. The tower’s observation deck provided spectacular views of the Minneapolis and St. Paul skylines, and the building itself inspired many artists who captured its one-of-a-kind profile in charcoal and watercolor.

The Witch’s Hat ceased to function as a water tower in 1952, but it remained an esteemed neighborhood symbol, worthy of defense. In 1955 when the city announced plans to demolish the tower following a lightning strike, the community mobilized. “Spurred on by eleven members of the Prospect Park Blue Birds (a junior organization of the Campfire Girls),”* neighbors fought city hall and saved their tower.

* Sources: Prospect Park History Committee, *Under the Witch’s Hat: A Prospect Park East River Road History* (Minneapolis: Prospect Park East River Road Improvement Association, 2003), quote, p. 109; Christine A. Curran and Charlene K. Roise, Prospect Park Water Tower and Tower Hill Park, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1997, State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota Historical Society.

Today the observation deck is open only one day a year, which is celebrated with an ice-cream social. The rest of the time, the Witch’s Hat quietly communes with the dog walkers, strolling lovers, and frolicking children that come to visit, just like any other resident of the neighborhood.

—JANE KING HESSION

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Gathering at the water tower, March 1937





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