

THE NUSHKA CLUB

“There was an enthusiastic determination on all sides to get all the fun possible out of tobogganing, snow shoeing, and other out of door winter sports.”

SUCH WAS the prevailing spirit at the annual meeting of the Nushka Toboggan Club of St. Paul on November 2, 1889, as reported in the *St. Anthony Hill Graphic*. It was in this same spirit that the club — and some sixty other similar winter clubs — were formed in the mid-1880s. Originally their chief purpose was to promote and take part in the St. Paul Winter Carnival, first held in 1886 in response to mischievous rumors that Minnesota was unfit for human habitation during the winter. Of all the winter clubs, however, the Nushka Club was “the most fashionable,” wrote Alice Montfort Dunn in her reminiscences, and it was the one which she joined in the winter of 1892–93. Certainly its roster of members reads like a “who’s who” for St. Paul of the late nineteenth century.¹

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¹*St. Anthony Hill Graphic*, November 8, 1889, p. 1; unpublished reminiscences of Alice Montfort Dunn, owned by her son, James Taylor Dunn, of St. Paul and Marine; Nushka Club album, 1890, n.d., n.p.; also albums for other years in the audio-visual division of the Minnesota Historical Society.

NUSHKA CLUB members posed on and around coaches in front of the ice palace (barely visible) for their 1887 group picture. The club emblem is at left.





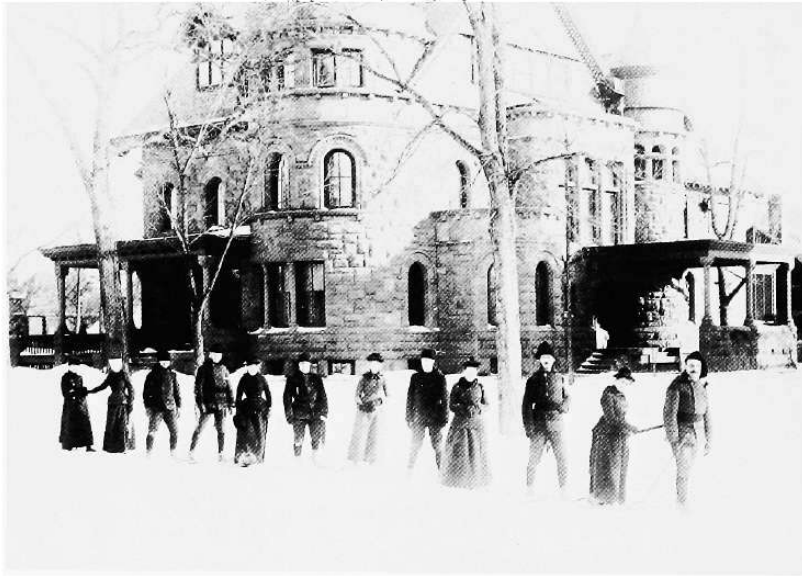
THE CLUB provided distractions other than winter sports, as the group portrait of 1886 (above) suggests. But, after all, the weather did not always co-operate, and even the most ardent sportsmen could not toboggan far on such barren ground. At left, looking a little like frosted gnomes, some Nushkas slid down a bank during a tramp on February 22, 1889; the temperature was recorded as fifteen degrees below zero. Below, high spirits prevailed over low temperatures during this winter walk.





UNDETERRED BY temperatures reaching nineteen below zero, these young people tramp along on snowshoes, probably in Merriam Park. The line of outdoor enthusiasts stretches to the very horizon. Below, club members enjoy a turn on their ice rink on Summit Avenue. In the background is what appears to be the Burbank-Livingston-Griggs House. "Down Went McGinty as usual," was the gibe printed on the picture at left, no doubt aimed at one of the more sure-footed (?) members.





The Nushkas apparently succeeded in their determination to have fun, if the photographs on these pages are any indication. Fortunately, the club members recorded their antics, thus preserving a lighthearted footnote to the history of that period. These photographs are from several albums that club members donated through the years to the Minnesota Historical Society and are now part of the audio-visual division's collection of albums.

The Nushka Club is said to have derived its name from an Ojibway (Chippewa) exclamation meaning "look!" It was formally organized on December 21, 1885. Its founders adopted a polar bear emblem and uniforms of red and black "blanket suits" with the bear insignia on them.² The group's chief amusements during its first winter, according to its history, were "tobogganing on the slide at Crocus Hill and attending various ceremonies, parades, etc., incident to the first Winter Carnival, to promote the interests of which the Club had been organized." Its membership grew rapidly, and its spheres of amusement were enlarged. In the winter of 1888-89 a skating rink on the corner of Western and Summit avenues "furnished a new winter sport and tobogganing was neglected."³

As the photographs indicate, the Nushkas' activities were not limited to the outdoors. In the winter of 1886-87 they held their first Washington's Birthday celebration, an event that was to become a tradition, and they began their informal "Saturday Nights." The club "made rapid progress as a social organization," according to its history. One such gala occasion was reported by the *St. Anthony Hill Graphic* on February 28, 1890:

"On Saturday afternoon the Nushkas enjoyed a wildly merry afternoon and evening in honor of the Father of our Country. In the afternoon the club was photographed in uniform, and enjoyed a snow shoe tramp. In the evening numbers gathered in full force at the club room, where an informal entertainment was applauded to the echo. . . . As to the fun and frolic, from first to last, no adequate idea of it can be given in print, and any attempt might give an entirely erroneous

²Roy Swanson, *Minnesota Book of Days*, 118 (St. Paul, 1949).

³Nushka Club album, 1890, n.p. (both quotes).



FOR A WHILE, the Chauncey Griggs house at 476 Summit was the Nushka Clubhouse (shown at far left). The clubhouse library was lavishly Victorian; in this photograph it appears to be decorated with garlands, probably for some festivity. Above, what could be more appropriate for a Washington's Birthday celebration in 1890 than Russian dancing? Costume parties and masquerades were a favorite entertainment, judging by photographs in the albums. Indoor gatherings began to supplant outdoor activities in importance and "brilliancy." The Nushka Club was soon in a decline from which it would not recover.

impression. Enough to say, that it was a carnival of harmless hilarity, among friends."

In addition to the celebration of Washington's Birthday and informal parties, Nushkas began to observe St. Valentine's Day and to hold a New Year's Eve "bal masque." They also started to extend their amusements beyond the winter season. In the summers of 1888 and 1889, "many coaching parties were enjoyed" to the tennis tournament, to the races, to Minneapolis, and to Lake Elmo, "and the first step [was] taken toward graduation from a winter club," noted the history. A photograph in one of the albums shows a party of Nushkas boarding a train to take part in a regatta in Duluth in July, 1890, which the sailboat, the "Nushka," won.

The *St. Anthony Hill Graphic* reported on November 7, 1890, that "The club has secured the [Chauncey W.] Griggs house [at 476 Summit]⁴ for the winter and will soon open the house with the usual festivities." The group apparently had other meeting places, too. One

⁴The house still stands, although it has been somewhat altered, most notably by the addition of a large skylight on the north side facing Summit Avenue.

album contains a photograph of the members in front of a house on Western Avenue. "Carpenter's Lookout," where Summit and Ramsey meet, was a rendezvous, as was Woodruff's, a hotel at 2050 St. Anthony Avenue.

The Nushka historian wrote regarding the 1888-89 season: "Notwithstanding the abandonment of the Carnival this year, the *Nushka Club* thrived and advanced with great rapidity as a social club." (Unseasonably warm weather over the next two winters forced cancellation of the winter festivities. The carnival was held in 1886, 1887, and 1888 and then in only four other years until 1937, when it was revived and has continued to the present.) In the fall of 1889, the historian's account continued, "applications were so numerous it is deemed advisable to increase the membership somewhat, which was done to a moderate degree." For the 1889-90 season, the history records:

"Nushkas have this winter kept up at least a semblance of the Club's former aim — winter sports — by an occasional tramp and establishment of a temporary skating rink, but with the advent of a Club House the rationale of the *Nushka Club* appears to have metamorphosed. We are crystalizing into a social club, and if the transmigratory condition of the past few years continues *Nushkas* may look forward to a time in the near future when blanket suits will be relegated to the old clothes basket, and the polar bear become a symbol of forgotten lore."

The writer sounded pleased at these developments, but others were not. The *St. Anthony Hill Graphic* rebuked the group in its April 25, 1890, issue:

"The Nushkas have the hearty good wishes of the entire community. They won admiration when first their well muscled men, and bright eyed rosy cheeked ladies dared challenge Minnesota winter, Jack Frost, and the King of the Winter Carnival in out of door sport. It will be a thing to be regretted if the increasing brilliancy of the club's indoor gatherings leads them to forget the leading features of the club's first seasons. When the Nushkas first began to make out of door winter sport fashionable in St. Paul they inaugurated a noble undertaking. They have done for the health not only of their own members, but of hundreds of imitators among the young people of the city and state, what no doctors nor elaborate teachings . . . could do. They made good health popular."

Laments notwithstanding, the club apparently did "metamorphose" into a social club. Lacking its original purpose, or perhaps much purpose at all, it gradually died away around the turn of the century.

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