

# Nelle Palmer

OF STILLWATER

Entertainer  
and  
Innkeeper

Patricia Condon Johnston

NELLE PALMER came to fame as an innkeeper. She was the flamboyant grande dame at the Lowell Inn, Stillwater's "Mount Vernon of the West," which she guided to the top of Duncan Hines's list of prize-winning hostleries. And a flair for the dramatic, acquired in her earliest years, counted strongly in her extraordinary success. Since childhood, Nelle had been a professional performer.

Nelle (pronounced "Nell," though her birth certificate says "Nellie") was born June 27, 1893, in Madison, Minnesota, to Christian David and Augusta Bertram Obrecht. She was the ninth child in a family that included ten children, evenly divided between boys and girls. At the age of five she was playing cornet in the family band.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The author is especially grateful to Jon Willand of North Hennepin Community College for help in locating several sources concerning the Obrecht family. Birth certificate for Nellie Obrecht, Lac qui Parle County District Court, Madison; birth records, Obrecht family Bible, now in the possession of family members in La Crosse, Wis.

<sup>2</sup>*Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, June 25, 1899, part 3, p. 6; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, February 15, 1925, p. 9; Julie Obrecht, Nelle's sister, to Patricia C. Johnston, June 9, 1979, in possession of author; Obrecht family Bible; Paul W. Maatz, clerk of courts, Lac qui Parle County, to Patricia C. Johnston, July 10, 1979, in possession of author.

<sup>3</sup>*Sunday Tribune*, June 25, 1899, part 3, p. 6; *Lac qui Parle Press* (Lac qui Parle), July 10, 1885, February 26, 1886, both on p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>*Western Guard* (Madison), August 31, 1892, p. 1; Jessie Ash Arndt, "Couple Build Reputation for Minnesota," in *Christian Science Monitor*, September 29, 1952, women's sec., p. 6.

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Both her parents were immigrants. Her father, Christian, had been born in Switzerland; his mother brought him to this country — to Dane County, Wisconsin — when he was four years old. Augusta Bertram was 15 when she left her native Berlin to move to Milwaukee. The couple was married September 23, 1878, and set up housekeeping in Red Wing, Minnesota. The first of their children, a son named for his father, was born there the following year. Two more boys, Arnold and Edward, were born at Ortonville in 1882 and 1883. In time for the birth of their fourth child, Leonard, the family moved south in 1884 to Madison in Lac qui Parle County, where the remaining six children arrived during the next 11 years.<sup>2</sup>

Christian was a barber by trade and also an accomplished musician. His mother had taught him to sing and read music as a child. In addition, he had studied violin, band instruments, and composition. In July, 1885, a Lac qui Parle newspaper noted that he was a member of the newly organized Madison string band, which provided music for a Fourth of July dance "to the entire satisfaction of those who attended." (The next spring Christian's addition of a bathtub to his barbershop also made the newspapers.)<sup>3</sup>

As his family continued to grow, Christian became hard pressed to feed his brood by cutting hair. In 1892 he was selling musical instruments, music, and jewelry, presumably while still barbering. At the same time he taught his children each to play at least two musical instruments. When Obrecht's business failed in the late 1890s, the family took to the road, becoming a professional concert company that toured the Middle West. Barely old enough for kindergarten, Nelle was already a trouper.<sup>4</sup>

Numerous newspaper clippings, gleaned from both small-town and big-city presses, chronicle the Obrecht group's long years in show business. Nelle appeared on



*THE OBRECHT Juvenile Concert Company of Madison about 1890; Nelle is the third from the right, holding a baritone horn.*

stage with family members in a wide variety of programs, mostly musical, for 30 years. "The first company we had was strictly musical," her mother told a reporter in 1925. "I accompanied Mr. Obrecht and acted as ticket seller. When not on the stage I was with the little ones behind the scenes, and at one time I had seven of them to take care of." The reviews they received leave no doubt about their exceptional talent: "The Obrecht family consisting of seven children, the eldest only fourteen years of age, and the youngest five years, forms one of the most remarkable groups ever gathered together," declared one Twin Cities paper. "This is an aggregation of musical prodigies [*sic*] which is not equaled. All the family down to the youngest are assiduous students of music and it is claimed have no equals, age considered, in solo, duet, trio, quartet, quintet and sextet work."<sup>5</sup>

The group, billed first as "Obrecht's Juvenile Concert Company" (led by "Professor" C. D. Obrecht), evolved over the years into "The Obrecht Stock Company" (led by "Colonel" C. D. Obrecht). Long-time Stillwater residents remember that the family appeared there during the 1920s. By 1925, Nelle and her sisters were being billed as "The Obrecht Sisters." In a company that included Arthur V. Palmer as musical director and pianist, Nelle also became the heroine of melodramas.<sup>6</sup>

Nelle "was the one who was just going to die when the hero dashed upon the scene, amid the whistles and cheers of the audience, and rescued her. . . . It was he [Arthur] who played 'Hearts and Flowers' as her stage foster-father told of adopting the little girl and how 'down from Boston came a stranger.'" Between acts the Obrecht sisters did "specialities, which included the cross-hand trumpet duets which their Swiss father had taught them in their early childhood."<sup>7</sup>

On June 27, 1927, Nelle's 34th birthday, she and Arthur were married. "He stole the leading lady and broke up the show," she would tell friends later. The newlyweds formed their own stock company, bought such Broadway hits as *Abie's Irish Rose*, *The Bat*, and *What Price Glory*<sup>8</sup>, and took the plays on tour through 22 states. Nelle also played with the Arthur Casey Players at the Orpheum Theater in St. Paul and with the Buzz Bainbridge Players in Minneapolis.<sup>9</sup>

BUT the heady days of vaudeville were fast approaching a final curtain. In St. Paul, for instance, the landmark Metropolitan Opera House gave notice that it would no longer "be used exclusively for legitimate stage productions. It will house motion pictures, and when a good stage production is available it will be presented. The latest type of talking picture equipment is being installed."<sup>9</sup> Variations on this same

<sup>5</sup>*Pioneer Press*, February 15, 1925, p. 9. Lac qui Parle County District Court records indicate that the three oldest boys died of various illnesses before the family left Madison. Leonard was then the oldest of the children, followed by May, Julie, Rose, Christian (the second son to be so named), Nellie, and Sarah. See also *Sunday Tribune*, June 25, 1899, part 3, p. 6; *Independent Press* (Madison), June 20, 1902, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>*Independent Press*, June 20, 1902, p. 5; *Western Guard*, January 16, 1914, p. 5, interview with Sue Collins, Stillwater Public Library, June 28, 1979, concerning taped oral history interviews she has made with longtime Stillwater residents, notes in possession of author; *Pioneer Press*, February 15, 1925, p. 9.

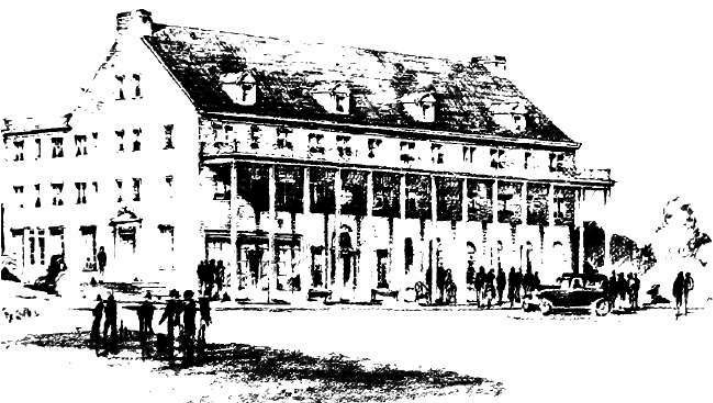
<sup>7</sup>Fred Neumeier, "Remember Nell in Melodrama?" in *Pioneer Press*, March 24, 1946, magazine sec., p. 4.

<sup>8</sup>Arndt, in *Christian Science Monitor*, September 29, 1952, women's sec., p. 6; Neumeier, in *Pioneer Press*, March 24, 1946, magazine sec., p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>*St. Paul Dispatch*, November 13, 1934, p. 11.

theme appeared in news articles across the country. Motion pictures were here to stay. As the 1920s ended, the Palmers were looking for a new line of work.

Hotel management, as it happened, seemed to run in the Palmer family. An uncle for whom Arthur was named, Arthur L. Roberts, was at the time “perhaps the widest known hotel owner in the northwest.” He headed a system that operated 14 hotels (including the Angus in St. Paul and the Hastings in Minneapolis) in Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and Montana. Roberts had grown up in the hotel business and had served his apprenticeship as manager of his grandfather Henry Kahler’s hotel in Rochester. In 1930 Roberts needed a new manager for the Lowell Inn, a 50-room hotel, barely three years old, in Stillwater. A succession of managers had been unable to make it pay, but the Palmers were willing to give it a try. “You can’t do worse than what’s been done,” Roberts told them.<sup>10</sup>



*THE ARCHITECT’S design for the Lowell Inn, drawn by William M. Engemann in 1926*

Nelle and Arthur Palmer served their first meal at the Lowell Inn on Christmas Day that year. Nelle was radiant in “a smart brown flowered dress,” her long blond hair in braids. She was an innkeeper now, and she would play the role to the hilt. In many ways, she never

<sup>10</sup> *Stillwater Daily Gazette*, June 25, 1927, special sec., p. 16; interview with Arthur V. Palmer, Jr., May 16, 1979, notes in possession of author.

<sup>11</sup> *A Tradition Is Born, A Brief History of the Lowell Inn*, n.p., n.d., a brochure available at the inn; Oliver Towne [Gareth Hiebert], “She Was Incomparable!” in *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 28, 1970, sec. 2, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 452, 672 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14, 1912); Emma Glaser, “How Stillwater Came To Be,” in *Minnesota History*, 24:200 (September, 1943); George E. Warner and Charles M. Foote, *History of Washington County and the St. Croix Valley*, 526 (Minneapolis, 1881); *Stillwater Gazette*, June 25, 1927, special sec., p. 9, 11, September 14, 1967, p. 5, June 24, 1977, p. 1

changed professions. For 40 years, night after night, when she made her entrance down the banistered staircase to greet her guests, she was once again on stage. No one who saw her performance could ever doubt that. Once at a formal dinner for special friends, Nelle, then in her 60s, brought down the house with an impromptu trumpet performance. “When she worked up to it,” wrote one reporter, “Nelle tooted one of the hottest jazz and Dixieland concerts in the business.”<sup>11</sup> But the success story that became the Lowell Inn was founded on more than theatrics.

The inn itself had built-in assets, not the least of which was its location. It stood on the corner of North Second and Myrtle streets, the site of the old Sawyer House that had catered to lumber barons and their womenfolk. Built about 1858 by Henry Sawyer of Skowhegan, Maine, the original inn, “one of the best small town hotels in Minnesota,” had 75 sleeping rooms in addition to dining facilities, “pool and billiard tables,” a “high-class barber shop,” and a bar where women were not permitted. For 65 years until the four-story wooden structure was razed in 1924 to make room for a more modern facility, the Sawyer House had been the social center of Stillwater. One of the last of its proprietors was Elmore Lowell, who formed the Lowell Investment Company in 1925 to raise local funds for a new hotel. Lowell came to be considered Stillwater’s “first citizen,” and the new inn was named in his honor. In spite of its youth, the new Lowell Inn was blessed with a ready-made reputation. Moreover, it presented an enticing facade. Designed in the image of a southern colonial mansion, the inn — built of brick, rising three stories high, and colonnaded with 13 white pillars for the original colonies — looked every bit the part of a prosperous establishment.<sup>12</sup>

But there were also liabilities. Times had changed and a 50-room hotel in Stillwater, especially in the first

*THE SAWYER HOUSE, photographed by John Runk in 1924 shortly before it was razed to make space for the new Lowell Inn*





years of the Great Depression, was an anachronism. It did not take Nelle and Arthur long to discover that they had a surfeit of guest rooms. Then too, the inn's exterior charm belied the institutional nature of its new furnishings. The modern interior was starkly sterile; warmth and grace had been left waiting at the welcoming front door.<sup>13</sup> Year after year of exceedingly hard work enabled the Palmers to make the Lowell Inn both comfortable and financially rewarding.

Luckily, Nelle and Arthur knew something about hotels from their long years on the vaudeville circuit. They had some definite and original concepts about how a first-rate hotel should be run. These ideas bore fruit, and in 1945 the Palmers were able to purchase the Lowell Inn. Looking back at their beginnings, Arthur commented, "It's a mighty good thing we didn't know how tough the road was going to be, because I'm afraid we never would have gone over it. . . . The personnel was not in sympathy with two young troupers who thought they could come in and tell them how to run their hotel."<sup>14</sup>

WITH their only child, Arthur, Jr., the Palmers lived upstairs at the inn in a small apartment that has since been converted to Room 21. Palmer was the inn's business manager and, failing to find a competent cook (or at least one who could stay sober for any length of time), was also in charge of the kitchen. Nelle, of course, was out front. While she had no head for figures, she did know and insist on quality. On one occasion when their financial picture looked particularly bleak, Arthur succeeded in getting their rent reduced \$100.00 a month, only to find that Nelle had charged \$500.00 worth of glassware and china. But bit by bit, piece by piece, and recipe by recipe, the pair made the inn a Minnesota institution, nationally acclaimed for its accommodations and fine cuisine.<sup>15</sup>

Early in the inn's existence Nelle outfitted her waitresses in ruffled shirtwaist dresses, usually in delicate floral patterns, and the girls learned to "call," or recite, the entire menu for customers. Many of the recipes that became traditional at the inn — favorites like the Swiss pear bread with anise — were from Nelle's mother. (She was never above wheedling time-tested family recipes out of employees, either. The Thanksgiving pumpkin pie, for example, still served today was the pride of her baker's mother.)

Leaving it up to Arthur to worry about where the money was coming from, Nelle ordered hand-blocked Belgian and Irish table linens and replaced the inn's heavy hotel chinaware with English Spode and Wedgwood. But Nelle had an eye for a bargain, nonetheless. When she found a matched set of colored crystal water goblets at an estate sale, she brought them home for her largest table, an oblong one that now fills the north end



NELLE PALMER (left) and her husband, Arthur (right), welcomed the Duncan Hineses to the inn about 1945.

of the George Washington Room. The glassware drew so many favorable comments that she continued to frequent sales, picking up glasses for one or two tables at a time. The ornate silver candelabra and serving pieces still used in the room were birthday and anniversary gifts that she and Arthur gave to each other.<sup>16</sup>

Nelle bought the best in groceries too. In 1942 *The Hotel Monthly* reported that she had paid \$8.00 in February for an early watermelon rather than go without fresh melon coupes and melon balls. Nelle herself often preferred a plain boiled dinner or even a peanut butter sandwich to selections from the restaurant's fancy menu. But she never ate in the kitchen! Attended by their staff, the Palmers took their meals at a table for two in the main dining room.

During the years that Nelle and Arthur ran the Lowell Inn, they did considerable remodeling and redecorating. Arthur once explained that their theatrical background made them acutely aware of the importance

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Palmer interview, May 16, 1979. Interior photographs of the new inn appeared in *St. Paul Daily News*, July 3, 1927, rotogravure sec., p. [4, 5].

<sup>14</sup> *Hotel Monthly*, January, 1942, p. 13; Palmer interview, May 16, 1979; *A Tradition Is Born*.

<sup>15</sup> Here and below, see *Hotel Monthly*, January, 1942, p. 15; interviews with Palmer, May 16, 1979, and Phyllis McConaughy, longtime Lowell Inn employee, June 2, 1979, notes in possession of author; Arndt, in *Christian Science Monitor*, September 29, 1952, women's sec., p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Here and 2 paragraphs below, see Palmer interview, May 16, 1979; *Hotel Monthly*, January, 1942, p. 17, 20.

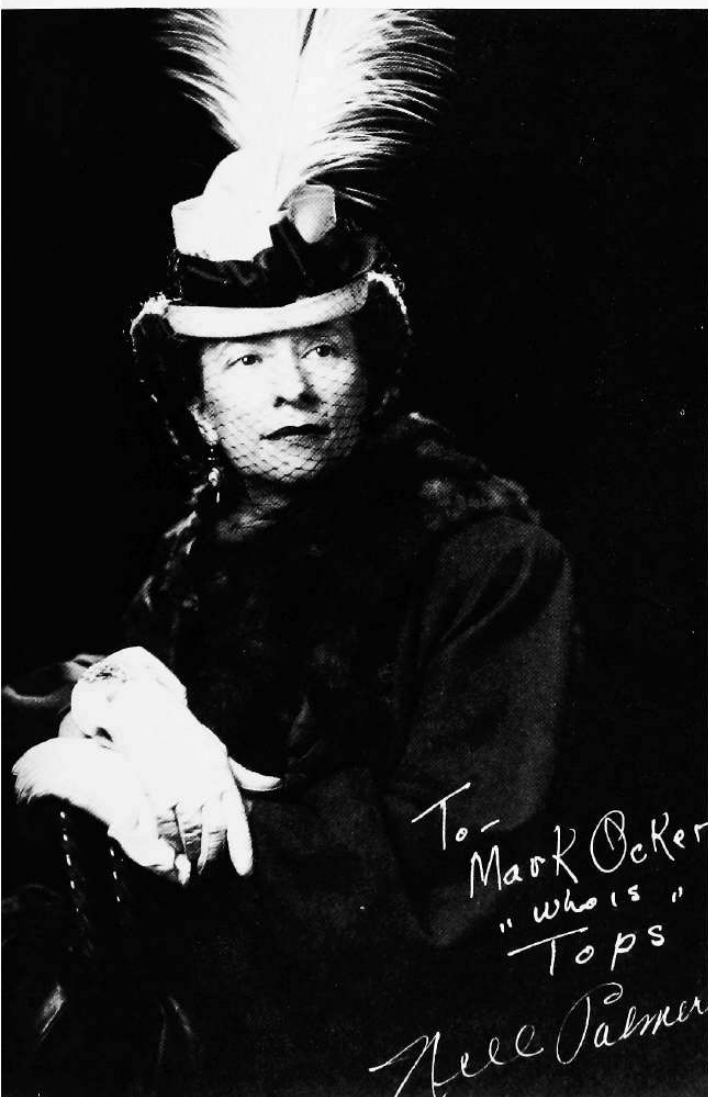
of proper backdrops. This was the reason he took out the massive front desk in the lobby and installed a wood-burning fireplace instead. Since then, a small front desk has occupied a corner formerly belonging to an empty elevator shaft. Second- and third-floor guest rooms were enlarged, and private baths were added. Many of the inn's antique furnishings are choice pieces that Nelle bought cheaply during the depression.

The first addition to the inn came in 1939 with the Garden Room and its pool of brook trout. The pool was to have been an outdoor one, but when natural springs in the adjoining hillside began seeping water into the new room, Arthur decided to move the pool indoors.

<sup>17</sup> *A Tradition Is Born.*

<sup>18</sup> Here and below, see Palmer interview, May 16, 1979.

<sup>19</sup> Here and below, see Towne, in *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 28, 1970, sec. 2, p. 23; Palmer interview, May 16, 1979.



Since the water was coming into the room anyway, "I may as well make it look good," he said.<sup>17</sup>

Arthur, Jr., remembered that prospective patrons sometimes had trouble finding their way to the inn in the early days. His father remedied this temporarily by painting the telephone poles blue and white along the road from Minneapolis to Stillwater. Then he ordered newspaper advertisements that told customers to follow these guideposts. Unfortunately, the telephone company was less than enthusiastic about the project, and the innkeeper ended up repainting his handiwork.<sup>18</sup>

There was little question that Arthur was his wife's emotional anchor. When he died in 1951, she grieved inconsolably. (For a period of nearly three years, their son ran the inn virtually by himself.) To honor her husband's memory, Nelle had his portrait painted by Minneapolis artist Frances Greenman and installed over the fireplace in the main lobby. Nelle always considered this area — furnished with the best of colonial antiques, custom-upholstered wing chairs, and overstuffed couches — her private living room.

During Arthur's lifetime, the inn never served liquor. Nelle modified this policy somewhat in 1957 when she converted a first-floor gift shop to an intimate, Victorian-style cocktail lounge. The idea was her son's, and the no-liquor-in-the-dining-room policy still held, but whatever Nelle did she did with a flourish. The drinks were all doubles, served in "goldfish bowls" by liveried barmen, who were usually graduate students. Nobody ever drank more than two. That rule was never published, but just about the time someone thought of signaling for a third round, Nelle invariably managed to announce that "your table is ready."<sup>19</sup>

Arthur Palmer, Jr., suspects that few people ever really knew his mother. Nelle was always "on," he says, and "rarely let down her hair. She had 'presence' — what people today might call charisma. She enjoyed playing a part." She could also be demanding at times, even berating a waitress in front of customers. (Her husband had better rapport with employees and kept things running smoothly.) After Arthur's death, Nelle's sister Sarah and Art, Jr.'s wife, Maureen, often worked alongside her as hostesses.

What people did remember was the showy way in which Nelle dressed. A 1946 *St. Paul* newspaper article called her one of the "best-dressed women in this area," adding that "her exotic creations have caused much comment." Her dresses were usually one-of-a-kind designs, and she favored large, flowery hats. During his adoles-

*THIS DRAMATIC* photograph shows Nelle Palmer about 1940 as many remember her — hatted, gloved, bejeweled, and befurred.

cent years her son was not much taken with her headgear. The same journalist reported that "he warns her when she calls to see him at St. Thomas Military Academy in St. Paul, which he attends, to leave the hat in the car while she visits with the 'boys.'" The antique earrings "from all over the world" that Nelle wore in her pierced ears became a trademark. Her closets contained numerous handbags, French gloves, and beautiful hankies.<sup>20</sup> Certainly Nelle was striking in her appearance. Her bearing was regal, and even into her 70s she kept a willowy hourglass figure.

In the first years after World War II, Nelle drove a Lincoln Continental that had been purchased to ferry customers to the inn. Later, she became known for her flashy white Cadillac Eldorado. For Nelle, there was just no second best.<sup>21</sup>

Nelle died of cancer on December 22, 1970, in the heart of her favorite season. She and Arthur had greeted their first guests at the Lowell Inn on a Christmas Day, she liked to remind visitors. She reveled in the trappings of the holidays, trimming the inn with joyous abandon. The tree put up in the lobby the day after Thanksgiving was traditionally an immense flocked extravaganza on which Nelle lavished myriad baubles and balls, ornamental birds, and imported music boxes, each "selected with as much care as another woman would choose diamonds." Christmas was the time when both the inn and Nelle, who was most apt to be decked out in a "hiphugging long white satin gown, slit up the side," were at their best.

Toward the end she became very fragile. Most of her time was spent in the room she had taken after Arthur died, a suite still furnished with her personal antiques. She rarely came downstairs, and simple meals, often including a banana cake she was fond of, were brought to her room. A tribute paid her the week she died pointed

out that "perhaps it is not so ironic that she died during the season she loved best. Like Diamond Jim Brady, who once said in the midst of a feast: 'If you have to go, what a time to go,' perhaps Nelle Palmer would have said the same thing about Christmastime."<sup>22</sup>

The Lowell Inn remains in the Palmer family. Arthur, Jr., and Maureen, with the help of most of their nine children, are the present innkeepers. In 1959 it was they who came up with the idea for the Matterhorn Room, which honors Nelle's Swiss ancestry. Many of the room's fine wood carvings were purchased that year when the pair traveled in Switzerland. A master Swiss carver subsequently spent more than two years in Stillwater completing the room. Needless to say, Nelle loved it.<sup>23</sup>

The younger Palmers also commissioned the long, narrow oval pastel and oil portrait of Nelle that hangs in the inn's main lobby. Painted by artist Jerome Ryan, it is the very essence of the elegant Nelle, the svelte, sophisticated hostess, her pencil in one hand, her reservations in the other — held off at a distance because she was too proud to wear glasses.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Neumeier, in *Pioneer Press*, March 24, 1946, magazine sec., p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Here and below, see Palmer interview, May 16, 1979; Towne, in *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 28, 1970, sec. 2, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> McConnaughey interview, June 2, 1979; Towne, in *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 28, 1970, sec. 2, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Arthur and Maureen Palmer, January 3, 1983, notes in possession of author.

<sup>24</sup> Palmer interview, May 16, 1979.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS on pages 210 and 211 are used through the courtesy of Arthur and Maureen Palmer; all others are in the MHS audio-visual library.



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