

THE Rollicking REALM of BOREAS



A CENTURY OF CARNIVALS IN ST. PAUL

Jean E. Spraker

IN 1986, St. Paul's Winter Carnival will celebrate its centennial year. As in time past, the pageantry surrounding the carnival's arctic King Boreas and winter sporting activities will draw local residents outdoors in frigid temperatures. The en masse display of such spunk, promoters hope, will re-invigorate St. Paul's community spirit and once more prove to outsiders that fun is indeed possible in a frosty clime. The St. Paul Winter Carnival may seem only amusement and boosterism at first encounter, but its tenacity on the city's civic calendar suggests that it retains value and meaning in the public realm of residents' lives. The Winter Carnival is worth considering as something more than mere frivolity.¹

The origins of the idea to stage a winter festival in Minnesota's capital city are found in the St. Paul business community of the 1880s. At that time, the nation's urban places, including Minnesota cities, were competing intensely among themselves for regional and national dominance. Early literature reports that the impetus for the first Winter Carnival in St. Paul was a remark by a New York newspaper correspondent that St. Paul was "another Siberia, unfit for human habitation in winter." Some of St. Paul's businessmen, who wanted to counter such harmful impressions, saw a winter carnival as a way to boost the city's image by proving that an enjoyable life was possible in a climate as cold as theirs.²

The Saint Paul Ice Palace and Winter Carnival Association was formed in November, 1885. Members of the founding board of executive officers were men who had a decided interest and financial stake in the future growth of St. Paul. Included were George R. Finch, a dry-goods "merchant prince" from the wholesale house of Auerbach, Finch, and Van Slyke, as president; George Thompson, editor and proprietor of the *St. Paul Dispatch*, as first vice president; William A. Van Slyke, in partnership with Finch, as second vice president and general manager; Albert Scheffer, president of the Commercial National Bank, as treasurer; Alfred S. Tallmadge, a commission merchant and secretary of St. Paul's Chamber of Commerce, as secretary; and J. H. Hanson, journalist and secretary of St. Paul's newly

¹ The St. Paul Winter Carnival has not been held each of the last 100 years. During the 19th century there were carnivals in 1886, 1887, 1888, and 1896. The event was revived in 1916 and 1917, and after the interruptions of World War I and the Great Depression, it was again staged from 1937 to 1942. After World War II, a Victory Carnival in 1946 reinstated the tradition, and Winter Carnivals have occurred each year since.

² J. H. Hanson, *St. Paul Ice Palace and Winter Carnival Souvenir*, 3 (St. Paul, 1885).

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A CHAMBER of Commerce booth in front of the 1886 ice palace underlines the connection of the first carnival and the business community. St. Paul boosters borrowed much, including designs by architect A.C. Hutchinson, from Montreal, North America's first city to erect an ice castle.

formed Contractors' and Builders' Board of Trade, as assistant secretary. Setting up headquarters in St. Paul's newly built and palatial Hotel Ryan, the Ice Palace and Winter Carnival Association members went about the business of boosting their city as an invigorating winter mecca.³

To do so, the carnival's originators envisioned staging parades, pageants, and winter sporting activities over a 12-day period around a centerpiece palace of glittering ice. For a model they looked directly to Montreal, which since 1883 had had such a palace and carnival. In 1885, however, that city's hopes for continuing a winter festival dwindled when it was quarantined because of a smallpox outbreak. When Montreal withdrew from the

field, St. Paulites acted quickly: "the press took up the movement and 'boomed' it. The necessary funds were pledged in a couple of weeks, and . . . leading business men . . . stepped forward and volunteered to do the work of organization and preparation."⁴

Many of the city's smaller businesses followed suit and private residents also joined in, setting up clubs to compete in the winter sporting and recreational events. During the first Winter Carnival, held in February, 1886, competitions ranged from curling matches to a fancy skating meet and an ice polo tournament, to name a few of the events. The enthusiasm of late 19th-century St. Paulites in organizing for the carnival was such that one chronicler remarked, "The 'Legend of Hiawatha' was ransacked to find names enough for toboggan and snow shoe clubs. The woolen mills were driven to desperation in trying to make new blankets for uniforms.

³ Hanson, *Souvenir*, 2. For further biographical information on these men, see J. H. Hanson, "Officers of the Association," in *St. Paul Dispatch, Carnival Edition*, December 25, 1887, [p. 6].

⁴ Harry P. Robinson, "Our Winter Festival," in *The Northwest Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (St. Paul), February, 1888, p. 2.

Rules and regulations of every kind of winter sport were at once in demand."⁵

Without question, the local business community has played a key role in originating and maintaining the Winter Carnival throughout its history. Small businesses, including mercantile and real estate concerns, and large corporations, notably the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads, have formed recreational clubs and bands from within their ranks. These groups have participated in carnival parades and competed for sporting trophies and positions within the courts of the Ice and Fire kings. Private groups have also formed, some along class and ethnic lines. In early days, for example, the Scandinavians were noted for their participation in skiing clubs. And the St. George's Snowshoe Club was an organization to which a number of St. Paul's wealthier men belonged.

Program brochures from the earliest to the most recent St. Paul Winter Carnival provide listings of the events that constitute the official celebration. Over the years some of these have remained consistent: the winter sporting competitions and exhibitions, receptions for civic officials and carnival dignitaries, musical performances, balls, cultural displays, and structures carved of snow and ice. The carnival has also come to incorporate a round of activities including parades, oratory, winter sports, mock royalty, and palaces of ice. But the events that are at the core of the carnival and which have framed it since its inception are those associated with the legend of the Ice King, Boreas, who reigns over the carnival, and of his rival Vulcanus, the Fire King.⁶ The coronation of Boreas marks the beginning of his reign of winter frolic over the city, while the assault upon his stronghold by Vulcanus at the carnival's end brings down that reign, returns the city to everyday toil, and foreshadows the coming of spring. The ritualistic reenactment year after year of a legend that imposes a monarchical order on a society that normally embraces democratic ideals invites further investigation.

EVEN THOUGH St. Paul has competed with other cities for growth, its promoters have shared the same rhetoric with other urban boosters. During the 19th century, widely read business periodicals such as *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine* and *DeBow's Review* provided models for promoting an urban area.⁷ Such booster publications are permeated with statistics of local commerce; in addition, they reflect theories about western growth prevalent in their time. Winter Carnival promoters incorporated one such theory, the "doctrine of natural advantages" — the assertion that a particular community is assured success because it enjoys a superior climate or geographical location — into a version of the King Boreas legend published in 1886. In choosing St. Paul as his residence the monarch proclaims that despite the city's

wintry reputation, "'Tis a place thrice blessed./ Climate, commerce, condition./ All aid to produce/ A great city's position."⁸

Images and objects associated with the St. Paul Winter Carnival provide clues to its meaning and significance. Carnival is traditionally a time of celebration when the normalcy of the workaday world is temporarily suspended. This suspension provides carnival participants with opportunities to pursue carefree amusement and, at the same time, the chance to explore realms of abnormality within a legitimate setting.⁹ The image of an ice palace, home of the Ice King, provides an example of how such reversal is manifested in the St. Paul Winter Carnival tradition.

Ice palaces on a grand scale actually were built, primarily during the early years of the carnival's existence.¹⁰ But the image, so central to the festival, is repeated year after year, regardless of whether a palace was constructed, in newspaper supplements, on sheet music, commemorative medals, souvenir silk scarves, trade cards, and postcards. The representation of the American White House alongside the ice palace of 1887 on a late 19th-century embroidered quilt suggests a comparison between the residence of monarchy and that of democracy. Reinforcing this juxtaposition is the tradition that the elected mayor of St. Paul hands the key

⁵ Saint Paul Ice Palace and Winter Carnival Association, *The Crystal Carnival*, 10–15 (St. Paul, [1885]); Robinson, in *Northwest Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, February, 1888, p. 1.

⁶ See *The Crystal Carnival*, 1, 4, for what may be the earliest rendition of St. Paul's Ice King legend. Titles of the primary characters in the legend surrounding the Winter Carnival have changed over time. Versions surviving from the late 19th century most often refer to the arctic monarch as the Ice King or Borealis Rex while his opponent goes by Fire King Coal. When the carnival was revived in 1916, Boreas Rex I and Vulcanus Rex I were crowned. These titles continue to the present day.

⁷ Carl Abbott, *Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West*, 111, 121 (Westport, Conn., 1981).

⁸ See Charles N. Glaab, "Visions of Metropolis: William Gilpin and Theories of City Growth in the American West," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 45:24 (Autumn, 1961) for more on 19th-century theories of urban growth. For the Boreas legend version, refer to J. H. Hanson, *An Idyl on Ice*, 9 (St. Paul, 1886).

⁹ Symbolic anthropologists have explored the meanings of ritual reversal; Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1974) is a primary work in this area. Also of interest because it treats an American popular amusement is John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1978).

¹⁰ For a thorough treatment of St. Paul's ice palace structures, see Fred Anderes and Ann Agranoff, *Ice Palaces*, 47–66, 85–104 (New York, 1983).



THIS rich-looking quilt, from about 1890, shows in its central square the 1887 ice palace. Juxtaposed to the palace, in a smaller block to the lower right, is the simple structure of the American White House.

to the city over to King Boreas for the duration of the topsy-turvy period of carnival.

Additional iconographic research on carnival imagery strengthens the suggestion that the St. Paul Winter Carnival has served as a medium through which its participants negotiate issues related to class, ethnicity, community, and national identity. For example, a reporter from *Outing* magazine called the 1917 carnival "a common meeting ground" where St. Paul citizens of differing stations learned to mingle with each other, something that "couldn't have been learned in the workplace." Such negotiation according to historian Herbert G. Gutman, has played a major role in American society as it modernized more quickly than most European nations. As a result of the large, periodic waves of immigrants who arrived in the United States from the late 19th through early 20th centuries, the American social structure has had to incorporate preindustrial peoples over an extended time.¹¹

Today, as in the past century, the St. Paul Winter Carnival is a large-scale community activity that receives

¹¹ Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," in *American Historical Review*, 78:586 (June, 1973); Albert Britt, "St. Paul — the City That Discovered Winter," in *Outing*, 69:675 (March, 1917).

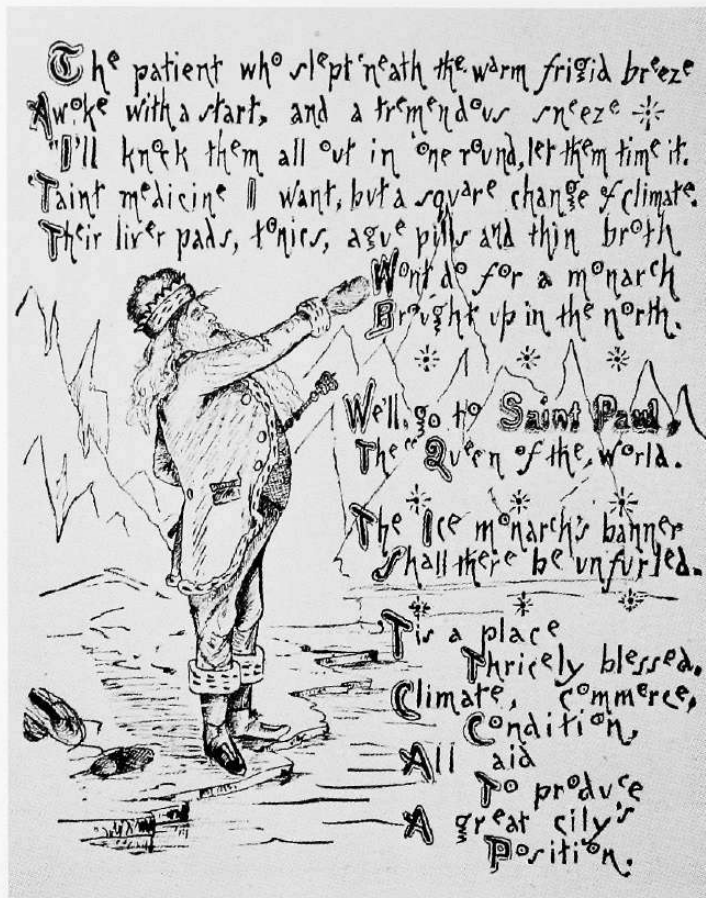
broad-based business support and public participation. It remains an important, almost cherished, event on the civic calendar. This persistence is significant in an era when there are not only more effective media for city promotion, but also when the public is drawn in great numbers to watch professional sporting events for recreation. The longevity of the carnival and its popularity suggest that it has functioned and continues to function in important ways for its promoters and the citizens of St. Paul. How does the St. Paul Winter Carnival fit into a typology of American celebrations and public events? By not only celebrating carnival, but also reflecting upon it in relation to similar public events — booster festivals in other cities, mass sporting events, world expositions, wild-west shows, political rallies, Mardi Gras, and amusement parks, for instance — we may come closer to explaining the ways of thinking which motivate us as a culture to participate in such events and to shape them in the ways we do.

A national sporting magazine gave broad exposure to the Winter Carnival's newly instituted Winnipeg-to-St. Paul dogsled race in its March, 1917, issue.



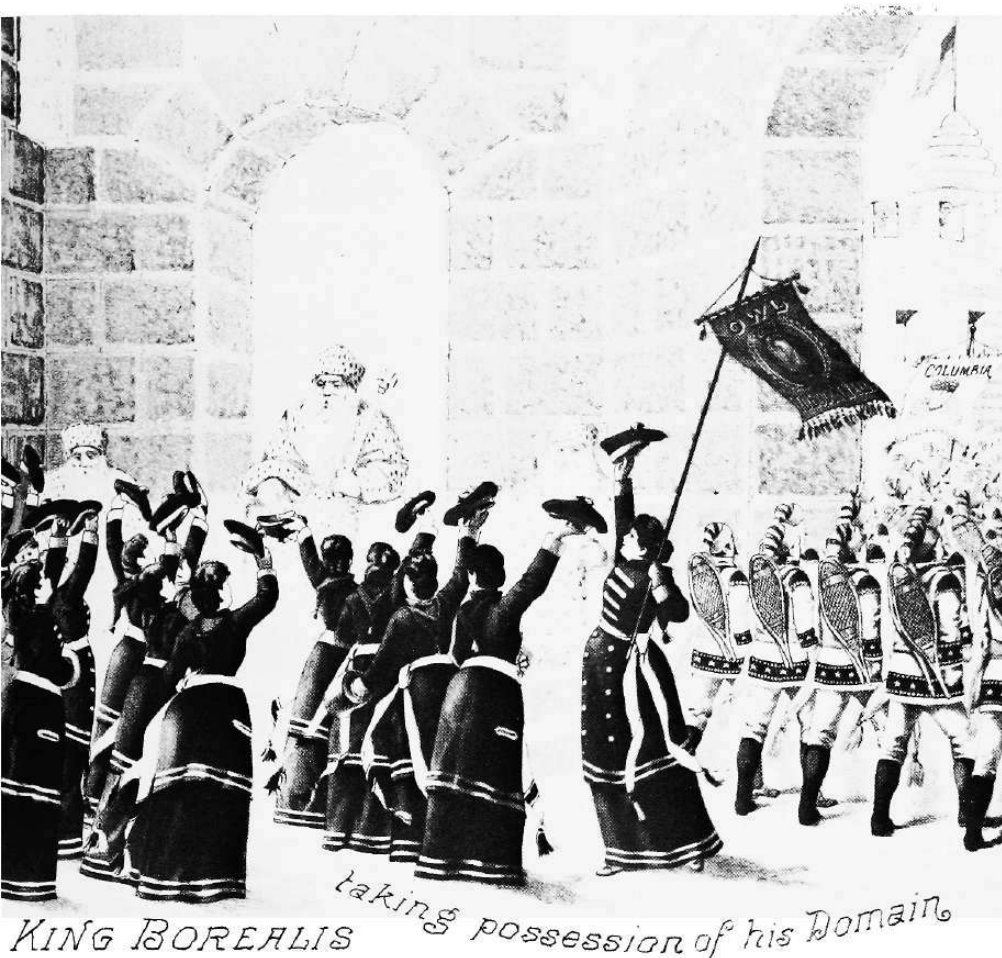
IN 1886, for the second Winter Carnival, J.H. Hanson wrote An Idyl on Ice, modeling his verse after American poet Clement C. Moore's popularly adored A Visit from St. Nicholas (1823).

Hanson's lines blessing St. Paul with fine "climate, commerce," and "condition" incorporate rhetoric common to 19th-century boosters who invoked "natural advantages" to spur urban growth. Illustrations by A.M. Doherty.



HUTCHINSON'S ice palace design, featuring a central tower 100 feet high, represented in lithograph by the H.M. Smyth Printing Co., St. Paul, for a souvenir booklet published by the Saint Paul Ice Palace and Winter Carnival Association before the 1886 carnival. The entire palace used 20,000 blocks of ice.





MEMBERS of the St. Paul Curling Club, the Nushka Club, the Owl Toboggan Club, and the Columbia Snowshoe Club pass by in salute to King Borealis in this lithograph for the 1888 carnival, published in the St. Paul Dispatch, Carnival Edition, December 25, 1887.



A SILVER and brass medallion, 1887, depicts the sporting events for which St. Paulites organized clubs galore. The encircled vignettes (clockwise from top) show skating, snowshoeing, curling, and tobogganing. At the center is St. Paul — a busy commercial and rail hub — an image living up to its promoters' claims (accession no. 648.N25).



POST-Civil War sentiment was evident in early Winter Carnivals. Union veterans, for example, stormed the 1886 ice palace and returned the city to normalcy after the festivities. Similarly this patriotic shield, used by the Columbia Showshoeing Club in 1887, exhibits the motto of national unity (accession no. 1978.11.2).

ACCORDING to the Ice King legend, Borealis finally succumbs to the Fire King's attacks. This chromolithograph from the St. Paul Dispatch, Winter Carnival Edition, 1889, depicts that scene, entitled "Surrender of the Ice King and His Forces."

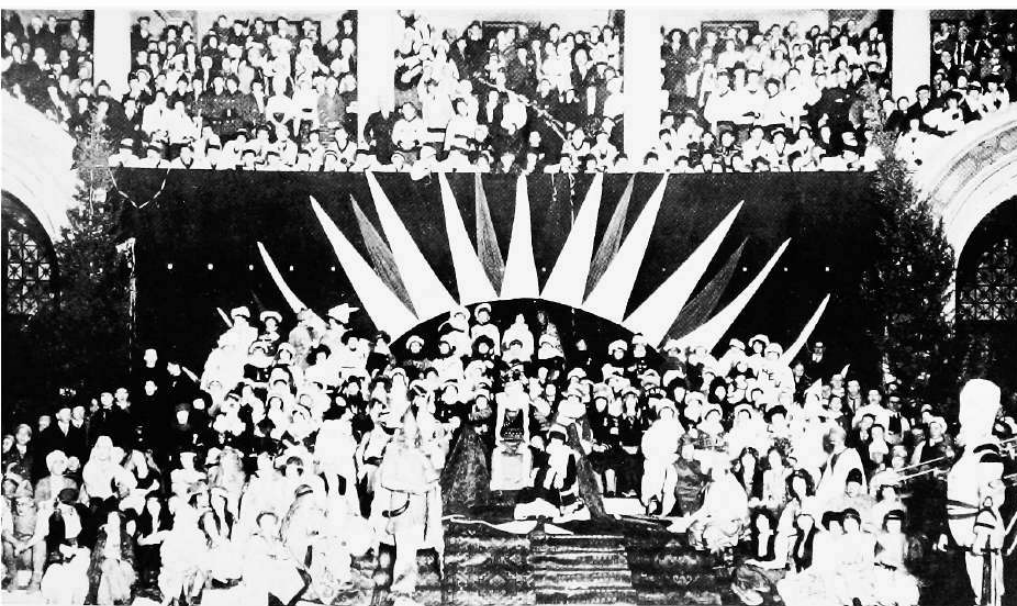


A FASHIONABLY dressed man and woman in showshoeing attire provide the logo image on this prospectus for a Winter Carnival that fizzled out in 1896.



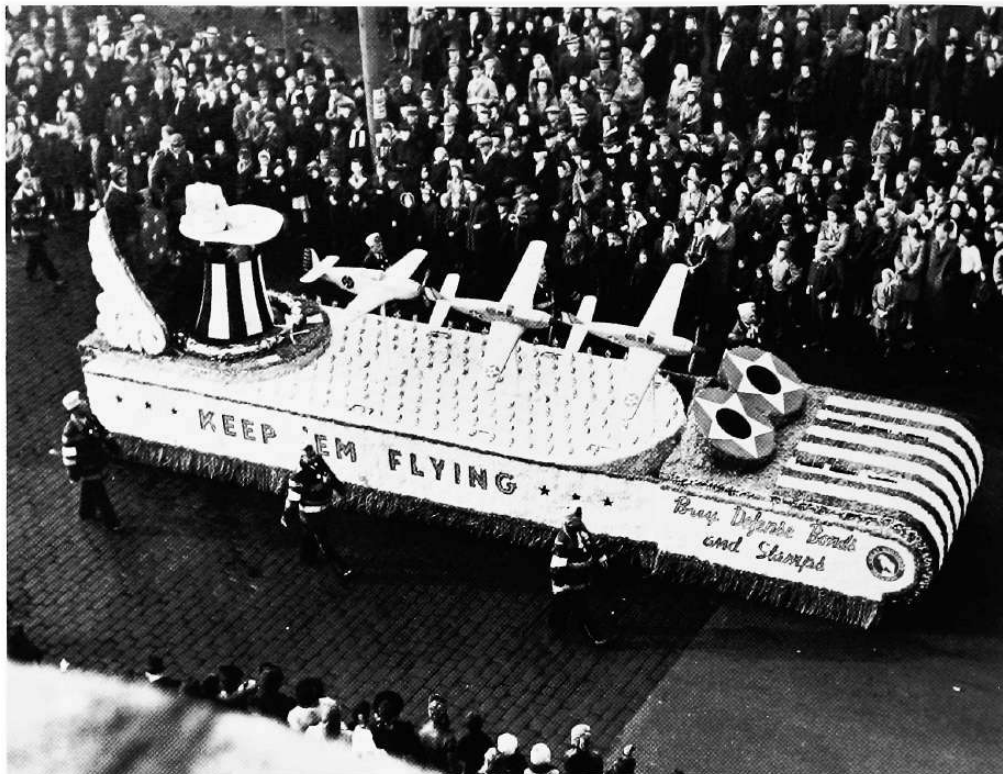


BY IMPERIAL decree J.P. Ridler, Boreas Rex II, invited President Woodrow Wilson to the 1917 St. Paul Outdoor Winter Sports Carnival, thereby indicating that it might be possible for a chap from the hinterlands to consort with heads of state at carnival time.



DEMOCRACY shone through the glitter of mock royalty at the 1916 carnival as well. At the time that America was crusading for democracy, a decision could not be made for a single queen. Instead, all 108 candidates reigned.

PATRIOTISM was the message of the Great Northern Railway's float in 1942. The railroad's carnival princess sits atop Uncle Sam's familiar striped hat.



THE PERSONIFICATION of the Fire King as a devil-like figure extended from the 1880's to the 1946 "Victory Carnival" staged just after World War II. Vulcan Rex IX, George Schrantz, sent season's greetings to Sir Digger, one of the Vulcan Krewe, which was formalized over the years to assist the Fire King in his assaults.

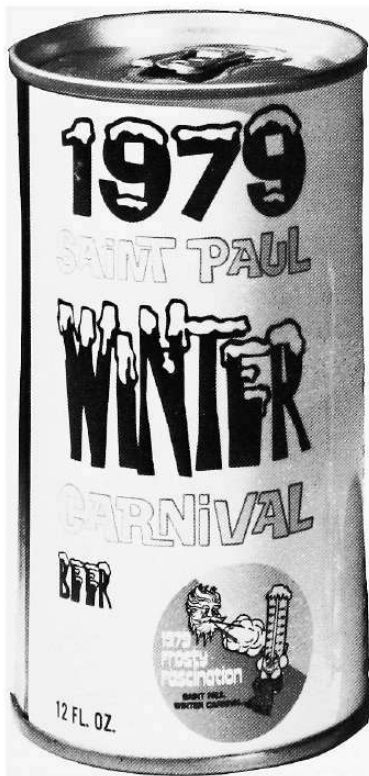


NOT ONLY Vulcans of the past, but Vulcans present, as well, do mischief. A telltale calling card from 1947.

VULCAN
has been
HERE



THE 1967 palace of snow, located on Kellogg Boulevard in St. Paul, was a small-scale rendition compared to those of the 19th century. But it did serve to revive the palace-building tradition which had lapsed for the preceding 20 years.



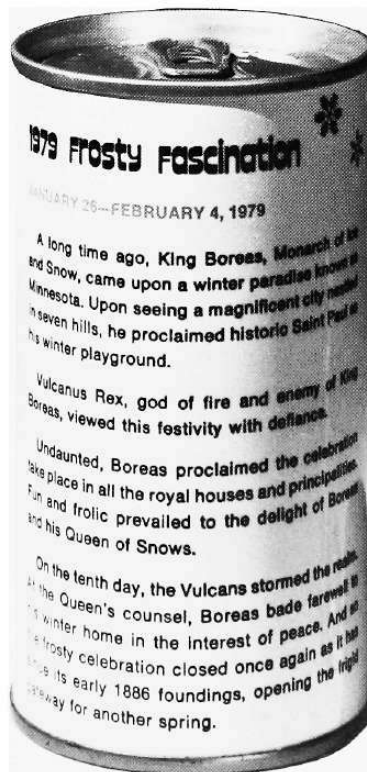
A CAN of Schell's beer, produced for the 1979 "Frosty Fascination" Carnival, bears the legend of the Ice King in a nutshell:

"A long time ago, King Boreas, Monarch of Ice and Snow, came upon a winter paradise known as Minnesota. Upon seeing a magnificent city nestled in seven hills, he proclaimed his historic Saint Paul as his winter playground.

"Vulcanus Rex, god of fire and enemy of King Boreas, viewed this festivity with defiance.

"Undaunted, Boreas proclaimed the celebration take place in all the royal houses and principalities. Fun and frolic prevailed to the delight of Boreas and his Queen of Snows.

"On the tenth day, the Vulcans stormed the realm. At the Queen's counsel, Boreas bade farewell to his winter home in the interest of peace. And so the frosty celebration closed once again as it has since its early 1886 foundings, opening the frigid gateway for another spring" (accession nos. 1983. 172.1..2).





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