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Digital Tour of Saint Paul, Minnesota

By Jamie L. Martin, Target Corporation

Saint Paul, Minnesota, our host city for the MAC 2011 Annual Meeting, has a tremendous amount to offer to the first-time visitor. While Saint Paul is often in the news for its winter weather, it comes alive year round as the arts and culture capital of the Midwest, with over 52,000 theater seats, three world-class museums, and a vibrant grassroots arts community. Springtime brings additional fun in the way of local sporting events and outings along Summit Hill or Grand Avenue. Even frequent visitors to this cultural mecca, however, may be unfamiliar with the history of this city. A “twin” city to neighboring Minneapolis, Saint Paul has been the capitol of Minnesota since 1849. Founded as a trading and transportation center on the banks of the upper Mississippi River near historic Native American settlements, Saint Paul’s early days were tied to water as the city served as a gateway to the east for travelers seeking the Dakota Territories. Over the years, waves of immigrants from Germany, Ireland, Scandinavia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa all have left their indelible mark upon the city, seen today in the variety of cultural attractions and restaurants throughout the city. For a more thorough look into this fascinating city, there is a wealth of archival resources available on-line to help you learn more about the history and culture of Saint Paul and Minnesota in general.

A useful first stop is the Minnesota Digital Library (MDL), <http://reflections.mndigital.org>, the largest digital library consortium in the state. More than 108 different cultural organizations, including libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies have contributed to this rapidly growing resource. Contributing institutions vary from the large collections of the Minnesota Historical Society and the University of Minnesota to more specialized institutions such as the American Swedish Institute or the Minnesota Streetcar Museum. The MDL seeks to support education, scholarship, and enrichment by providing students, researchers, and educators with Internet access to digital collections. Since 2004, the MDL has digitized more than 58,000 photographs, images, maps, journals, documents, letters, and works of art. It also acts as a pointer to other digital collections already available on the Web, including historical societies, state and private universities, and the Hennepin County Library. A new beta test project, known as Minnesota Finder, allows users to search for images in

four of Minnesota’s on-line collections from the MDL site. Users can browse by collection, topic, or region, or do an advanced search by specific key words or collection. A search for Saint Paul brings up 3,980 items in subjects ranging from politics and government to arts and architecture to sports and recreation.

MDL also provides access to several local collections that focus on Saint Paul history. The Saint Paul Public Library, <http://www.stpaul.lib.mn.us/reading/special-collections.html>, has a collection of historic images and newsletters, many of them focused on library activities. Numerous Saint Paul educational institutions also present a wide variety of images on MDL, highlighting Saint Paul college campuses, student life, and activities throughout the decades. Many of these institutions, including Saint Catherine’s University, <http://images.stkate.edu>, Hamline University, http://www.hamline.edu/hamline_info/offices_services/administration/ur/archives/index.html, Macalester College, <http://www.macalester.edu/library/archives/index.html>, and University of Saint Thomas, <http://www.stthomas.edu/libraries/collections/digital/default.html>, also have a wealth of digital collections available on their own Web sites, allowing in-depth searches of photographs, newsletters, and other historical resources.

Any virtual tour of Saint Paul also should include a visit to the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), <http://www.mnhs.org/index.htm>. Based in Saint Paul, with 26 historical sites and museums across the state, the mission of MHS is to be the chief caretaker of Minnesota’s story. In fact, the MHS Web site is a wonderful jumping off place to dive into the history of Minnesota in general and Saint Paul’s story in particular.

“Becoming Minnesotan: Stories of Recent Immigrants and Refugees,” <http://education.mnhs.org/immigration>, offers the opportunity to learn more about several immigrant cultures and their impact on Saint Paul and Minnesota History. It combines on-line timelines, brief cultural overviews, and access to the Minnesota Immigrant Oral History Project. Through the project, users have access to 120 interviews, collected between 1992 and 2004, that are available on-line as streaming audio files. Some of the area’s recent immigrant groups, including Hmong, Somali,

Tibetan, Khmer, and Asian Indian are profiled, allowing a unique perspective on the lives and experiences of these diverse cultures. The ethnic history of Saint Paul is particularly diverse—as of 2008, more Hmong live in the Twin Cities, particularly Saint Paul, than any other urban area in the United States, and Minnesota is also home to the nation's largest population of Somali immigrants.

The MHS site also features a Visual Research Database, <http://collections.mnhs.org/visualresources>, which allows access to more than two hundred thousand items in the MHS collection, 140,000 of them with a corresponding digital image. Photographs, art, and posters are all included in the database, representing life in Minnesota during the past 150 years. Users can search for nineteenth-century images of the regional Native American cultures, iconic events such as the Saint Paul Winter Carnival or the Minnesota State Fair, or historical images of Saint Paul streetcars, railways, and winter fun.

For an overview of the diverse neighborhoods of Saint Paul, a visit to the Ramsey County Historical Society, <http://www.rchs.com>, provides access to neighborhood profiles taken from the Ramsey County Historic Site Survey Report in the 1980s. The Site Survey documents five thousand historic structures located in Saint Paul and neighboring areas through architectural profiles, brief histories, and photographs. For example, users can learn more about the upscale Summit Hill neighborhood, which is filled with stunning architecture, including homes listed on the National Historic Register, or the working class Frogtown neighborhood that was originally settled by Poles, Scandinavians, Germans, and Irish, seeking

work in the nearby railroad yards and which is home to an interesting array of Victorian and turn-of-the-century buildings.

Outside of Saint Paul, Minnesota is home to a variety of corporate museums and collections, a number of which have a presence on the World Wide Web. For example, the Web site for the SPAM Museum, <http://www.spam.com/games/Museum>, provides a quick look at the Austin, Minnesota, museum dedicated to the unusual spiced meat that first gained a foothold in American culture during World War II and is now an iconic and irreverent aspect of Americana. Another local corporate archives, General Mills, also has a presence on the Web, <http://www.generalmills.com/en/Company/History.aspx>. Users can explore the importance of the flour and milling industry to early Twin Cities history through the lens of this long-standing company that was first founded in the 1860s at a flour mill near Saint Anthony Falls in nearby Minneapolis. The Web site provides access to a General Mills timeline, highlights company innovation and invention, and features biographies of iconic marketing characters.

All of these Internet-based resources provide a fascinating glimpse into this “most livable city” and the rich cultural heritage of the surrounding area. Online visitors can learn a great deal about Saint Paul by visiting these Web sites, but to truly experience everything this city has to offer, we hope to see you at the MAC 2011 Annual Meeting.

Jamie L. Martin is the Corporate Archivist for the Target Corporation and a member of the Local Arrangements Committee for the MAC 2011 Annual Meeting.

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