St. Paul Winter Carnival
Video Podcast Transcript
Minnesota Historical Society

Hi! You know, when the weather gets like this in some parts of the country, folks
hole up and they don't come out again till spring. But not here in St. Paul. Here we
celebrate winter. It's called the St. Paul Winter Carnival, and we've been doing it for
over 100 years.

From grueling dog-sled races to magical ice palaces under siege, carnival
activities have enlivened the long cold season and brought residents and visitors
outside to enjoy the frigid charms of Minnesota in winter. The Minnesota Historical
Society has documented the Carnival from its earliest days compiling a fascinating mix
of items showing how this event has evolved over the years. Photograph and visual
collections document the succession of Ice Palaces, as well as the various
organizations whose costumes and trappings added color to the many parades and
ceremonies. Here also are portraits of the Carnival Royalty and examples of advertising
posters and fliers.

The Historical Society's manuscript holdings contain some interesting
descriptions of Winter Carnival activities from participants. Among these are the diaries
of Michael J. Boyle. Boyle, the son of Irish immigrants, was born in Pennsylvania in
1856, and after working some years as a surveyor, he moved to St. Paul in the 1870s
where he went to work as a clerk in the dry goods firm of Aurebach, Finch, Culbertson
and Company. Among his many social activities, Mr. Boyle was a member of the
Nushka Club, a lively group of men and women who spent the winter days tobogganing
and the evenings partying. Not surprisingly the "Nushkas" were avid participants in the
early years of the Winter Carnival. In his diary entry for January 20, 1887, Boyle
describes some of the highlights:

"Tonight the King of Fire invested the dwelling place of Borealis with a large
invading force. The attack was a savage one but his fiery majesty was finally
repulsed. The Nushkas were assigned to the defence and we had as our guests
the Makwa Toboggan Club of Minneapolis. Being under the walls we could see
but little of the pyrotechnic display. The action and din of the minnie battle was
quite exciting. We entertained the Makwas at Groles after the storming - a
sandwich and beer lunch supplemented by songs and speeches. There was
much hilarity and expression of good fellowship. We escorted them to the depot
about 11 o'clock. An hour later I took myself away from a crowd at the Ryan, who
were evidently bent on making a night of it."
Boyle noted in his entry for the following day that these activities had taken something of a toll on his work life: "My record for punctuality," he noted, “has been a bad one this week.”

The Ice Palace was a central feature of early carnivals even when melting the structures attracted public attention. Insurance and financial issues took them out of the picture for much of the 20th Century but they enjoyed a glorious if brief revival towards the end of the past century with appearances at Lake Phalen, Harriet Island and Downtown.

Parades are the one feature of the carnival that has endured since its earliest days. The Society's collections include examples of many marching uniforms from the various clubs and business-sponsored marching groups that participated over the years, adding much to the color of the event.

This fleece cardigan-style jacket was worn as part of the Riverview Commercial Club group in 1937.

**Object: Winter Carnival uniform (1990.250.1)**
This Winter Carnival uniform of royal blue was part of the Empire Bank group, worn by Russell H. Johnson in 1940.

This is a classic Hudson Bay blanket-type uniform, with a Great Northern marching group patch, that was worn by Louis Hill himself, one of the founders of the Carnival, in the year 1917.

In the 20th Century both amateur and professional film makers documented the Carnival, including this early Kodachrome film made for the Great Northern Railway in 1942. The event was held on an unusually warm day but the parade already reflects America's entry into World War II with its floats and military marching units.

These are just a few examples, the "tip of the ice palace," if you will, of the Minnesota Historical Society's Winter Carnival collections. I'm Hamp Smith, Reference Librarian, Minnesota Historical Society Library.