

History corner

# War, embezzlement, and the big white house on the bluff

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There has recently been a lot of interest in the American Civil War, the money in the Minnesota State Treasury, and white-collar crime. Here's a little-known story about a former prominent resident from the Dayton's Bluff neighborhood's past that, in a way, contains all three.

Emil Munch was born in Prussia in December of 1832 and immigrated to the United States at the age of 18. It's unclear when he moved to our neighborhood in St. Paul, but he first settled in Taylors Falls, Minnesota in 1852, and moved to Pine County after five years. He served in the Minnesota House of Representatives for the Pine County area from 1860-1861, but enlisted in the First Minnesota Artillery Battery on October 16, 1861 and was chosen captain the following month.

He experienced some bad times during the conflict. While fighting at Shiloh, one of the bloodiest battles of the war, his horse was shot out from under him. While Emil tried to remove the saddle, he was severely wounded in the thigh. As a result of the wound and subsequent exposure while on march, Munch resigned his commission in December 1862.

When he returned to our state, Munch joined the Minnesota State Militia as a brigadier general. During May through July 1863 he was involved in the aftermath of the U.S.-Dakota War. Governor Alexander Ramsey sent him to go to the western counties to get the settlers ready to defend themselves if their areas came under attack. In this commission, he helped fortify settlements.

In August 1863 he was back in the Union army. He had accepted an appointment to the Veteran Reserve Corps, unfortunately named the Invalid Corps. Munch remained with the unit at Camp Douglas, Illinois, until the war's end. His duties largely involved serving on court martials and guarding military prisons.

Munch returned to St. Paul in 1865 and married Bertha Seeger, a member of a prominent German American family living in Dayton's Bluff. In 1871, Emil Munch was living at a house at 334 Mounds Boulevard (now 652 East 5<sup>th</sup> Street). It is usually listed as the Gustav Munch house, but at least one of the

Minnesota Historical Society's photographs label it the Emil Munch house. At this time, I'm not sure where Emil fits in.

The house, an 1869 Italianate frame structure, still stands and is the last remaining west-facing home on the crest of the bluff. It's the one with the white columns – added sometime in the 1940s – that make it look like the plantation home Tara from *Gone With the Wind*.

Like many other Civil War Veterans, Emil became involved in politics. He served as deputy state treasurer and was elected Minnesota state treasurer from 1868 to 1872. After these two terms, Munch was succeeded by his father-in-law and neighbor William Seeger. Unfortunately, during his father-in-law's tenure, "The Great Defalcation" was uncovered in the winter of 1873. (I looked up "defalcation;" and it is an archaic term for embezzlement).

As investigations showed, Munch had purchased timberland and saw-mill operations using "enforced loans" he made from the treasury. \$112,000 would be

found missing from the State General Fund. He doubtless had the expectation that his profits would enable him to restore the loan he made to himself.

The blame was attached to William Seeger. He had accepted his son-in-laws I. O. U. and listed it as cash when he took over as State Treasurer. Seeger probably hoped that Emil's personal finances would rebound and the missing fund could be restored before any one noticed. Like Nixon's Watergate scandal, the cover-up became almost more troublesome than the crime.

After an investigation, a legislative resolution was immediately passed, ordering Seeger's impeachment. There is some confusion in the historical records. One writer said during the impeachment proceedings, Seeger sent a letter of resignation which was accepted by Governor Horace Austin. A different source said that Seeger tried to resign, but was ultimately impeached, convicted, and removed from office. Must have made an interesting topic of conversation at the Dayton's Bluff family dinner tables.

No criminal prosecution was made. Munch's bondsmen, including two major bankers and the head of a major whole dry goods firm, made the treasury whole. Emil moved to Lakeland in Washington County, where he engaged in the lumber business. He went to nearby Afton, Minnesota in 1875 and took charge of a flour mill. According to one later source, he and brother Adolph – a long-time Dayton's Bluff resident – also had a boat building enterprise there. Emil Munch died on August 30, 1887 and is buried in Oakland Cemetery.



Minnesota Historical Society

Emil Munch, c.1861



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The Munch house, 652 East 5<sup>th</sup> Street (later 334 Mounds Boulevard), built in 1869. The current white columns were added in the 1940s.

View from my porch

## Our animal companions

Sage Holben  
special to the Forum

Around 22 years old, Sophie spends most of her time curled up in front of the heat register. She comes out for food, water and the litter box. She once loved to be cradled on her back in my arms, reaching her paw to gently turn my face toward her when my attention strayed. Now she prefers to just sit nearby, seeming to doze for half an hour at a time. During this nap time, I trim what gnarly mats from her coat that I can. Under her once fluffy, long, multicolor coat, her body has lost almost 10 pounds and become sharply angular. She appears to be somewhat deaf and blind, but still able to jump up onto the bed and chairs. She chose me when she was about three years old. Poppy, my son's 17-year-old cat, had died and Sophie showed up on a nearby Iowa farm. A work colleague brought her to my office, opened the cat carrier, and Sophie walked to me, one of three women standing there. As she's nearing the end of her life, I am grateful for the years she's shared, including about 10 years ago when she came into indirect contact with D-Con and I found her icy cold, with coughed-up blood. (Thank you, Dr. Ryan, for your care!) Then there were the nights she carried her miniature Mickey Mouse doll down the hallway, giving an eerie midnight wail.

We gained a housemate about four years ago when an acquaintance called to ask if I could find a home for a stray. Renamed Tommy, the stray is still with me. He was big then; now, at about 25 pounds, Tommy seems as much like a dog as a cat. He is at the door to welcome whoever is there. He is alert to any outside noise and jumps up like a watchdog. He seems to know his bulk is formidable, as he gently eases his way onto a lap or into a snuggle. When he came into our home he brought new life to Sophie, encouraging her to imitate his play and seeming to remind her of activities she had slipped from initiating. Yet Tommy always seems to respect the old girl's space and needs.

"Perhaps the greatest gift an animal has to offer is a permanent reminder of who we really are."

—Nick Trout, *Love Is the Best Medicine: What Two Dogs Taught One Veterinarian about Hope, Humility, and Everyday Miracles*



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