Ah, love. What other human emotion is there that incites such a wide variety of other feelings? From ecstasy, joy, passion and contentment, to sorrow, anger, jealously and bitterness, love certainly lends color to our lives. Love is turbulent. In fact, the only constant thing about is its centrality to our existence. Looking at old photographs, we instantly see so many things that have changed since when the photo was taken. Clothing and hair styles, architecture and décor, technology and geographic surroundings have all evolved over the years. But look into the faces of star-crossed lovers of yore, and things don’t seem very different at all.

“For richer or poorer” never meant more in American society than in the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rich were fabulously rich, and the poor were very poor. But were the thoughts and feelings of rich and poor on their wedding days very different? Mary Frances Hill, daughter of Empire Builder James J. Hill (worth around $2.5 billion in 2007 dollars), looked beautiful in her wedding gown in 1888: http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?mhs,1308

Though the bride below lacked the fortune and social position of J.J. Hill’s daughter, she enjoyed a wealth of well-wishes from family and friends on her wedding day: http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?gust,345

This double wedding looks like the stuff of a Broadway musical: http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?scott,120

Wedding customs have changed somewhat since the Victorian era. The Victorians were not renowned for their simple tastes, but I think even their wedding extravagances would pale in comparison to the expensive shindigs that are so common nowadays. What could be better than a small wedding held in a well-decorated parlor? http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?was,477

Many ethnic customs and traditions are associated with marriage ceremonies:

(Austrian wedding) http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?irrc,1629
(Swedish wedding) http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?swede,47
(Duluth’s first Jewish bride) http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?jhs,413
Not all weddings are grandiose affairs, especially in times of war. Though their wedding took place in the middle of a trying era, this couple seemed to cherish their all-too-brief respite from the harsh realities of international conflict in 1943: 
http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?/jhs,166

Not all romances end happily, however much we romantics try to convince ourselves to the contrary. It is one of the most famous tragedies in Stearns County history: in 1886, a tornado hit Sauk Rapids, tearing the town to pieces and toppling the dreams of one young couple. Twelve people, including the minister and groom, died at a marriage ceremony, turning what should have been the happiest day of a young bride’s life into an unfathomable nightmare: 
http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?/stearns,1032

Of course, some romances end for very different reasons. One Lady Macbeth and her hubby experienced some marital difficulties that are the stuff of English literary legend-- and are still rehashed in theaters around the world: 
http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?/mpls,2680

Even if one’s marriage is less challenged than that of the Macbeths, many couples experience irreconcilable differences. Imagine if a divorce required an act of the Minnesota State Legislature: http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?/sro,848

While romantic love is the focus of most Valentine’s Day celebrations, it is of course not the only kind of love. The “passions” many of us carry through life for social causes, artistic endeavors and intellectual cultivation may number among the great loves of our lives. The love for and commitment to spiritual life and public service have driven the achievements of America’s Catholic religious orders, which exercised tremendous influence over the development of this country’s infrastructure of hospitals, schools, orphanages and social service organizations. Peek in on Sister Philomene O’Brien as she helps three youngsters say their goodnight prayers at the Catholic Boys’ Home in 1960: 
http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?/ssc,87

Love of country may have motivated these young Carleton College students to sign up to serve in the Spanish- American War: 
http://reflections.mndigital.org/u/?/ccn,162

What will Valentine’s Day mean to you this year? Don’t limit your thoughts to chocolate and roses; rather, spend the next few weeks reflecting over all the different kinds of love that bring meaning and joy to our lives. And as you do your own reflecting, take some time to explore Minnesota Reflections!

Alex L. Ames
Graduate Assistant, Minnesota Digital Library