Minnesota Unraveled

EP108 - Leon Belmont: Gender and Celebrity in Minneapolis in 1880

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Chantel Rodríguez:

I'm in Downtown Minneapolis on Chicago Avenue near 6th Street. It's a spot any Vikings fan would recognize right off the bat, U.S. Bank Stadium. It's a hulking, angular building, half glass, half metal, all corners. Later today, the plaza across from me would be swarming with crowds in purple and yellow, everyone trying to get their photo with the Viking ship statue out front. But if we were to rewind the clock all the way back to a fall day in 1880, you would have seen a different kind of frenzy on this street corner, a media frenzy. Back then, this lot was home to a courthouse, and that November, a case was tried there that held the attention of all of the Minneapolis newspapers. At the center of that case, someone named Leon Belmont.

Leon was accused of fraud. Authorities claimed Leon was a woman wearing men's clothing, passing herself off as a man. I encountered Leon Belmont for the first time while I was doing research for another episode altogether. I came across a sensationalist headline about Belmont in a newspaper article and was filled with questions. Who was Leon Belmont? What had life in Minneapolis been like that Leon's story could cause such a sensation?

I'm Dr. Chantel Rodríguez and this is Leon Belmont: Gender and Celebrity in Minneapolis in 1880.

To help make sense of it all, I went to someone who might have the answers, public historian Lizzie Ehrenhalt. As luck would have it, Lizzie's been working on a book about Belmont since 2020, and it'll be published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2026.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

My name is Lizzie Ehrenhalt and I'm a public historian. I edit MNopedia, which is the digital encyclopedia of Minnesota history that's part of Minnesota Historical Society Press. And in my own writing, I focus on the history of gender and sexuality in the US between about 1870 and 1920.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I also spoke with PhD candidate Myra Billund-Phibbs.

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

I'm Myra Billund-Phibbs. I am a second-year PhD student at the University of Minnesota studying history. I'm also a former archivist at the Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies, and formerly was the project manager of the Tretter Transgender Oral History Project there. My area of expertise is local LGBT history, mostly from the 1960s through the 1980s.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Generally, a historian's first task is to figure out who we are talking about, who played a significant role in the event, what is their lived experience, and how might that shape their decisions and actions? But with Leon Belmont, answering these questions is a challenging task.

Here's Lizzie.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

Telling people that he was the nephew of a New York millionaire named August Belmont, who was very famous at the time, but this was not actually true. He was actually from the state of Massachusetts and had a very different family.

Belmont was someone who was assigned a female sex at birth who lived in Minneapolis between 1880 and '81. Newspapers made him into a celebrity in the fall of 1880 when one of his girlfriends, he did have more than one at a time, told police that he owed her money. So the police interviewed Belmont. They saw him as a woman "pretending to be a man," and they took him into custody. And since 1877, there'd been a city ordinance in Minneapolis making it illegal for people to wear what was called the "clothing of the opposite sex," in quotes. So that was the pretext of his arrest.

Chantel Rodríguez:

We'll go deeper into that city ordinance later on.

The Minneapolis press had a field day with Leon's arrest. Newspaper after newspaper published articles sensationalizing his story, stoking public interest and excitement to sell more papers.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

The first story appeared in the Minneapolis Tribune on October 30th in 1880. It has a pretty great title too. It's called, "In Disguise: The Curious and Romantic Sensation that was Developed in the City Yesterday Afternoon. How a woman lived in male attire for a year and a half, exercising the male prerogative of making love to two women at once, a young man who turns out to be a young woman." And then the St. Paul Globe followed suit the very next day, didn't want to be left out. So that was the beginning.

Then over the next two months, there were about 40 newspaper articles that ran in Twin Cities newspapers, but also in Pennsylvania, in Dakota Territory, in Massachusetts, Vermont, and I think the St. Paul Globe's article from, I believe it's October 31st, sums it all up really well. A reporter wrote, "Minneapolis was yesterday aroused over a sensation that satiated the appetite of the most inveterate novel reader and a development that to people in general seemed more like a misty dream than a reality. A frail woman, but 19 years of age, has lived in this city since the first of last May dressed in male attire and passed in all respects as a man. She has made people believe she was an English heir. She has lived in ease as a gentleman of the first rank, she has studied medicine as any other student, and she has done as much courting as two young men ordinarily do."

Chantel Rodríguez:

Many of the papers covered his arraignment, his day-to-day in Minneapolis, and of course his arrest.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

But in general, what's happening is that people are trying to force Belmont back into the sex and gender binary, and partly they do this by forcing him to have two examinations with doctors. But then the doctor examining him in one session said that he was a man, and the doctor examining him in a different session said that he was a woman. So in general, this attempt to squeeze him back into the gender binary fails.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Though today it may seem expected for a medical professional to examine Belmont and give a credible diagnosis, this was still a fairly novel idea in the 1880s. At the beginning of the 1800s, doctors had little cultural authority. People did not trust physicians as the ultimate authority on health and illness. In fact, there were actually different schools of thought among medical practitioners. Doctors would often disagree amongst themselves on how to best treat illnesses. But with the discovery

of germs in the late 1800s and new ways of treating illness, doctors began to gain more of the public's trust.

US government agencies and other institutions were quicker to get on board. The courts embraced these medical advances as a new form of expert testimony. In the late 1890s, X-ray technology offered doctors new knowledge of internal anatomy, lending their diagnoses even more credibility. All of this only served to deepen the public trust in physician's authority.

With this framing, it makes sense that Minneapolis law enforcement would turn to physicians to determine if Leon Belmont was a man or "only pretending." It also makes sense that those two doctors would disagree.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

Yeah, absolutely. So it's an era of medicalization, it's an era of the public giving more authority to doctors, and it's also the era of the birth of modern psychiatry, and that's a huge force in labeling people in this period, in coming up with taxonomies of identities for people based on their, what we would today call gender identity and sexual attraction, sexual orientation.

Chantel Rodríguez:

As time wore on, some of the coverage began to dig into Leon Belmont's backstory.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

So after the initial Belmont sensation in February of 1881, a Connecticut newspaper ran an article on Belmont, and a reader of that newspaper actually recognized him as someone he had known a few years earlier in Northampton, Massachusetts. So the reader wrote a letter to a friend in Minneapolis saying that he thought Belmont was a woman named Mrs. Stanley. He said that Mrs. Stanley's unmarried name had been Addie Walker and she'd been indicted for fraud in 1876. She'd also spent five months in jail. In 1878, she had moved to Kansas, and this lined up with what Belmont had been telling people that he had done in Minnesota.

And then the Minneapolis friend of the Massachusetts reader told the Minneapolis Tribune and then the Boston Globe eventually verified the facts about Walker. And then the Minneapolis Tribune finally confirmed on February 21st that Belmont had been born in Warren, Massachusetts in 1853, was not the nephew of August Belmont, the millionaire, but the son, or rather the person assigned a female sex at birth, child of Albert Walker.

So Addie Walker was indicted for fraud in Massachusetts a couple years before she transitioned to living as Belmont and was in jail in Springfield for almost six months. Eventually got out of jail, was never actually convicted of a crime, important to remember, but did, at that point, transition to living full-time as a man as Leon Belmont, and he lived as a man for 25 years. And that's part of why it's important to respect his commitment to being a man and that's why I use he/him pronouns, even when the newspapers use she/her.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Lizzie is highlighting an important aspect of gender history: being careful with terminology usage. The terms and concepts we would use today to talk about gender would not necessarily be the same in the late 19th century or even make sense to someone living at that time. Gender historians have to give careful thought to the language they do or do not choose to use. Many historians use gender variants as a sort of umbrella term, a phrase that covers the many ways people defied gender norms before they used terms like trans, non-binary, and intersex, to name a few.

I wanted to understand how a historian thinks through these language choices, so I asked Myra.

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

There's the consideration, as I mentioned, of not wanting to refer to Belmont as a transsexual or as a transperson because that terminology would not have been available to him. And I definitely am hopping around different terms, like gender variant, gender-nonconforming, gender migrant, those I've seen used in a lot of different contexts and I think all pretty much do the same work of just describing a person who has moved from their birth sex to a different sex in terms of their presentation, their social role, and how they want to be perceived.

Chantel Rodríguez:

It's so important to think about people on their own terms and in their own context, right?

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

Mm-hmm.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Which really can be the challenge, I think, for historians or anyone interested in looking into the past is something you have to be very, very mindful of. When you

think about Leon Belmont's story, it was sensationalized; people in the newspaper were writing about him in a lot of different ways and really just questioning his gender identity, right?

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

Mm-hmm.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Is he a man? Is he a female? That kind of language. And as historians sometimes, or even non-historians, can feel very tempted to apply the terminology of today to people in the past, as you hear stories.

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

Oh, sure.

Chantel Rodríguez:

As you hear Leon Belmont's story, right? So as a historian, how do you approach explaining Belmont's identity to folks who are struggling with applying labels? And do we even have to apply a label here?

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

Right. I mean, this is a really good question and it's something that I think comes up a lot in terms of the terms that we use to describe people have changed so much since Leon Belmont's lifetime, but I think a good rule of thumb is that you never want to describe somebody in a way that they wouldn't understand if you were speaking to them contemporaneously. Right?

Chantel Rodríguez:

Mm-hmm.

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

I think with the Leon Belmont story in particular, there has to be an understanding of the reason that this became news in the first place and became history in the first place, while also being respectful of an idea that we have about this person's sense of themself that 99.9% of the time we're not going to really know, we're just going to have to conjecture from the things they said to the newspaper man who showed up

at the door or the things that they said to the doctor or the thing, such and such. So trying to balance between how do we build an accurate picture so that this has some relevance and people can understand the situation that existed and can picture it and can actually take it at face value, while also being really respectful of what we imagine this person's idea of themself to be.

And so to take that more specifically into the realm of language, it is, I think, right not to describe a person like Leon Belmont as "a transperson" because that would have no meaning to that person, right? But at the same time, we can understand in 2024 that if this person lived today, that's how we would, that's the box we would put them into. And so I just think all you have to do is say both those things, and I definitely see that in the writing about Belmont. And to be clear, that would be, this is hugely different from the way that these people used to be written about and even used to be written about 10, 15, 20 years ago.

So that's a very broad answer to your question, but we do ourselves a great disservice when we try to fit people, the square peg in the round hole. It's just never going to work, right? We have to be able to adjust expectations and adjust our image of the past based on what we're finding, not adjusting what we're finding based on our image of the past.

Chantel Rodriguez:

Using caution when applying terms goes beyond respect towards the individual. Myra is saying that applying our ideas and terminology of the present onto people in the past could mean we risk misunderstanding the history itself.

Here's Lizzie again.

I'm wondering what you say to folks who really want to put a modern label on Belmont.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

I would say that it's not helpful because it's using a historical frame that was not his, and there are two parts of this though. One is recognizing that using today's language is not helpful, but also realizing that at the same time that's true, he is a predecessor of the people who live today who are trans and queer and intersex, I would argue. So it doesn't mean that we can't claim him as a kind of ancestor. I really encourage that actually because there's a lot that we can see in his experiences in our own experiences today.

But at the same time, neat history is not good history. It's not responsible history. To be a responsible historian, you have to embrace complexity and you have to be willing to complicate your arguments when you get new evidence, and above all, you

have to think like a person from the time period you're studying rather than your own time period.

Chantel Rodríguez:

That's something that's easier said than done. Both Myra and Lizzie seemed able to put themselves in the shoes of someone who'd lived during Belmont's time. How were they able to do that, and where did they find the information that made it possible? I asked Lizzie to take me back to the beginning of her research process.

Can you tell me about the first time you came across the story of Leon Belmont?

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

Well, like a lot of historians do, I came across Belmont's story when I was looking for a different story. I was researching two people who escaped from Shakopee State Reformatory for Women In 1949. I was in the Star Tribune Digital Archives, which is an amazing source. I used the search term "dressed as a man" because that was how the newspapers wrote about the two people I was researching. But the first result was not about Shakopee or the 1940s, it was about someone named Leon Belmont who was arrested in Minneapolis in 1880. And I very quickly became interested in Belmont and left behind the research that I had intended to do because I discovered article after article on Belmont.

Chantel Rodriguez:

I'm curious if you could share with me what perhaps the biggest challenge has been in doing this research and how you've overcome it or attempted to overcome it.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

The biggest challenge has been staying alert to distortions in sensational newspaper articles. I would estimate that a good 25% of what was printed about Belmont just wasn't true. Beyond that, the challenge is to remember that people like Belmont didn't experience gender and sexuality the way that we do today, to not fall into those kinds of anachronisms while still recognizing him as part of trans and queer history, and also just remembering that he probably didn't label himself and that he was just a person living his life.

They didn't use words that we'd recognize in 2024. They did get very creative. They called him a female man, the what-is-it, which is used frequently in the late 19th century coming off of freak shows, and they called him a masquerader, an adventuresse, a femme masculine contortionist, and a mystery in pantaloons. In particular, the Illustrated Police News, which actually had national reach, called him

"a woman in pantaloons who made love to girls and became engaged to them in marriage."

So there's a little bit of overlap here with the modern identity category we call intersex. That word was not in use, but the St. Paul Globe did float the possibility that Belmont was similar to what we would today call intersex. So at the time, doctors didn't have the technology to detect chromosomes or measure hormones and intersex, the way we know it, isn't a thing. But instead, people did use an offensive word that I won't mention here, I won't say here, that comes from putting together the names of two Greek gods, hilariously enough, Hermes and Aphrodite.

So 1800s doctors labeled people with this word when they failed to read as either male or female unambiguously during physical examinations, and people who weren't doctors also use this word less precisely to describe a lot of different androgynous traits, but it is an offensive word today, just as it was then.

Chantel Rodríguez:

With so many sources saying so many different things, it might be your first instinct to want to suss out the truth or the answer, but Lizzie has realized that there's not necessarily a single term that could define Leon Belmont. That's not her task anyway. Her goal is to understand Leon on his own terms in the historical context of his time.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

Yeah, it's really disrespectful to have a gotcha approach to this kind of history. People who trans gender in the past are not figures to be unmasked and exposed. That's, again, really disrespectful. So instead, what I'm trying to do is put Belmont in historical context and just give him the benefit of a narrative of his entire life because a lot of people who trans gender in this period, you don't hear about them from birth to death. You just hear about them in these moments of sensation.

When we think about our own lives, we realize that they don't make very much sense. Often our identities are nonsensical. That's as true for gender-normative people as for gender-non-normative people, as true for straight people as for queer people. So it's just important to not feel like you're the excavator of the truths of other people's lives because people's truths are their own.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Myra takes a similar approach when reflecting on Belmont.

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

So I would say as a historian, I am really interested in small-scale things. I'm really interested in individuals and their commitments, their relationships, their attachments. So I was really taken by the attention that Lizzie gives to Leon's love life, to Leon's sense of himself, and to really specific instances in his life of his travels, and not only of his travels and the actual trajectory of his life, but also the stories that he told about the trajectory of his life, the myth-making that he did about himself.

And I think this actually speaks to what is so salient about trans history, is trans history is not, it's in no meaningful way distinct from studying any other group of people because ultimately it's about self-formation, it's about myth-making, it's about the stories that we tell and the things that we choose to commit ourselves to. Right?

Chantel Rodríguez:

As for how Lizzie was able to find out so much about Leon's life trajectory, it was through painstaking, careful, deep dives into the archives. Part of that was looking into local court records. Remember that courthouse, the one that used to be where the U.S. Bank Stadium is today?

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

The courthouse is important because it was the scene of Belmont's arraignment and a lot of newspaper reporters covered it. So they went in person and they wrote these very detailed descriptions of Belmont's appearance, commenting on his hair and his face and his body, and how attractive he was, and what his assumed attitude was like. And the reporters also recorded the fact that the courtroom was packed. Everyone, it seems, had gone down to the courthouse to see Belmont, and it was really a moment of gawking for the community. So it was really one of the few times that Belmont actually appeared and spoke in public.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Got it. And can you put that in context of the timeline? So we know he's arrested, arraigned put at the courthouse, and then we have that story that kicks everything off with the sensation?

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

After December, there were still more articles, but the intensity really died down. And in fact, in January, one newspaper ran an item that just said, "Leon Belmont slipped on a sidewalk and sprained his arm." And I find that interesting because it shows how

much of a celebrity he was. It was newsworthy just when he fell down on a sidewalk. And it shows too that either someone in the public was out walking around and noticed him and then told the newspaper or that a reporter recognized him. I think those are both pretty hilarious.

Chantel Rodríguez:

More than 100 articles, each building out a piece of Leon Belmont's story. What kind of angle did these stories take? What could reading between the lines tell us about how late 1800s Minneapolis was thinking of Leon Belmont?

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

The St. Paul Globe wrote, "Enough has been made known to establish Belmont as the most despicable creature that ever breathed the air of Minnesota. The lowest woman of the street is respectable by the side of this mass of abomination. The woman who shows to the world her true character, be it ever so bad, is a princess by the side of this Belmont who has betrayed her womanhood and misled two as respectable young ladies as there are in the community in the most delicate of all matters, which is nothing more or less than love."

What I've just read here is tricky because in some ways it hints at condemnation of gender variance that isn't going to come for a few decades yet. It uses the word abomination, which has a lot of biblical charge to it, especially Christian condemnation of same-sex relationships. And it does express some outrage, but I would caution people to notice that the outrage is not that Belmont is some kind of gender outlaw or that he's not gender-normative, but that he's a fraud, that he's pretending something, and that he has fooled these young ladies and prevented them from making marriages. So really, the drama is not about sex or gender deviance so much as it's about fraud, assumed fraud.

Chantel Rodríguez:

At this stage, I have a better sense of who Leon Belmont was. I thought about the most fitting terminology to use and tried to put myself in the shoes of both Leon Belmont and the press. But to fully understand the whole story, I need to know more about the society in which he lived. How did Minnesotans of the late 1800s think about people like Leon Belmont? Why were these newspaper articles so focused on fraud in particular?

As it turns out, it's because in the late 1800s, Minneapolis was experiencing a huge surge in population growth. Between 1880 and 1890, the city's population went from roughly 46,000 to about 164,000. Minnesotans in the city could no longer recognize everyone they passed on the street. Concern over crime rose, and with it, the policing

budget for the city. Spending on the police force nearly quadrupled between 1882 and 1893.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

The 1880s was a decade of huge growth of urban police forces. And as you say, there's a lot of money that's suddenly dedicated to this because there is, if not an actual increase in crime, then a perceived increase in crime.

Chantel Rodríguez:

There is, yeah. Yep.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

There's a perceived... Well, there's increased anxiety about the possibility of crime, and I think the fraud that Belmont was assumed to have committed is tied up in that.

Chantel Rodríguez:

You mentioned he was arrested because he was in violation of the Minneapolis city ordinance against cross-dressing. Can you tell me, one, when that ordinance was actually passed, and why it was put in place in the first place?

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

Sure. It was put in place in 1877, so it was really new in 1880, and it's a remarkable piece of timing that Belmont actually could be charged with anything at all. But Minneapolis was actually the 19th US city to outlaw cross-dressing by ordinance or statute between the years of 1845 and 1880 and this was really a reaction to the fact that American cities were reaching a critical mass in size during this period.

In the mid-1800s, they were getting so big that they packed together strangers who couldn't be sure who their neighbors were, and this was a new thing. They couldn't know who the people they met on the street were. It wasn't like living in a small town or a village anymore. And in fact, thousands of people were moving from rural areas into cities in this time, and this made people anxious.

So in response, officials of some cities across the country, including eventually in Minneapolis, thought that making a cross-dressing ordinance would cut down on what they thought of as fraud, so someone pretending to be someone that they were not.

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

I mean, the traditional discourse around people like Belmont was that they were, and Lizzie gets into this, but basically that they were in some way dishonest or they were fraudsters, they donned men's clothing so that they could take certain occupations or that they could fight in wars or be sailors or whatever it was. And that might be the case that they did some of those things also to take part in male social and economic roles, but we can bring a different perspective on it when we can start to think through what they actually felt about themselves and how they understood themselves instead of just how they appeared to their contemporaries.

Chantel Rodríguez:

From what Myra and Lizzie are saying, it sounds as if Minnesotans at the time were more interested in how Leon Belmont might have deceived them rather than what we today would call his gender variance. What does this say about society and its perceptions of gender and sexuality in the late 1800s? Was defiance of gender norms less of a concern?

When we think about people's real-time reactions to the story from these newspapers that you're talking about, what do their real-time reactions to Belmont's story tell us about how society of the late 1800s thought about gender and/or sexuality?

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

They show us that Americans living in 1880 didn't think of variations in gender and sexual attraction as a kind of disease the way that they started to over the next few decades. They didn't see it as evidence of an identity either. None of the Twin Cities newspapers said that Belmont was a kind of person for having relationships with women or for presenting as a man. Sexual orientation and gender identity, as we know them, didn't exist in Minneapolis in 1880 or in any other US city. There was a brand-new field called sexology, which is the scientific study of sexual behavior, but that was only just starting to develop with doctors in Europe. So for this reason, reporters in Minneapolis and other cities didn't think of Belmont as trans, for example, or gender-fluid or gay or bi or lesbian, but, of course, they didn't think of him as straight or cisgender either because those also didn't exist.

So the Belmont sensation played out in a time period before sexology had changed the way people thought about sex and gender, and you can see this in the way the reporters write about him. Most of them focus on exposing him as a liar, not on classifying him exactly, not classifying him, for example, as an invert, to use a word that was coming out of sexology at the time, just starting to. But they do ask the question, what is it? And the answer for them can only be he's a man or he is a woman pretending to be a man.

I was excited because I found confirmation of what I would expect to see in this period, which is that for most people in Minneapolis in 1880, Belmont was not necessarily a problem that needed to be solved. He was sensationalized, he was sexualized, but most people didn't think of him as a monster or diseased in some way. They just thought that he was pretending.

Chantel Rodríguez:

How long does this sensation last for, and does it maintain a level of intensity the entire time?

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

It goes on for about two months at the high level of intensity, so between October 30th and the end of December. After December, there are a few more things. For example, I mentioned the item about Belmont slipping on the sidewalk. The Minneapolis Journal wrote as early as the middle of November that, "It is now in order to give Belmont a rest," so there's some fatigue there.

Somebody wrote a letter to the Pioneer Press that was published and said, "The time has come for dropping the public and private discussion of what is known as the Belmont case." And the Pioneer Press chimed in as well with, "This reporter, with becoming modesty, just simply calls Belmont a conundrum and gives it up."

Chantel Rodríguez:

The amount of sustained news coverage Leon Belmont received was pretty uncommon for an individual at that time, especially for someone who expressed gender variance. So when a historian like Lizzie stumbles across this kind of treasure trove, it's an exciting chance to gain insight into someone's lived experience.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

My first reaction was that I was amazed that the articles never seemed to end. There were always more. I kept searching for his name. His name is uncommon enough for 1880 that most of the results were related to him. Leon Belmont is not a particularly common name. I also couldn't believe that the paper trail kept leading to more. There were always more newspaper articles, more census records, more city directories to look at, even criminal court records.

So as a historian, I was especially excited because Belmont left behind more of a written imprint in the historical record than most people who get written up in sensational stories about gender crossing. Usually what happens is there's like a flashbulb moment where someone is arrested or confronted for their gender and

they get written up, but there's really only one article. But with Belmont, there were more than a hundred articles total that I found.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The wealth of insight that historians can gain from articles like these is invaluable, but there is one more thing to consider. The articles themselves are telling us that the person at the heart of them, Leon Belmont, was not a fan of people knowing his business.

In one article, Belmont is quoted as saying, "I have friends in this town who will take care of me. I have been trouble enough to them already, and as I am free from the law, it's nobody's business. I just wish the public would let me alone. I have stood about all I am going to stand. There is no use in you or any other reporter asking me any questions because I won't answer one. I am not going to say a word to anybody again."

How do historians weigh these two things, the historical value of the story and Belmont's seeming desire that it not be told? Should we be telling the story if Belmont himself wanted to be left alone?

Here's Myra.

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

Belmont sort of insisted on his right to be left alone. I found it really interesting the way that Belmont just spoke about the ways that he wanted to be a normal guy and not have anybody mess with him, not have anybody arrest him for the way he dressed. He clearly was not getting off on the sensationalization of his life in the press. I'm sure that his experiences with both the doctors who did those examinations of him must not have been positive.

So what I'm seeing is ultimately a person who was swept into history unwittingly, and I've actually found that in my own work among people that I've spoken to who said basically the same thing, that they just wanted to live their life and have the trappings of normal life, and they were swept into, I am paraphrasing the phrase that gets thrown around, but it chose them, right? They were made to be political. They didn't intend to be political. And Belmont fits that bill earlier on.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Leon Belmont did not necessarily intend to be political. He didn't intend to cause a stir and likely just wanted to go on living his life on his own terms. How does this

knowledge shape the way a historian approaches analyzing and tallying Leon's story?

So when you think about this fact that these historical actors, these historical agents are folks that really just wanted to be left alone because that's what we know from the sources, from the voices that they left behind, knowing that, for you as a historian, how does that color how you are interpreting the source material?

Myra Billund-Phibbs:

I think you're always weighing people's dignity and people's right to privacy with what something could mean in a contemporary context and the importance that people might be bringing to something from their own lives. And so there's always that delicate balance where you never want to be taking advantage of somebody's story and making them into a figure, and by doing that, making them one-dimensional. There definitely is no answer. I just think it's something that we think through in terms of ethics and ethical use of sources, and certainly something I think of in terms of doing oral histories. It's a really important tightrope to be walking and that I always have to be really mindful of those considerations.

I've been able to speak to about two dozen people and look at a number of archival sources and find a whole lot of stuff that has been out there, but people haven't been looking at it necessarily together.

I think there's a persistent frustration that sometimes happens when it comes to doing the work of trans history, that there's a sense that it is not undoable, but really hard to find, or that it's lost in the archives, or that trans people don't want to talk, or I will hear this come up. There's a lot of forces that have made trans people harder to find: A, it's a small group of people; B, a lot of people, as I mentioned, transition and then effectively disappear and effectively want to have normal lives. Stealthness is a way that we often refer to that and it's something that definitely comes up as an impediment sometimes in trans histories. There's a way that a lot of trans people have wanted to not be part of history, have wanted to, like Leon Belmont did, live their lives unharassed.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Trans history is difficult work to do for all the reasons that Myra has outlined, but when those stories go untold, it's easy to assume that they never happened, that people like Belmont didn't exist. And as Leon Belmont's story tells us, people expressing gender variance lived in Minnesota in the late 1800s, whether or not their existence is noted in the historical record.

Back to Lizzie.

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

Well, I think we assume... Well, some people assume that people like Belmont didn't exist, everyone was gender-normative in the 19th century, and that's just really not the case. So Belmont's history is 19th century history, it is trans history, it is American history. They can't be separated, all of these things.

Chantel Rodríguez:

All of the newspaper coverage of Leon Belmont gives us a detailed look at his life, but only one moment of it. What happened to Belmont when the coverage died down?

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

At some point in December of 1880, Belmont started renting a room in the house of a married couple named George and Melvina Campbell. And then in February, Melvina sued her husband George for divorce, and in April, she married Belmont in a legal wedding in Isanti County. This reinvigorated the sensation a little bit, but not too much, and they actually lived as a married couple. Belmont became a stepdad, basically, and Belmont, Melvina, and Melvina's daughter moved to Kansas, partly, I think, because they were fed up with Minneapolis, but that's some editorializing on my part, and they went to Kansas. Belmont had a cattle ranch. He sold washing machines, he ran a grocery store. And then actually in 1902, he went through a second gender transition and lived as a woman until his death in Kansas in 1927.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And how did you become aware doing your research that Leon Belmont had done another gender transition in the 1890s or so? Was that also in newspaper, or how did you figure that out?

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

That happened because I was doing research on his wife, Melvina. I was looking at her pension records. She had been married to her first husband who was a Civil War veteran, so she wanted to receive a pension. She wanted to have her pension restored after Belmont left her in the first decade of the 1900s. So there's this huge trove of paper where Melvina is trying to convince the board of pensions to restore her pension. And in it, she talks about how her husband, Belmont, left her in 1902.

But what the pension examiners actually discover is that in 1902, Belmont started living as a woman named Nova McClure and didn't actually move, just had this gender transition, continued to live in the same house with Melvina for several years.

And it's the pension records that really document this and that allowed me to sketch out the story.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Leon Belmont was more than a single arrest in 1880. He lived a full life before and after he became a Minneapolis celebrity. His is a story that emphasizes the messiness that can come from history done responsibly.

When people hear these kinds of stories, their impulse is to still wonder, "Well, what's the answer?" Right?

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

Mm-hmm.

Chantel Rodríguez:

"How did it end?" Or, "Was he a man or a woman?" And that's the impulse. And I don't think what you're saying is, "I'm doing this research so I can find that answer."

Lizzie Ehrenhalt:

Yeah, absolutely. I am not working on this project to solve a riddle because Belmont is not a riddle. He's a person, he's a human being. He's not a mystery to solve. He's not a problem to solve.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Back outside U.S. Bank Stadium, surrounded by the swelling crowds of Vikings fans, I felt like I had a new sort of understanding of Minneapolis, the many evolutions it's gone through to get to today, and the many types of people who have called this city home.

Leon Belmont's story gives us new insight to the world of Minneapolis at the end of the 1800s. It shows us that people have been questioning, challenging, and sensationalizing gender throughout Minnesota history. At the same time, it's a story that points to the importance of understanding the historical context. It's all too easy to project our present-day understanding of gender variance onto the past. But if we do this, we miss the chance to better understand the late 1800s in Minnesota and how fear of fraud set the stage for growing concerns about gender nonconformity.

Leon Belmont's story is a reminder to get comfortable with the messiness of history, to take historical figures on their own terms, and to be mindful of not projecting our contemporary ideas onto the past.

You've been listening to Minnesota Unraveled, pulling on the threads of Minnesota history. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources, and MNopedia articles at our website, mnhs.org/unraveled.

Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Pod People. Special thanks to our production team, Rebecca Chaisson, Angela Yih, and Brett Baldwin, and sound design and editing by Erica Wong. Lead Research by me, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. Our theme music is Careless Wanderer by Arthur Benson. Funding for Minnesota Unraveled is provided by the State of Minnesota, the Legacy Amendment through the vote of Minnesotans on November 4th, 2008, and our generous donors and members.

Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious. And remember, the tapestries of history are all around you just waiting to be unraveled.