

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI

By Rachel Hines

“Living with the Mississippi” is a blog series that examines the history of the river flats communities and what it means to almost literally live on the Mississippi River.

Follow along to learn more about life on the Mississippi prior to luxury condos and clean river water, before the riverfront was considered a desirable place to live.

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RIVERSIDE COMMUNITIES

OVERLOOKED HINGES BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

by Pat Nunnally

The Mississippi River corridor contains many places that are widely recognized as having national or international significance. But the stories of places where “ordinary” people have made their homes in proximity to the river are, often literally, overlooked.

This week, we begin a [series of blog posts](#) written by recent graduate Rachel Hines, an archaeologist who has conducted extensive study on the various “flats” communities along the Mississippi in the Twin Cities. These low-lying areas were subject to regular inundation by foul-smelling river water, and were sometimes threatened by bigger than usual floods. The people who lived in “Bohemian Flats,” “Little Italy,” “Swede Hollow” and comparable sites were often new immigrants living where land was cheap. In the mid part of the 20th century, these communities often were romanticized as they were destroyed, for various reasons.

But these communities bear closer examination, largely because they have been so easily romanticized and overlooked. Rachel’s series explores the coping strategies that communities developed as they lived in this proximity to a large body of moving water, as well as investigates what happened to these communities and these landscapes after the people left. By studying particular sites closely, and seeing their development through time in detail, we

can gain a measure of insight into what the Mississippi has meant to the communities here.

The series “Living with the Mississippi” takes readers through Bohemian Flats, Little Italy/Upper Levee, West Side Flats, and Swede Hollow: Who was there? How did the community change through time? Why did the people leave and where did they go? What has the land become subsequently?

In some if not all cases, these places are central to the future riverfront planning in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Our series explores themes of place and memory, the river in relation to the communities through which it flows, continuities and differences in ways people have lived in proximity to the Mississippi, and how the river has had variable meanings and uses to different communities through time.

The Mississippi is an iconic, mythic place, as well as a water system of almost incomprehensible complexity. But it is also a location, a place that is central to understanding where we are and what we might imagine our future to be.

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The Mississippi's role in shaping the industrial history of Minneapolis is well known. However, the banks of the Mississippi provided more than a workplace for the early residents of Minneapolis and St. Paul- they also served as a home. Between 1860 and 1960, the Mississippi River floodplain hosted a half-dozen ethnic enclaves in St. Paul and Minneapolis. These communities were often seen

as their own separate settlements, distant from the city located above. The residents of these areas bore a number of labels, ranging from penniless criminals to hard-working new Americans. Today, the communities are often remembered as cultural havens, places where recent immigrant families could practice their traditional customs and beliefs, separated from the city both physically and culturally.



Spring Flooding at the Bohemian Flats in 1897.
Image Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

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Three of these communities were located near downtown St. Paul. The West Side Flats occupied the large flat area located adjacent to Harriet Island and across the river from downtown St. Paul, the Upper Levee, or Upper Landing, was an Italian community located just across from the West Side Flats below Irvine Park, and Swede Hollow ran along Phalen Creek, the southern end of which was known as the

Connemara Patch. Minneapolis was home to three settlements of its own as well. Two of these were known as the East Side Flats; one at the site of the East River Flats Park below the University of Minnesota campus and the other beneath the 35-W and 10th Ave Bridges. The other was the Bohemian Flats, located just across the river underneath the Washington Avenue Bridge.



“Swede Hollow, St. Paul.” Taken by Albert Charles Munson in approximately 1910.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI

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Home to various immigrant groups upon their immediate arrival in the Twin Cities, the river flats communities were in undesirable locations; the homes, even into the mid-20th century, lacked modern conveniences like running water and sewer systems, and the residents, victim to the flooding of the river each spring, were often forced to take shelter elsewhere when their homes became inundated. Despite these unfavorable conditions, however, thousands of immigrants called these communities home, whether for only a year or most of their lives, and many recall fond memories of life alongside the river. After decades of immigrant settlement, the residents of each community

were removed from the land for various reasons, whether it due to the health risks associated with living near a polluted river or the attractive quality of the real estate.

For the next few months, this series will examine the history of the river flats communities and what it means to almost literally live on the Mississippi River. Continue to follow along to learn more about life on the Mississippi prior to luxury condos and clean river water, before the riverfront was considered a desirable place to live.



River Flats Communities Map, Created by Rachel Hines using Historic Plat Maps and Bing Maps, June 2014.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE BOHEMIAN FLATS

by Rachel Hines

In 1869, Minneapolis had been a city for only two years, and the first settlers had just arrived at the Bohemian Flats- a Danish couple.[1] The community's population grew to include over 1,000 residents, until it began to dwindle around 1900 due to commercial development at the riverfront. In 1923, many of the residents were evicted from their homes to make way for a Municipal Barge Terminal, and in 1931, most of the remaining community was asked to leave as well, leaving only fourteen homes. Just ten years

later, in 1941, the Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration published a book about the Bohemian Flats which painted a picture of an idyllic, Old World community. The flats appeared diverse and inclusive, a place for residents of all ethnic origins to escape the busy life of the city, a retreat where traditional customs were maintained. This book has fostered an air of nostalgia and romance around the settlement.



"Boys Rowing Boat Down Street in Bohemian Flats, Minneapolis." Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, Taken in 1898, Photographer Unknown.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE BOHEMIAN FLATS

by Rachel Hines

The WPA guide, and the plays, publications, and artwork inspired by the story, have perpetuated a few myths about the Bohemian Flats. Despite the romantic legacy, as well as the fond memories of many former residents, the Bohemian Flats was not necessarily the utopia it is often portrayed as. Living at the flats had a number of setbacks, from the heavy flooding endured by the residents each spring to the rampant poverty, disease, and crime that permeated the community[2]. Additionally, though depicted as a melting pot, the Bohemian Flats was one of the most homogenous

communities on the river, as most of its inhabitants were immigrants from modern Slovakia escaping the persecution of the Austria-Hungary Empire[3].

There was also a notion that the flats community was distant from the city and the residents free from the influence of Americanization; in actuality, there were a number of reasons to venture off the flats. Aside from a grocery store and a Lutheran church, most services were only available in the surrounding city. The residents of the



“View of Bohemian Flats from Across the River.” Courtesy of Hennepin County Library, Date and Photographer Unknown.

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flats were responsible for establishing churches in Northeast Minneapolis, Cedar-Riverside, and Prospect Park[4], and traveled to the city center and beyond for their jobs. Members of the community likely attended Americanization classes at nearby centers, such as the Pillsbury House in Cedar-Riverside or the Seven Corners Library.

Somewhere along the way, the story of the Bohemian Flats lost these less savory details and assumed an almost legendary status, likely due to the inherently romantic nature of the story, as well as the nostalgia that followed the evictions of the residents and the demolition of the homes. Though the St. Paul river flats communities would soon succumb to the same fate as the Bohemian Flats, the evictions were relatively early in Minneapolis history and

preceded a long phase of urban renewal in the Twin Cities. The feeling of loss were compounded by the publication of the WPA Guide, which was written during the inter-war era, known as a short period of celebration for America's ethnic groups.[5] Former flats residents and others in Minneapolis were able to reflect on their fond memories of the community, immortalizing the Bohemian Flats as a legend, a pre-modern utopia lost to progress.

For more on the Bohemian Flats, visit the University of Minnesota Heritage Collaborative website. This site features research about the Bohemian Flats, including student projects from an Archival Analysis class in Spring 2014. <http://ias.umn.edu/programs/collaboratives/heritage/projects/boho/>

Further Reading:

- A Blog Post by Historyapolis, a research project to retell the history of Minneapolis: <http://historyapolis.com/bohemian-flats/>
- A recent novel written by Mary Relindes Ellis and set at the Bohemian Flats was published by the University of Minnesota Press: <http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-bohemian-flats>
- A Radio Clip from KFAI aired in February 2014 about the Women of the Bohemian Flats <http://kfai.org/10000-fresh-voices/playlists/20140207-1>
- City Pages Review of Liz Neerland's Spring 2013 play "The Bohemian Flats" produced by the Nimbus Theater: http://blogs.citypages.com/dressingroom/2013/03/bohemian_flats.php

Footnotes:

[1] Works Progress Administration. The Bohemian Flats. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986, 8-9.

[2] Remembered in newspaper articles such as "Life at the Dump." Minneapolis Tribune 26 April 1892. "It Was Man-slaughter." Minneapolis Tribune 21 December 1893. "War on the Diphtheria." St. Paul Globe 27 November 1900. "Slovaks Brave Floods." Minneapolis Tribune 5 September 1909. "Flood Drives 200 Families from homes." Minneapolis Tribune 26 March 1920.

[3] See the Bohemian Flats population maps to learn more about the ethnic composition of the Bohemian Flats community. The information was obtained from U.S. Census Records, available online at www.archive.org

[4] For more about these churches, see Emmanuel Lutheran Church's 75 Years of Grace (1883-1963). Minneapolis, MN: Holy Emmanuel Lutheran Church, 1963 and St. Cyril Catholic Church's 100th Anniversary: the Church of S.S. Cyril and Methodius, Minneapolis, Minnesota: 1891-1991. Minneapolis, MN: Church of SS Cyril and Methodius, 1991, as well as Vaclav Vojta's Czechoslovak Baptists. Minneapolis, MN: Czechoslovak Baptist Convention in America and Canada, 1941 to learn more about the history of Immanuel Slovak Baptist Church in Cedar-Riverside.

[5] Works Progress Administration. The Bohemian Flats. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986, xiii-xiv.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI LIFE ON A FLOODPLAIN

by Rachel Hines

In 1931, after the Bohemian Flats community was removed from the river bank to make room for a barge terminal, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredged the river to allow large barges to pass through. The dredged material was placed atop the flats, raising the grade, and a sea wall was erected to ensure the new terminal would not experience flooding.[i] The city had learned to take these precautions after observing the traumatic experiences of the residents at the Bohemian Flats, as well as those at the flats communities in St. Paul, brought by the river each spring.

These floods occur due to the unique position of the Twin Cities: the Mississippi River Gorge. The gorge was created by the retreat of the St. Anthony Falls; as the river eroded the soft St. Peter Sandstone, it caused the top layers of limestone and shale to break off, moving the waterfall from St. Paul to its current location. This process left behind the gorge's steep bluffs and a limited floodplain, the river flats. When snow and ice melt upstream during the spring, or when the Mississippi River Basin receives large amounts of



“Flooded upper levee area of St. Paul.” Photographer Unknown, taken in 1952. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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rain, the river becomes too large for its banks and empties onto the floodplain.

This process remains a concern today, its effects felt when the river flooded this past June (2014). For those at the Bohemian Flats, spring floods often meant packing up your belongings and temporarily living with friends or family; there were even reports of the residents camping out in the Noerenberg Brewery until the water subsided.[ii] One Minneapolis Tribune article noted that some families had to remain in their inundated homes: “Though one house is floating and the kitchen is flooded, the family is still cooking and living there. No one would take them in, said Susie [Sustiak], because the are seven children and they would make the house so dirty.”[iii]

Floods not only brought water into the homes, but debris, logs, and ice as well, which could cause irreparable damage.[iv] The river would also carry belongings away, including sheds and wood piles, and chickens would be found drowned after the water receded.[v] Though a flood wall was erected at the Bohemian Flats in the early 20th century, it did not do much to prevent flooding. Rather, it often trapped much of the water and silt behind it once the flooding subsided. One of the most devastating floods in the Twin Cities area took place in April 1952, leading to the evacuation of the entire Upper Levee community and portions of the West Side Flats.[vi] The rise in water level led to extreme property loss for both communities and prompted the city of St. Paul to consider new plans for the flats. This eventually led to the demolition of the homes on the flats and the repurposing of the land for industrial uses.



“View of flooding on West side of Wabasha Street Bridge, St. Paul.” Photographer unknown, taken in 1952. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

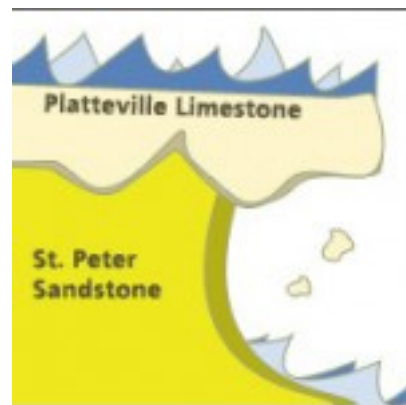


Image created by the National Park Service for website “Twin Cities Geology,” updated in 2014.
<http://www.nps.gov/miss/naturescience/twingeol.htm>

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI LIFE ON A FLOODPLAIN

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Further Reading:

- “River of History,” the historic resources study for the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area: <http://www.nps.gov/miss/historyculture/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&PageID=192461>
- The National Park Service’s timeline for the Flood of 1952: <http://www.nps.gov/miss/historyculture/1952timeline.htm>

Footnotes:

[i] Minneapolis City Engineer’s Records about the Municipal Barge Terminal. Minneapolis City Archives, 1926-1932.

[ii] “Critical!” Minneapolis Tribune 2 April 1897.

[iii] “Venice Again Appears on Flats Under Washington Avenue Bridge.” Minneapolis Tribune 12 April 1922.

[iv] “Anxiety! Dwellers on the Bohemian Flats Filled With Alarm.” Minneapolis Tribune 3 April 1897

[v] “Venice Again Appears on Flats Under Washington Avenue Bridge.” Minneapolis Tribune 12 April 1922

[vi] “The Flood of 1952.” National Park Service. <http://www.nps.gov/miss/historyculture/1952timeline.htm>

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI SWEDE HOLLOW

by Rachel Hines

Though Swede Hollow is named for its Scandinavian residents, it was home to settlers from a number of countries. Swedish and Norwegian immigrants were the first to the area, but the successive Italian population inhabited the land just as long, the neighborhood sometimes referred to as “Little Italy.”[i] Despite the sustained Italian presence for almost thirty years, Swede Hollow only served as a stopping point for these recent immigrants. It was extremely rare that a family would live at Swede Hollow for more than a decade, usually moving to a nicer neighborhood once financially possible. Many moved into nearby Railroad

Island, where institutions such as Yarusso Brothers Italian Restaurant, founded by former Swede Hollow residents and decorated with photos and artwork commemorating the community, continue to survive today.[ii]

Residents were eager to leave Swede Hollow due to the poor quality of life; Phalen Creek, which ran through the middle of the community, was extremely polluted, causing rampant disease. The houses were shacks, lacking running water and electricity,[iii] and the railroad ran above the ravine, rocking the homes and even causing avalanches at



“Swede Hollow.” Print by Jacob Theodore Sohner, 1928. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI SWEDE HOLLOW

by Rachel Hines

times.[iv] In 1956, when the population of the settlement was largely Hispanic, the city of St. Paul condemned the entire community for public health risks.[v] The residents had long been using Phalen Creek as their sewer by constructing outhouses on stilts above the water[vi], a practice that was very unsanitary, especially during spring floods. The homes were burned down, the community dispersed, and the land later converted to a public park in the 1970s. [vii]

Though the living conditions at Swede Hollow were hazardous and the homes little more than shanties, the community is only remembered fondly by its former residents. Many lived there as children and remember the years they spent there through rose-colored glasses, making Swede Hollow one of St. Paul's most celebrated stories. Gentile Yarusso remembers the idyll of the community in his memoirs: "Each home had then a little garden; a little shed attached to the home had an outside oven in which to bake bread.



"Burning of Swede Hollow." St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press, 12/11/56. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI SWEDE HOLLOW

by Rachel Hines

Some houses had a water hand-pump close to the kitchen sink... Each home had its own outside “bifee” on stilts overhanging the little creek that flowed through the hollow, and had its own plank bridge for crossing the creek. All the houses had little rustic fences around them, covered usually with grapevines that failed to grow. Grapes needed plenty of sun, and the Hollow was heavily forested with trees and other vegetation.”[viii] He goes on to add that though the community may not have been the nicest place to live, most were not “ashamed to say or let it be known that his or her folks came from the Hollow or Railroad Island.”[ix]

As former resident Joseph Morrey states in his memoir, “Swede Hollow occupies a nook in St. Paul lore.”[x] Swede Hollow has been memorialized in paintings and photographs, theater productions and art festivals, and publications and walking tours, much of which has been facilitated by the Friends of Swede Hollow, a community group founded in 1994.[xi] It is obvious that the members of the surrounding community, whether they are descendants of former residents, historical buffs, community organizers, or artists, have maintained the legend of Swede Hollow, enabling the story and the landscape to continue intriguing and inspiring audiences.

Further Reading:

- Swede Hollow Neighborhood Group Website: <http://www.swedehollow.org/>
- Walking tour of Swede Hollow created by community leader Karin DuPaul: <http://www.daytonsbuff.org/History/SwedeHollowWalkingTour/SwedeHollowWalkingTour.html>
- MinnPost Article- Walk through Swede Hollow (MinnPost) <http://www.minnpost.com/stroll/2013/05/exploring-swede-hollow-once-neighborhood-carved-out-wild>
- MPR Segment about the burning of Swede Hollow: <http://www.mprnews.org/story/2011/12/08/burning-swede-hollow>
- Nels Hokaanson’s recollections of the community at Swede Hollow from Minnesota History: <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/41/v41i08p362-371.pdf>
- Twin Cities Daily Planet Article from February, 2014: Memories of Swede Hollow <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/news/2014/02/26/memories-swede-hollow>
- Michael Sanchelli’s contributions to Minnesota’s Greatest Generation Share your Story Project: <http://people.mnhs.org/mgg/story.cfm?storyid=168&bhcp=1>
- Minnesota Department of Health on Swede Hollow’s Present: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/water/com/waterline/featurestories/swedehollow.html>
- Recent Blog Post from “The Streets of Saint Paul” about Swede Hollow’s History: <http://www.streetsofsaintpaul.com/2013/06/a-short-history-of-swede-hollow.html>

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI SWEDE HOLLOW

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YouTube Clips:

- Excerpts of Ann Millikan's Opera "Swede Hollow": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fl2NdM22LM&feature=youtu.be>
- City of St. Paul: Swede Hollow History http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLnZ4_7jxU4
- Moore on Sunday 1995 clip on Swede Hollow <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Odv-QKuK-lc>
- Segment from Lost Twin Cities <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNDhGKLLubw>
- St. Paul Historical on the Payne Avenue Area <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qo7X6mJ8uuU>

Footnotes:

[i] Yekaldo, Ralph. This is about life in Swede Hollow [sic]: things I remember and the people I grew up with. Photocopy of Handwritten Autobiography kept at the Minnesota Historical Society, 1987.

[ii] "About Us." Yarusso-Bros Italian Restaurant. <http://www.yarussos.com/about.html>

[iii] Aronovici, Carol. Housing Conditions in the City of Saint Paul. Saint Paul, MN: The Wilder Foundation, 1917.

[iv] "Two Houses Wrecked." St. Paul Globe 20 April 1891.

[v] Wurzer, Cathy. "Burning Swede Hollow: Why an immigrant community deliberately went up in flames." Minnesota Public Radio News, December 9, 2011. <http://www.mprnews.org/story/2011/12/08/burning-swede-hollow>

[vi] Aronovici, Carol. Housing Conditions in the City of Saint Paul. Saint Paul, MN: The Wilder Foundation, 1917.

[vii] "About Us." Friends of Swede Hollow Website. http://www.swedehollow.org/About_Us.html

[viii] Yarusso, Gentile. Yarusso, Gentile. Swede Hollow, then up on the street: A documentary. Published by Mueller Mortuary, Carlson Funeral Home, and Phalen Park Funeral Home, September 1968.

[ix] Ibid.

[x] Morrey, Joseph. I Drank Life to the Foam. Reno, NV: Sheridan Books, 2002.

[xi] "About Us." Friends of Swede Hollow Website. http://www.swedehollow.org/About_Us.html

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI DR. KILVINGTON'S DUMPING GROUND

by Rachel Hines

In 1890, the St. Anthony Falls Water Power Company ordered that the City of Minneapolis stop dumping their garbage directly into the Mississippi River, giving them only a few days to find a new place to dispose of waste. [i] Barred access to the river, Dr. Kilvington, head of the Minneapolis Board of Health, and his sanitation committee found a loophole by depositing trash on the banks of the Mississippi instead. It was determined that the flats beneath the Washington Avenue bridge would provide a satisfactory location for the dump, "away from the settled city." [ii] This facility, described in an appropriately titled Minneapolis Tribune article about the flats called "Life at the Dump," was extremely hazardous to the health of the residents at the Bohemian Flats.

The reporter describes the odor of the dump in great detail: "The smell though was extremely picturesque. It had frills and fancy trimmings all over it. The outer zone was gently suggestive of eggs which had become passé. Then there was wafted in an odor reminding one of a Bridge square restaurant; this was soon reinforced by foul exhalations from decaying fruit and vegetables, and the center of the atmospheric pollution was a combination of all these smells and every other that could offend the olfactory sense." [iii] The author goes on to condemn the dumping of garbage into the river as an illegal offense, and discusses the implications of these practices on the nearby community.

The residents of the Bohemian Flats were not the only people affected by the dumping ground. Not surprisingly, this new riverside location did not remedy the Mississippi's water quality issues. An 1894 report found that the water, which approximately 100,000 Minneapolis residents drank, was extremely contaminated. Report author and chemist Charles W. Drew attributed the major disease outbreaks to this problem, noting that the water's quality was one of the city's most important issues. [iv] The garbage at the Bohemian Flats was routinely washed into the river by spring floods, which not only contaminated the water, but also temporarily left the city without a place to put their waste. [v]

In 1899, the State Board of Health ordered Kilvington's replacement, C.T. Frane, to find a new location for the city dump, after closing the location at the flats. This article not-

ed that city residents had been dumping their "cess-pools" (toilet waste) beneath the bridge in addition to trash. [vi] Around the same time, a similar dumping ground at the East Side Flats beneath the 10th Avenue Bridge was closed; however, it seems that these decisions were concerned solely with the water quality of the Mississippi River. The residents of these communities were rarely mentioned in the articles. Though one story discusses a petition from the Bohemian Flats residents asking to remove the dump from their community, the government, "recognizing nothing could be done at once," filed the petition and seemed to promptly forget the complaint. [vii]



"S.S. Kilvington." Taken by W.H. Jacoby and Son in approximately 1885. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI DR. KILVINGTON'S DUMPING GROUND

by Rachel Hines

Though the residents at the flats predated the garbage dump by over two decades, it reflected negatively on the community, rather than the people who put their garbage next to a residential area. It leads one to wonder about the role of the government in creating an unfavorable place. What responsibility did the city and the city's residents

take for this trash heap? Why did it become synonymous with the flats residents when the majority of the garbage did not belong to them? The Bohemian Flats was already a place where disease and poverty ran rampant, but the presence of this city dump would have made life much more unbearable.

Footnotes:

[i] "In the City: The City to Be Without a Place to Dump Its Garbage After Tuesday of this Week." Minneapolis Tribune 30 April 1890.

[ii] "That Garbage Dump: The Health Officers Think the New Site Will Answer." Minneapolis Tribune 26 August 1890.

[iii] "Life at the Dump." Minneapolis Tribune 26 April 1892.

[iv] "River Water Report." Minneapolis Tribune 10 June 1894.

[v] "It's Quite Serious: The City Has No Place to Dump Garbage." Minneapolis Tribune 22 May 1892.

[vi] "The Court Says, Stop!" Minneapolis Tribune 1 September 1899.

[vii] "At the Top Again." Minneapolis Tribune 10 May 1892.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI HEALTH AND HOUSING ON THE RIVER

by Rachel Hines

In my post on Dr. Kilvington's dumping ground I discussed the health risks specific to the Bohemian Flats, though most of the river flats communities faced similar challenges with health and poverty. Some of these risks were direct effects of the proximity to the river, while others stemmed from the basic nature of low-income neighborhoods. In 1917, Carol Aronovici, Director of Social Service for the Wilder Foundation, wrote a report about the housing conditions in St. Paul. This study, which focused on slum housing,

consistently ranked Swede Hollow, the Upper Levee, and the West Side Flats as having some of the worst conditions in the entire city.

The districts were rated and compared for a number of attributes, including access to city water, sewers, and bathing facilities, presence of ash cans or garbage cans, degree of crowding, amount of light and ventilation, and extent of rubbish on lawn. The flats communities consistently ranked



"Flooding in Bohemian Flats." Taken by Karen Bayliss in June, 1929. Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library. (Note the trash lining the banks of the river.)

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below average on these conditions, particularly the Upper Levee, which completely lacked bathing facilities, access to city water or a sewer, garbage cans, or ash cans.[i] Pictures of the West Side Flats and Swede Hollow appeared in the report; the former was called out for the dilapidated boarding houses lining State, Robertson, and Wabasha Streets, while Swede Hollow was noted for its sanitation

issues, as the residents had constructed their outhouses above Phalen Creek to use the stream as their sewer.[ii]

Though the city of Minneapolis did not conduct an extensive survey like St. Paul, the Bohemian Flats was discussed in a 1915 examination of housing in Minneapolis. This report noted the limited supply of water at the flats,



“Swede Hollow, St. Paul.” Taken by Albert Charles Munson in 1910. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society. (Note the outhouses over the creek on the right side of the photo.)

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specifically citing a pump at the Bohemian Flats continued to provide water to much of the community though it had been condemned two years earlier.[iii] Contaminated water would have likely been a problem at many of the flats communities, as most of the residents received their water from pumps and springs. Spring floods would not only fill the homes with unsanitary silt and water, but also could have flooded these water sources, contaminating their water supply as well.

The lack of clean water, sewer systems, and garbage facilities, as well as the overcrowding of homes, provided the perfect breeding ground for infectious diseases, resulting in a number of outbreaks in these communities. The health and housing conditions at the river flats settlements provide a departure from the more common, nostalgic narratives, providing insight into the physical problems these immigrant communities were facing.

Further Reading:

- Carol Aronovici's report on housing conditions in St. Paul can be found online at Hathi Trust: <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009010997>
- The report on Minneapolis Housing Conditions has been digitized by Harvard University: <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/2574829>

Footnotes:

[i] Ibid.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Ibid.



“Woman pumping water from pump on Bohemian Flats, Minneapolis.” Photographer Unknown, taken in approximately 1935. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE WEST SIDE FLATS

by Rachel Hines

The West Side Flats in St. Paul has provided a home to a number of different communities. First occupied by the Mdewakanton Sioux, the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux opened land on the West Side to white settlement; many Native-Americans stayed and were joined first by French-Canadians and later by German and Irish settlers. [i] Then, abruptly, in 1882 a train arrived in St. Paul carrying over two hundred Russian Jewish refugees fleeing the persecution of Czar Alexander III. As Eastern European Jews continued to arrive, they permeated the flats, taking ownership of the community. Later, they would be joined by Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, and, beginning in the 1930s, started being replaced by Hispanic immigrants, mainly migrant workers from Mexico. The Lower West Side has been referred to as the Ellis Island of St. Paul, a stopping point for many new immigrants to the city.[ii]

However, through these changes, one fixture remained constant: the presence of the Neighborhood House.

In 1893, the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society established an Industrial School to teach new skills and “American ways” to the Jewish refugees on the West Side Flats. By 1897, the school, now known as the Neighborhood House, began catering to adults as well, and it was quickly realized the needs of the community extended beyond the Jewish population. In 1903, it reorganized to become a non-sectarian center, providing a number of services to the residents of the West Side Flats, including Americanization and English classes.[iii]

Scholar Lorraine Pierce, who wrote her Master’s Thesis on the history of the West Side’s Jewish community, noted



“Neighborhood house, Indiana Avenue and Robertson Street, St. Paul.” Photographer Unknown, taken in 1924. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE WEST SIDE FLATS

by Rachel Hines

that many of the clubs at the Neighborhood House were segregated by ethnic group, indicating that it might not have been the “melting pot” it was often described as, yet many Mexican-American residents remember a peaceful coexistence. In a 1975 Oral History, former West Side Flats resident Frank “Kiko” Rangel noted that “the West Side was like one big family. Everybody knew everyone and anything that happened everybody would know right away.” When asked if the different nationalities got along, he answered yes. “There wasn’t any sign of...discrimination, yes. None at all.”[iv]

In his 2010 Oral History for the Lideres Latinos project, community leader Gillbert de la O echoed Rangel’s sentiment, stating that “there didn’t seem to be any of that, well, discrimination. I’m black. I’m Chicano. I’m Jewish..

All that kind of stuff, it wasn’t happening back then, not on the West Side.” He went further to discuss the cultural exchanges between the Mexican and Jewish populations, stating that “Just being able to go to school with some of the Jewish kids and get involved with their culture was great, and they’d get involved with our culture.”[v] A look at the population maps confirms a lack of segregation between ethnic groups; other than a general cluster of Jewish Eastern European and Hispanic households along State and Robertson Streets, the West Side Flats is startlingly integrated. A 1940 Neighborhood House survey found as many as 30 nationalities represented by its patrons.[vi]

As rumors of an industrial park at the West Side Flats began to circulate, the Neighborhood House created the “Old West Side Improvement Association” to protect the



“Dancing class, Neighborhood House, St. Paul.” Taken by Carl R. Ermisch in approximately 1920.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE WEST SIDE FLATS

by Rachel Hines

interests of the community.[vii] As the Port Authority and the St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority made moves to acquire the entire community for urban renewal projects, this group was vocal in ensuring the West Side Flats residents would have adequate aid during the relocation process and worked to establish more public housing projects, though their efforts were unsuccessful. At the Neighborhood House, residents were able to meet with representatives from these agencies to better understand

their rights. Though assured by these representatives that urban renewal was in the best interest of the city, the West Side community resisted the change. Even former West Side residents joined the group, often still bound to the community by religious institutions or workplaces.[viii] When the remaining homes were demolished in 1962, the Neighborhood House followed members of the community onto the Upper West Side, where it continues to serve the needs of St. Paul's newest residents.



“West Side of St. Paul during flood.” Taken by the St. Paul Dispatch in 1952.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE WEST SIDE FLATS

by Rachel Hines

Further Reading for those interested in the history of the West Side Flats:

- The Neighborhood House Website: <http://www.neighb.org/>
- The Ramsey County Historical Society's website about the history of the West Side Flats: <http://www.rchs.com/neighborhoods/westside.htm>
- St. Paul Historical Video Clip about the history of the West Side: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5dqBRmeWjg>
- Tour St. Paul's walking tour of the West Side: <http://www.historicsaintpaul.org/files/westside.pdf>
- 2013 Post from Bill Lindeke's blog, "Twin City Sidewalks," featuring photos from a walk through the West Side Flats: <http://tcsidewalks.blogspot.com/2013/07/sidewalk-of-week-west-side-flats.html>
- Excerpts from one of William Hoffman's books about his childhood at the West Side Flats: <http://saintpaulalmanac.org/saint-paul-stories/history/a-nostalgic-zephyr-william-hoffman-on-the-old-jewish-west-side/>
- An article by Lorraine Pierce on the West Side's Jewish past, who wrote her Master's Thesis on the community: http://americanjewisharchives.org/publications/journal/PDF/1976_28_02_00_pierce.pdf
- The Minnesota Humanities Center's Absent Narratives Project: <http://humanitieslearning.org/resource/index.cfm?act=1&TagID=0&CatID=0&SearchText=west%20side&SortBy=1&mediatype=0&lurl=1>
- Twin Cities Daily Planet article about the MHC Absent Narratives Project: <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/news/2011/02/07/videos-feature-history-culture-st-pauls-west-side-flats-and-district-del-sol>
- Video Clip about the history of St Paul's West Side featuring interviews with former Mexican-American residents: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xjf45k_the-history-of-st-paul-s-westside-part-one-remembering-the-flats_short-films

Footnotes:

[i] Pierce, Lorraine E. St. Paul's Lower West Side. Thesis (M.A): University of Minnesota, 1971.

[ii] Johnson, Hildegard Binder. "The Germans" in They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981.

[iii] Rosenblum, Gene. The Lost Jewish Community of the West Side Flats. Chicago, IL: Arcadia Publishing, 2002.

[iv] Moosbrugger, Grant A. "Mexican-American Oral History Project" Interview with Frank Rangel on August 4, 1975.

[v] Duarte, Lorena. "Lideres Latinos Oral History Project" Interview with Gilbert de la O on March 29, 2010.

[vi] Kimball, Joe. "For newcomers, a place to feel at home. For 100 years, Neighborhood House on St. Paul's West Side has served as a beacon for immigrants from around the world." Star Tribune 11 August 1997.

[vii] Pierce, Lorraine E. St. Paul's Lower West Side. Thesis (M.A): University of Minnesota, 1971.

[viii] Old West Side Improvement Association Files, 1960-1961. Neighborhood House Association Records. Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI WHO OWNS THE RIVER?

by Rachel Hines

The status of the Mississippi Riverfront has constantly changed over time. Though today, the riverfront contains some of the area's most upscale housing, during the early 1900s, these areas were undesirable, home to some of the poorest communities in the Twin Cities. A 1917 report by Dr. Carol Aronovici, Director of Social Service for the

Wilder Foundation describes the West Side Flats, Swede Hollow, and the Upper Levee as some of the worst housing conditions in St. Paul and makes a few recommendations for their use, were the housing to be demolished and the residents relocated: "Phalen Creek and the banks of this stream are ideal for park purposes, while in their



Barge at Municipal River Terminal, Minneapolis. Taken by Norton & Peel in 1958.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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by Rachel Hines

present state they constitute a menace to the health of the residents and to the community at large.” “The ‘Flats’ if properly treated would afford a splendid opportunity for the development of an industrial zone accessible to rail and river transportation instead of being what they are today, a slum of the worst character.”[i]

Though it took a few decades, Aronovici’s visions eventually came true. Swede Hollow became a public park in the 1970s, while the West Side Flats and the Upper Levee were used for industrial purposes beginning in the 1960s. The latter two communities, victims of intense flooding, poor housing conditions, and the city’s growing interest in urban planning, were dispersed throughout St. Paul. Today,

however, the industry at the riverfront has shrunk; the Upper Levee is home to the “Riverview at Upper Landing” apartment complex, while plans to give the West Side Flats a residential facelift are underway. When the residents of the West Side Flats were removed in 1962 by the St. Paul Port Authority and the Housing and Relocation Authority, the community, informed that they would have public housing options, assumed the public housing would be built on the flats, allowing the settlement to remain intact. To their dismay, public housing was never constructed on the Lower West Side, though there was plenty of room to do so.[ii]



“View of Mississippi River showing coal barges at Municipal River Terminal, Minneapolis.”
Photographer unknown, taken in approximately 1940. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI WHO OWNS THE RIVER?

by Rachel Hines

Now, after over 50 years, housing will be built on the West Side Flats, with the quality of living improved immensely through plans for parks, a raised floodplain, and new facilities. Because the industrial riverfront is no longer lucrative, a residential riverfront will take its place. It begs the question, who owns the river? How will the river continue to be repurposed over time to take advantage of the changing economy? The residents at the Bohemian Flats, in Minneapolis, believed they owned their land; though they did not hold the lease to the land, they

maintained that it was wrong to charge rent for land on a river flat because it was claimed by the rising water each year.[iii] They were evicted to make room for a Municipal Barge Terminal which would allow for river trade routes. How long will the apartment complexes at the Upper Levee and the West Side Flats remain in place before another use takes precedence?



Riverview at Upper Landing Apartments.
Courtesy of their website, <http://www.riverviewatupperlanding.com/>

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI WHO OWNS THE RIVER?

by Rachel Hines

Further Reading:

- West Side Flats Master Plan <http://www.stpaul.gov/index.aspx?nid=5166>
- Upper Levee “River View” <http://www.riverviewatupperlanding.com/>

Footnotes:

[i] Aronovici, Carol. Housing Conditions in the City of St. Paul: Report Presented to the Housing Commission of the St. Paul Association. Amherst H. Wilder Charity, 1917.

[ii] Old West Side Improvement Association Files, 1960-1961. Neighborhood House Association Records. Minnesota Historical Society.

[iii] “River Flat Squatters Lose Battle to Keep Rent Free Homes.” Minneapolis Journal 14 November 1923.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE CONNEMARA PATCH

by Rachel Hines

The Connemara Patch, also known as South Phalen Creek, was a community located adjacent to Swede Hollow until 1908, when it was dispersed by railroad construction.[i] Though there were a number of ethnic groups represented at this small and short-lived settlement, many of the

residents were from Ireland or the United Kingdom. The name of the community has origins in the Connemara region of Ireland, which saw a terrible famine in the late 19th century. Catholic Bishop John Ireland of St. Paul, hoping to alleviate some of the poverty, brought a group



“Happy Hollow, Connemara Patch.” Painting by Wilbur Hausener, 1935.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE CONNEMARA PATCH

by Rachel Hines

of Connemara settlers to Graceville, Minnesota in 1880.

[ii] This project failed for a number of reasons, explained in an article by Father John Shannon for Minnesota History Magazine.

After barely surviving the harsh winter of 1880-1881, many of the settlers left their farms to take industrial jobs in the Twin Cities, establishing a settlement in the Connemara Patch. Poverty seems to have followed the Connemara settlers there, as the area along Phalen Creek was considered to have some of the worst housing conditions in St. Paul.[iii] Articles in the St. Paul Globe with titles like "Sad Case of Destitution" and "In Homes of Want" describe the miserable conditions of the community, the latter noting that the "little hovel" was "small, contracted and unfit for any human to live in," and that at the Connemara Patch "filth reigns supreme." [iv]

Two other river flats communities, the West Side Flats in St. Paul and the Bohemian Flats in Minneapolis, were both referred to as the Connemara Patch at times as well. [v] Though there was a large Irish population at the West Side Flats into the 1900s, as well as a much smaller Irish presence at the Bohemian Flats, it is unclear whether these settlers were actually a part of the Connemara clan or if this was a name used to designate any poor, Irish enclave. In her book, *Forgetting Ireland*, Bridget Connolly discusses how "Conamara" became a slang term in Graceville to describe "a lazy, drunken, no-good son of a bitch, too dumb to farm, a welfare bum." [vi] It wasn't until she visited the Connemara region that she connected the term to the place, understanding it had been used to describe a group of people by ethnicity, not character. It seems possible that this phenomenon may have occurred in the Twin Cities as well.

Though the Connemara Patch's history is short and is often lumped with the story of Swede Hollow, it has continued to captivate local historians and audiences. In 2011, SteppingStone Theatre produced "Get Up Your Irish" by Natalie O'Shea of The Celtic Junction, an Irish heritage organization which has hosted tours of the Connemara Patch. [vii] This play explored the tensions between the new Irish immigrants at the Connemara Patch and the more

MISERY'S DEPTH.

It is Found in the Shanties of the
Connemara Colo-
nists.

How their Half-Clad, Half-Fed In-
mates Passed Through the
Elizzard.

Such Scenes of Abject Poverty
Never Before Witnessed in
Minnesota.

The Fuel almost Exhausted, and
no Means of Securing Fresh
Supplies.

A Little Meal and Flour the Only
Food now Remain-
ing.

Immediate Relief Demanded—
What the Morris Good Sa-
maritans are Doing.

A Tribune Representative Visits
the Habitations of the
Poor Wretches.

Minneapolis Tribune Headline on Front Page, January 1, 1891, about the Connemara colony at Graceville.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE CONNEMARA PATCH

by Rachel Hines

established Irish community in the city of St. Paul. [viii]
The story of the original Connemara settlers continues to be told through publications like Grace Connolly's book, mentioned above, and Seosamh Ó Cuaig's documentary "Graceville: The Connemaras in Minnesota," [ix] both of

which offer a look into an event considered by many to be Bishop John Ireland's greatest mistake. The history of the Connemara Patch, though short and troubled, is definitely a unique story, and will likely continue to serve as an example of the complications in immigration and assimilation.

Further Reading:

- Father Shannon's article on Bishop Ireland's "Connemara Experiment" from Minnesota History Magazine: <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/35/v35i05p205-213.pdf>
- St. Paul Historical Article on the Connemara Patch, "St. Paul's Most Unique Settlement": http://saintpaulhistorical.com/items/show/9#.U6CMS_IdVSR
- National Park Service website about the Bruce Vento Sanctuary, the nature preserve near the former Connemara Patch: http://www.nps.gov/miss/parknews/venhto_auth-clark.htm
- Tour St. Paul's walking tour of the Dayton's Bluff area: <http://www.historicsaintpaul.org/files/Daytons%20Bluff%20Web.pdf>

Footnotes:

[i] Trimble, Steve. "St. Paul's Most Unique Settlement." St. Paul Historical. <http://saintpaulhistorical.org/items/show/9?tour=1&index=6#.U5n9lvldVSR>

[ii] Shannon, James P. "Bishop Ireland's Connemara Experiment." Minnesota History (March 1957) 205-213.

[iii] Aronovici, Carol. Housing Conditions in the City of Saint Paul. Saint Paul, MN: The Wilder Foundation, 1917.

[iv] "In Homes of Want." St. Paul Globe 2 December 1887." and "Sad Case of Destitution." St. Paul Globe 15 January 1900.

[v] "Sensational Story Growing out of a West Side Fracas over Fuel." St. Paul Globe. 12 May 1890. and "Two Men Badly Slashed: Fourteen Kegs of Beer Cause a Serious Cutting Affray and a Wedding Down on the Flats." Minneapolis Tribune 20 May 1891.

[vi] Connelly, Bridget. Forgetting Ireland. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2003, page 12.

[vii] "Tour! Connemara Patch Irish, October 1." The Celtic Junction, 2011. <http://www.thecelticjunction.com/home/past-events-2011/tour-connemara-patch-irish-october-1/>

[viii] Pleasants, Deb. "At SteppingStone Theatre, "Get Up Your Irish" tells the story of Irish immigration to Minnesota." Twin Cities Daily Planet, March 10, 2011. <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/arts/get-up-your-irish-steppingstone-theatre-preview>

[ix] This video, produced in Galway in 1996, can be difficult to find in the U.S. However, the Minnesota Historical Society has a copy in their archives.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI

A LANDING AND LAUNCHING PLACE FOR RECENT IMMIGRANTS

by Rachel Hines

Riverbanks are often thought of as landing and launching places for boats; however, the river flats served in a similar capacity for some of the Twin Cities' earliest immigrants. Though they would have arrived in Minnesota by train, the banks of the Mississippi River, located nearby, became a first home for many of these new arrivals, establishing reputations as immigrant communities. For some of these settlers, their time spent on the flats was a shameful period, thought of as a temporary stopping point. Many were only there to save money, either for a house or to enable their families to join them in the U.S., and looked forward to moving up and off of the flats.

William Hoffman, chronicler of West Side Flats memories, once wrote about this trend, making the distinction that while the river flats provided temporary homes, and often viewed by the surrounding city as a slum, it was still a home to those that lived there: "The West Side and all the other places like it were really stopping places [and] the old neighborhoods of immigrants here and all over- first and second generations- never constituted, either spiritually or culturally, a slum. They were often physically and materially poor but always rich in a wonderful culture and fine ethical values." [i] When the Jewish community at the West Side Flats left, they would move up to the West Side Hills, or out to communities like Linden Hills and Highland Park. However, many of their institutions remained at the flats, tying them to the land even after they had left. [ii]

Not everyone shared Hoffman's sentiment, however. Minneapolis resident Frank Braun, whose father had been born at the Bohemian Flats, mentioned that his family had been ashamed of living at the flats; his grandparents had lived for a few years until they could make enough money to leave, eventually moving to a farm in the German community of Maple Grove. [iii] Many residents at the Bohemian Flats would move up to the Cedar Riverside area, eager to get off the flats but unwilling to leave behind their community and churches. This is reflected in the dispersal

maps of the Bohemian Flats, which depict a large migration up to the Cedar-Riverside community and a less cohesive scatter throughout the rest of Minneapolis toward different places of work and religious institutions.

Similarly, at Swede Hollow, residents would stay in the community for only a few years, waiting to move up to Railroad Island. Gentile Yarusso, a former Swede Hollow resident, remembers how his family helped new Italian immigrants to find homes in St. Paul: "It was a period when thousands of Italian immigrants got off the train at the depot in St. Paul, Minnesota. They all had tags on their lapels, and on



"Joseph Yarusso family (left to right), Nicolina, John, Alvina, and Joseph." Photographer unknown, taken in approximately 1905.

Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI

A LANDING AND LAUNCHING PLACE FOR RECENT IMMIGRANTS

by Rachel Hines

each tag was written Joseph Yarusso, No. 2 Swede Hollow, St. Paul, Minnesota... By pinching and scrimping, in a year or two, when they had saved enough money, they, too, would move to better living quarters—Up on the Street. This was Railroad Island, just left of the Hollow, and surrounded by railroad tracks. This move would be a sign

of prosperity, of accomplishment.”[iv] As Yarusso notes, success for the residents of Swede Hollow was the ability to purchase a house “up on the street.” For those at the West Side Flats, it was the move “up the hill.” The ability to move up, both literally and figuratively, meant the beginning of a new life for the residents of the river flats communities.

Footnotes:

[i] Hoffman, William. *Tales of Hoffman*. Minneapolis, MN: T.S. Denison, 1961.

[ii] Pierce, Lorraine E. *St. Paul’s Lower West Side*. Thesis (M.A): University of Minnesota, 1971.

[iii] Frank Braun, in a personal conversation dated April 29, 2014.

[iv] Yarusso “Up on the Street” 1968

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE EAST SIDE FLATS

by Rachel Hines

Researching the East Side Flats communities in Minneapolis proved to be difficult; unlike their neighbor across the river, the Bohemian Flats, these two settlements went relatively unnoticed by the surrounding community and have largely faded from public memory. One of these, which I will refer to as “East River Flats” for clarity’s sake, was located below the area where East River Parkway runs along the

University of Minnesota Campus. Today, it is known as East River Flats Park and is the location of the boathouse for the school’s rowing team. The other, which I will call the East Side Flats, was located below the 10th Ave and 35-W Bridges between the Southeast Steam Plant and a heating plant used by the University of Minnesota.



“Residential area on the east bank of the Mississippi River, Minneapolis.”

Photographer Unknown, Taken on March 9, 1895. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE EAST SIDE FLATS

by Rachel Hines

It is unclear when settlers first arrived at the East River Flats, but the community appeared in the 1880 census. [i] The residents at the East River Flats lived a pretty quiet existence, until around 1891 when the Minneapolis Parks Board became interested in the property.[ii] Hoping to create a counterpart to Riverside Park, located on the west side of the river, the Parks Board made their first moves to acquire the land the following year. The residents were slowly evicted from their homes, until 1903, when Carrie Baker, the last remaining “squatter,” moved in with her granddaughter.[iii] Though the story of the East River Flats is not a prominent one in public memory, the name remains to commemorate the former community and the story has survived in historic newspaper articles and Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board publications (see below).

Even less has survived about the East Side Flats, however. Though the residents appeared in each year’s city directory

until 1952, I have yet to locate their names in the census data. The East Side Flats pops up in a few newspaper articles, sometimes noted as the “East Bohemian Flats” for its proximity to the Bohemian Flats,[iv] not for the ethnic composition of the community, makes appearances in the Minneapolis City Council Proceedings, occasionally as requests for utilities or public services, and survives in a few photographs, mainly of the University of Minnesota’s East Bank campus. Yet no publications are dedicated to its memory and no festivals or theater productions commemorate its history. It is unclear why so much attention was given to the Bohemian Flats and so little to the East Side, but I would suppose it was because the community was much smaller and less visible. The population was also less exotic, as most of the residents had Scandinavian surnames. Though we know little about this community, its quaint appearance mirrors that of the Bohemian Flats, and it is easy to imagine a settlement of a similar character.

Further Reading:

To learn more about the history of the East River Flats Park, or the Minneapolis Parks in general, check out David Smith’s 2008 history of the properties owned by the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board. The story of the East River Flats Park begins on page 51. http://www.minneapolisparcs.org/documents/parks/Parks_Lakes_Trails_Much_More.pdf

Footnotes:

[i] 1880 United State Census, Minneapolis, Hennepin County, Minnesota; p. 765; June 5, 1880; National Archives Microfilm, Reel 622.

[ii] Smith, David C. “Parks, Lakes, Trails, and so much more: An Overview of the Histories of MPRB Properties.” Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, 2008.

[iii] “The Last Squatter.” Minneapolis Journal 4 August 1903.

[iv] “Hikes Wid Me Rags: Little Willard Parton Explains His Presence in the River.” St. Paul Globe 14 July 1903.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI WORKING ON THE RIVER

by Rachel Hines

For many residents of the river flats communities, the river was not only a place to live, but also a place to work. Employment originally drew settlers to the Bohemian Flats. After the Kraenzlein & Miller Brewery was built above the southern end of the flats in 1866, a boardinghouse was to provide a home for the brewery workers, mainly German immigrants.[1] They were shortly joined by the Zahler Brewery built on the other side of the flats in 1874; this

brewery quickly changed hands and became the Noerenberg Brewery in 1880, while Kraenzlein and Miller became Heinrich and Mueller in 1884. These two breweries joined John Orth and Germania to form the Minneapolis Brewing and Malting Company in 1890, known today as Grain Belt. When a centralized brewery was established across the river, the jobs followed, and the breweries on the flats were abandoned.[2]



“Heinrich Brewery building (Minneapolis Brewing Company), foot of Fourth Street, Minneapolis. Photographer unknown, taken in approximately 1895. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI WORKING ON THE RIVER

by Rachel Hines

By this time, the population at the flats had greatly surpassed the labor force at the breweries. In fact, most of the brewery employees no longer lived on the flats, as the population was changing rapidly. The majority of the community worked as unskilled laborers; the men and most children over the age of 14 were employed by the mills and factories in downtown Minneapolis, while their wives and mothers would stay home to tend to the house.

Young women often worked until they were married, often employed as seamstresses or laundresses.[3] Historically, certain industries were sometimes ethnically affiliated. In an oral history, Bohemian Flats descendant Don Pafko mentioned the local railroads were controlled by the Irish, while trades like carpentry and bricklaying were associated with Scandinavians, making it difficult to obtain these types of jobs.[4] While residents at the Bohemian



"Palisade Mill on the West Side of the River in 1903." Photographer unknown, taken in 1903.
Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

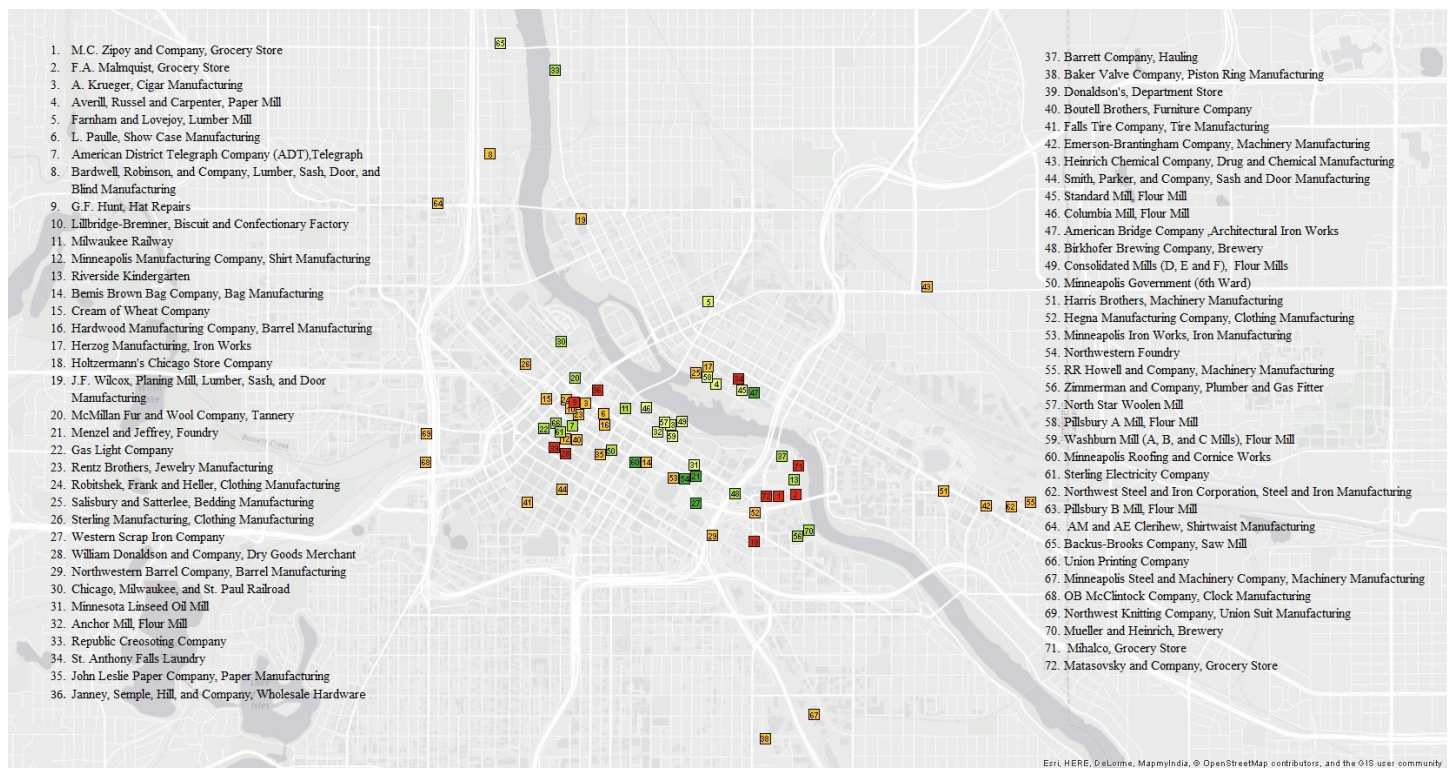
LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI WORKING ON THE RIVER

by Rachel Hines

Flats generally did not work in these industries, that did not prevent them from working in a diverse number of areas. Though about 75% of the people living at the flats between 1900 and 1930 were Slovak, they did not seem to favor any industry over another. Though families would sometimes work for the same company, this pattern was not reflected in the work of different ethnic groups.

Common employers in 1880 were the Averill, Russell, and Carpenter Paper Mill on Hennepin Island and the Minneso-

ta Linseed Oil Mill located in Cedar-Riverside. By 1890, the flour mills had become dominant, with Anchor, Humboldt, and Pillsbury Mills as some of the top employers. This concentration shifted to manufacturing companies by the 1900s, though many still worked at the mills as well.[5] Though many of these workplaces were located on the river, it was still a distant walk or trolley ride upstream for the residents of the Bohemian Flats.



This map shows a sampling of the workplaces of the residents at the Bohemian Flats between 1880 and 1920. Different industries are represented by color: mills are yellow, stores are red, manufacturing is orange, foundries are dark green, and everything else is light green.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI WORKING ON THE RIVER

by Rachel Hines

Further Reading:

- Bohemian Flats: Class, Poverty, and Labor Research Project: <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/bohemian-flats/index>

Footnotes:

[1] Minneapolis City Directories, 1859-1922. Found online at the Hennepin County Library website at <http://box2.nmtvault.com/Hennepin2/>

[2] Hoverson, Doug. Land of Amber Waters. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

[3] These patterns were reflected in the United States Federal Census from 1880-1930.

[4] Donald Pafko, interviewed by Anduin Wilhide, Houses of Worship and Ethnicity Project, April 13, 2012.

[5] Minneapolis City Directories, 1859-1922. Found online at the Hennepin County Library website at <http://box2.nmtvault.com/Hennepin2/>

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE UPPER LEVEE

by Rachel Hines

A trip to Cossetta's in St. Paul provides an idea of life was at the Upper Levee, St. Paul's historic Little Italy. Covering the walls of the restaurant are photographs of smiling Italians, shabby storefronts, and flooded streetscapes. The centerpiece is a model of the Upper Levee community, each of the houses painted and arranged along the three main streets, Upper Levee, Mill, and Loreto. Before the Upper Levee was known as Little Italy, however, it was St. Paul's Bohemian Flats, home to recent Czech and East German immigrants.[i] This was a notorious area of town, filled with

recently arrived single men, and was constantly featured in the newspapers for the drunken fights and altercations between residents.[ii] As these men made enough money for their families to join them, they moved up to the West 7th Area, vacating the flats for the Italian community. By 1910, the community's population was three-quarters Italian, and would remain so until the residents were evicted in 1959.[iii]



Model of the Upper Levee in Cossetta's Restaurant in St. Paul. Taken by Rachel Hines in June 2014.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE UPPER LEVEE

by Rachel Hines

The residents of the Upper Levee truly formed a community, a place where members looked out for one another. Many had emigrated from the same area of Italy, Campobasso, and, upon arrival in St. Paul, traveled straight

to the Upper Levee and never left.[iv] The welfare of the community was so important to the residents at the Upper Levee that, in 1931, they asked University of Minnesota student Alice Sickels to conduct a study on the community;



“Shepard Road and the Upper Levee, St. Paul” Photographer Unknown, Taken between 1950-1959.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE UPPER LEVEE

by Rachel Hines

it was the start of the depression, many young men were unemployed, and there was a high rate of juvenile arrests. The residents hoped that Sickels, a graduate student in Social Work, would find ways to keep these young men out of trouble and aid in planning programs for the new community center.[v] This report, which analyzes statistics on nationality, immigration, voting, religion, community participation, citizenship, and literacy, in addition to delinquency, provides a rare look inside one of the river flats communities, as most of the documents about these settlements are sensationalized newspaper stories or nostalgic memories from former residents. Sickels noted that the neighborhood was “almost a transplanted Southern Italian village built by men who migrated from old world towns.”[vi] Village ties were so important to the Italian immigrants that 30 of the community’s 50 marriages were between people from the same town. The residents maintained traditional Italian values by keeping close family ties, establishing their own restaurants and taverns in the West 7th area, and attending the local Catholic Church, Holy Redeemer, where mass was said in Italian.

“It would have been a normal evolutionary process for the Italians in this neighborhood to give place to the more recently arrived Mexicans, as is happening among the Italians in the Phalen Creek and the Jewish immigrants in the Central Community House districts in St. Paul, but there is a sense of permanent village life among the homeownership group of older inhabitants which has held some of the foreign-born residents there in spite of the fact that their children would have enjoyed moving into the better neighborhoods which they could well have afforded.”

–Alice Sickels, page 35

Though the residents of the Upper Levee had the means to move to a better neighborhood, they continued to remain in the community. Sickels noted that though it would have been natural for the Italians to be replaced by the newer Mexican immigrant population, there seemed to be a sense of permanence about the community.[vii] After the flood of 1952, the residents at the Upper Levee suffered extreme property damage, and the city of St. Paul decided the settlement’s location was too hazardous. An urban renewal and relocation plan was implemented by the Housing and Redevelopment Authority, and the Upper Levee residents were dispersed throughout the city. However, despite the unfavorable conditions at the flats, the community still resisted the move.[viii] The relocation plan failed to keep the community members together, placing them in homes similar to their own but surrounded by unfamiliar neighbors, disrupting the sense of unity maintained by this small settlement.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE UPPER LEVEE

by Rachel Hines

Further Reading:

- National Park Service River Heritage Poster on Little Italy: http://www.nps.gov/miss/forteachers/upload/LittleItaly_30x40.pdf
- Tour St. Paul's walking tour of the West End: http://www.historicsaintpaul.org/files/westend_webversion_0.pdf
- St. Paul Historical Youtube Clip on the History of St. Paul's West End: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GExEsdjr-whg>
- Cossetta's Restaurant History <http://cossettas.com/home/about-us/>

Footnotes:

[i] 1880 United State Census, Minneapolis, Ramsey County, Minnesota. www.archive.org

[ii] See articles like: "Murder on Bohemia Flats." Minneapolis Tribune 30 June 1888. "Murder in St. Paul." Minneapolis Tribune 10 December 1888. And "The Result of Beer Drinking." Minneapolis Tribune 21 February 1890.

[iii] 1910-1940 United State Census, Minneapolis, Ramsey County, Minnesota. www.archive.org

[iv] Sickels, Alice L. The Upper Levee Neighborhood: A Study of an Isolated Neighborhood of About One Hundred Italian Families in St. Paul, Minnesota. Thesis (M.A.): University of Minnesota, 1938.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Ibid.

[viii] National Park Service. "Little Italy: A Floodplain Neighborhood." http://www.nps.gov/miss/forteachers/upload/LittleItaly_30x40.pdf

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE RIVER AS A RESOURCE

by Rachel Hines

The Mississippi River is one of our country's major natural resources, not only providing us with transportation routes and countless recreation opportunities, but also supplying over 18 million people with drinking water.[i] Though the river's water was historically polluted, the residents at the

river flats found that the Mississippi was a resource in other ways.

The river was used to transport lumber from the saw mills upstream, which the residents at the Bohemian Flats were quick to capture. The WPA Guide to the Bohemian Flats notes that "They gathered the billets of wood, mill ends,



"Polish American girl and man with a wagon searching the Mississippi River shoreline near Bohemian Flats, Minneapolis. Photographer Unknown, taken in approximately 1900. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE RIVER AS A RESOURCE

by Rachel Hines

“dead heads” (entire logs), and other sawmill waste... ‘Slabs, shingles, strips, blocks, boards, and sometimes entire logs can be seen hurrying down the river.’” [ii] Photographs of the flats show piles of wood stacked against the walls of the houses, which could have been used to construct or repair their homes; the residents of the flats might have even sold the wood for extra income.

The WPA guide also notes that wood wasn’t the only thing the residents of the Bohemian Flats rescued from the Mississippi: “Oranges and bananas, dumped into the river by wholesale fruit houses, sometimes bobbed about in the current. “We saw a child eating one of those bananas from the river when we first came,” an old resident recalls,” and we thought he would die. The whole place was in a panic



“Women Gathering Driftwood from the River on the Bohemian Flats.” Photographer unknown, taken prior to 1930. Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE RIVER AS A RESOURCE

by Rachel Hines

until we found out that everyone ate them here. Until I came to America I had never seen a banana.”.[iii]

At Swede Hollow, the residents would catch fish in Phalen Creek until the stream became too polluted,[iv] and it seems likely the residents along the Mississippi would

have done so as well. Additionally, the river fed the flour, wool, and saw mills at the St. Anthony Falls, many of which provided jobs for the residents at the Bohemian Flats.

Though the real estate at the river was some of the worst in the city, the Mississippi still had a few benefits to offer its residents.

Footnotes

[i] “Water Quality.” 1 Mississippi, 2011. <http://1mississippi.org/water-quality/>

[ii] Works Progress Administration. The Bohemian Flats. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1941.

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Yekaldo, Ralph. This is about life in Swede Hallow [sic]: things I remember and the people I grew up with. Photocopy of Handwritten Autobiography kept at the Minnesota Historical Society, 1987.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI CREATING RIVER MEMORIES

by Rachel Hines

November 1st, 2015, marked the closing of our exhibit, “Remembering the Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices,” at Mill City Museum. An unintended but welcome outcome of the exhibit was hearing from a number of people who wanted to share their stories about life along the Mississippi. The exhibit struck a variety of chords: a woman who had lived at the flats as a young girl was confused by our “Crime and Vice” panel, remembering the community’s later years as peaceful and law-abiding. Some shared that their parents or grandparents had been ashamed to have lived at the flats, while others said they had been proud to live in the tight-knit community.

One story that stood out to me in particular was that of Ron Adler, whose grandparents lived in a different Mississippi River neighborhood: a camp under the 42nd Ave Bridge in Camden, Minneapolis during the 1940s. This area is now a part of North Mississippi Park, and though the story of



“Squatters ousted from their housing on banks of river at Camden Park, Minneapolis.”
Photographer unknown, taken on May 7, 1936. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI CREATING RIVER MEMORIES

by Rachel Hines

this community resembles that of the Bohemian Flats, its existence is barely acknowledged today. Ron remembers visiting his grandparents as a child, and describes the community as “a dump, nearly uninhabitable.”

Similar to the Bohemian Flats, there was no sewer or running water and water was collected from a community hand pump. The residents, considered squatters, lived

in poverty in small shacks and trailers. Local civic clubs wanted to evict the settlement’s 200 residents to create a public park, deeming them a “menace to public safety and sanitation.”[i] The comparison between the earlier and later river flats settlements made me reflective on the nature of memory. Why has history been so kind to the memory of communities like the Bohemian Flats and Swede Hollow, despite their notable problems? How do we choose which



“Gateway Park and the Gateway Center just before it was razed.” Taken by the Minneapolis Star in the 1950s.
Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI CREATING RIVER MEMORIES

by Rachel Hines

stories to keep, like those of the Bohemian Flats, and which to forget, like North Mississippi Park? More importantly, how do we decide how to tell these stories?

Though the river flats communities like the Bohemian Flats and Swede Hollow were once viewed negatively, the less favorable aspects of life, like crime, poverty, and disease, have been diluted to create much more favorable stories of quaint, ethnic havens. The city's disdain for and mistreatment of these communities over time has been forgotten, leaving mostly stories of their peaceful existence and later eviction. While the romanticization of these stories has caused us to perpetuate false, or at least not entirely true, ideas about our past, it has also allowed their memories to survive, incorporating them into our city's narrative.

One reason we can easily revise the history of the Bohemian Flats is that the neighborhood no longer exists. With the landscape so drastically altered, we are free to create new stories about the people who lived there. As I wonder about the narratives we will tell in the future, I reflect specifically on these areas that have been

completely erased. In her blog post "Blight by the Block," Kirsten Delegard of the Historyapolis project writes about the redevelopment of Minneapolis between the 1940s and 1980s. She mentions while Cedar-Riverside, the larger community that includes the Bohemian Flats, survived, other neighborhoods were lost, including the historic Gateway District. Decades later, we are forming our opinions about the demolition of this area, many already regarding it as a major mistake. How will future generations remember these places? Will they be viewed with a sense of nostalgia and loss, like the Bohemian Flats, or will we forget about them entirely, succumbing to the stories imbedded in the modern landscape?

Places have stories to tell, whether they are visible or not. Throughout this blog series, I have presented more complex stories about the historic river flats communities to give more depth to the experiences of the people who once lived along the banks of the Mississippi and to view places as having several stories to tell.

Footnotes:

[i] "Demand Eviction of Squatters: Residents Claim Camden Colony Menace to Public Society." Minneapolis Star 7 May 1936.

ON HISTORY AND THE FUTURE LESSONS FROM LIVING WITH THE RIVER

by Pat Nunnally

Our featured series “Living with the Mississippi” has gathered more readers than any other part of our work. Largely this is due to the stellar research and writing of the author, Rachel Hines. But it’s also a testament to the enduring hold that riverfront communities have on our imagination. There’s something about these places, whether Bohemian Flats or St. Paul’s West Side, that simply continues to interest people.

I think there are a couple of longer-term issues as well that the series and the places it describes bring to light. For one thing, the contrast between “then and now” in the physical environment is largely unstated, though ever-present. Living with the Mississippi a century ago meant living alongside what was often an open sewer and what was always an industrial waste dump. The river itself was different also. The construction of what we know now as the Ford Lock and Dam downstream of Bohemian Flats meant the water level is steadier now, with less of the seasonal rise and fall



Upper Landing

ON HISTORY AND THE FUTURE LESSONS FROM LIVING WITH THE RIVER

by Pat Nunnally

that marks a more natural river pattern. All of these factors meant that living in a space now reserved as a park was a completely different experience of land, of water, and of the sensory environment at the water's edge. The corridor smelled different, looked different, sounded different, even felt different underfoot with a marshy uneven river bank in place of today's mown grass field.

Our head note for the series alludes to another broad change when it refers to the time "before luxury condos and clean river water." Although the clean river water is

more important, it is now largely taken for granted, and Minneapolis and St. Paul have joined cities across the developed world in converting their riverfronts to something that is increasingly focused on luxury condos.

Simply put, we are in danger of privatizing our riverfronts to the point where the descendants of former residents won't be able, or feel comfortable, walking where their grandfathers and grandmothers once lived. On St. Paul's Upper Landing this has already happened; the narrow strip of public land and pathway outside residents' front balconies



Upper Landing and Residents

ON HISTORY AND THE FUTURE LESSONS FROM LIVING WITH THE RIVER

by Pat Nunnally

feels more private than public. There's room for debate on this of course; the debate would be a healthy next step in our riverfront planning and design.

The stories of places like Bohemian Flats and the Upper Landing are vitally important connections between past and present. They help us organize our thoughts about who we have been and who we are now. But we critically need new stories, stories of our relationship with the Mississippi in the 21st century. I would argue that the stories that drive our sense of the river's meaning forward should focus more than we have on sustainability and inclusion. We have spent a lot of time working on access; we must pivot to a focus on equity, where the gift of access is felt by all.

I don't think I'm the only one who feels this way. Last week, an article in the Minneapolis Star Tribune explored in some detail the efforts of the National Park Service to reach younger and more diverse audiences. One way to do this, and a way that our program can actively participate in, is to work to ensure that park visitors hear more diverse stories than we have been telling. Visitors to St. Anthony Falls

should know who Eliza Winston was and what happened to Spirit Island. Upper Landing visitors (and residents) should know who lived in that spot a century ago, and what happened to that community. As the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary planning gathers steam, people will need to know who Bruce Vento was, but also the importance of this place to Dakota people.

We have done a lot to bring people back to the riverfront. But there is much yet to do if we are to make the riverfront a welcoming place to all of the people who live here.

If our riverfronts reflect who we are and aspire to be, then what do they say about us? Do they say what we want them to?