

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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A LANDING AND LAUNCHING PLACE FOR RECENT IMMIGRANTS

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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.

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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