

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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LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI THE UPPER LEVEE

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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