

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 RIVER AS A RESOURCE

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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.

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“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.

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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.