

# 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.

First published online for River Life at <http://riverlife.umn.edu/rivertalk> in December, 2014 with comments by Pat Nunnally, River Life.

# 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.