

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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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.

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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.