

# 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 SWEDE HOLLOW

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Though Swede Hollow is named for its Scandinavian residents, it was home to settlers from a number of countries. Swedish and Norwegian immigrants were the first to the area, but the successive Italian population inhabited the land just as long, the neighborhood sometimes referred to as “Little Italy.”[i] Despite the sustained Italian presence for almost thirty years, Swede Hollow only served as a stopping point for these recent immigrants. It was extremely rare that a family would live at Swede Hollow for more than a decade, usually moving to a nicer neighborhood once financially possible. Many moved into nearby Railroad

Island, where institutions such as Yarusso Brothers Italian Restaurant, founded by former Swede Hollow residents and decorated with photos and artwork commemorating the community, continue to survive today.[ii]

Residents were eager to leave Swede Hollow due to the poor quality of life; Phalen Creek, which ran through the middle of the community, was extremely polluted, causing rampant disease. The houses were shacks, lacking running water and electricity,[iii] and the railroad ran above the ravine, rocking the homes and even causing avalanches at



“Swede Hollow.” Print by Jacob Theodore Sohner, 1928. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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times.[iv] In 1956, when the population of the settlement was largely Hispanic, the city of St. Paul condemned the entire community for public health risks.[v] The residents had long been using Phalen Creek as their sewer by constructing outhouses on stilts above the water[vi], a practice that was very unsanitary, especially during spring floods. The homes were burned down, the community dispersed, and the land later converted to a public park in the 1970s. [vii]

Though the living conditions at Swede Hollow were hazardous and the homes little more than shanties, the community is only remembered fondly by its former residents. Many lived there as children and remember the years they spent there through rose-colored glasses, making Swede Hollow one of St. Paul's most celebrated stories. Gentile Yarusso remembers the idyll of the community in his memoirs: "Each home had then a little garden; a little shed attached to the home had an outside oven in which to bake bread.



"Burning of Swede Hollow." St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press, 12/11/56. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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Some houses had a water hand-pump close to the kitchen sink... Each home had its own outside “bifee” on stilts overhanging the little creek that flowed through the hollow, and had its own plank bridge for crossing the creek. All the houses had little rustic fences around them, covered usually with grapevines that failed to grow. Grapes needed plenty of sun, and the Hollow was heavily forested with trees and other vegetation.”[viii] He goes on to add that though the community may not have been the nicest place to live, most were not “ashamed to say or let it be known that his or her folks came from the Hollow or Railroad Island.”[ix]

As former resident Joseph Morrey states in his memoir, “Swede Hollow occupies a nook in St. Paul lore.”[x] Swede Hollow has been memorialized in paintings and photographs, theater productions and art festivals, and publications and walking tours, much of which has been facilitated by the Friends of Swede Hollow, a community group founded in 1994.[xi] It is obvious that the members of the surrounding community, whether they are descendants of former residents, historical buffs, community organizers, or artists, have maintained the legend of Swede Hollow, enabling the story and the landscape to continue intriguing and inspiring audiences.

## Further Reading:

- Swede Hollow Neighborhood Group Website: <http://www.swedehollow.org/>
- Walking tour of Swede Hollow created by community leader Karin DuPaul: <http://www.daytonsbuff.org/History/SwedeHollowWalkingTour/SwedeHollowWalkingTour.html>
- MinnPost Article- Walk through Swede Hollow (MinnPost) <http://www.minnpost.com/stroll/2013/05/exploring-swede-hollow-once-neighborhood-carved-out-wild>
- MPR Segment about the burning of Swede Hollow: <http://www.mprnews.org/story/2011/12/08/burning-swede-hollow>
- Nels Hokaanson’s recollections of the community at Swede Hollow from Minnesota History: <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/41/v41i08p362-371.pdf>
- Twin Cities Daily Planet Article from February, 2014: Memories of Swede Hollow <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/news/2014/02/26/memories-swede-hollow>
- Michael Sanchelli’s contributions to Minnesota’s Greatest Generation Share your Story Project: <http://people.mnhs.org/mgg/story.cfm?storyid=168&bhcp=1>
- Minnesota Department of Health on Swede Hollow’s Present: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/water/com/waterline/featurestories/swedehollow.html>
- Recent Blog Post from “The Streets of Saint Paul” about Swede Hollow’s History: <http://www.streetsofsaintpaul.com/2013/06/a-short-history-of-swede-hollow.html>

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## YouTube Clips:

- Excerpts of Ann Millikan's Opera "Swede Hollow": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fl2NdM22LM&feature=youtu.be>
- City of St. Paul: Swede Hollow History [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLnZ4\\_7jxU4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLnZ4_7jxU4)
- Moore on Sunday 1995 clip on Swede Hollow <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Odv-QKuK-lc>
- Segment from Lost Twin Cities <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNDhGKLLubw>
- St. Paul Historical on the Payne Avenue Area <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qo7X6mJ8uuU>

## Footnotes:

[i] Yekaldo, Ralph. This is about life in Swede Hollow [sic]: things I remember and the people I grew up with. Photocopy of Handwritten Autobiography kept at the Minnesota Historical Society, 1987.

[ii] "About Us." Yarusso-Bros Italian Restaurant. <http://www.yarussos.com/about.html>

[iii] Aronovici, Carol. Housing Conditions in the City of Saint Paul. Saint Paul, MN: The Wilder Foundation, 1917.

[iv] "Two Houses Wrecked." St. Paul Globe 20 April 1891.

[v] Wurzer, Cathy. "Burning Swede Hollow: Why an immigrant community deliberately went up in flames." Minnesota Public Radio News, December 9, 2011. <http://www.mprnews.org/story/2011/12/08/burning-swede-hollow>

[vi] Aronovici, Carol. Housing Conditions in the City of Saint Paul. Saint Paul, MN: The Wilder Foundation, 1917.

[vii] "About Us." Friends of Swede Hollow Website. [http://www.swedehollow.org/About\\_Us.html](http://www.swedehollow.org/About_Us.html)

[viii] Yarusso, Gentile. Yarusso, Gentile. Swede Hollow, then up on the street: A documentary. Published by Mueller Mortuary, Carlson Funeral Home, and Phalen Park Funeral Home, September 1968.

[ix] Ibid.

[x] Morrey, Joseph. I Drank Life to the Foam. Reno, NV: Sheridan Books, 2002.

[xi] "About Us." Friends of Swede Hollow Website. [http://www.swedehollow.org/About\\_Us.html](http://www.swedehollow.org/About_Us.html)