

LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI HEALTH AND HOUSING ON THE RIVER

by Rachel Hines

In my post on Dr. Kilvington's dumping ground I discussed the health risks specific to the Bohemian Flats, though most of the river flats communities faced similar challenges with health and poverty. Some of these risks were direct effects of the proximity to the river, while others stemmed from the basic nature of low-income neighborhoods. In 1917, Carol Aronovici, Director of Social Service for the Wilder Foundation, wrote a report about the housing conditions in St. Paul. This study, which focused on slum housing,

consistently ranked Swede Hollow, the Upper Levee, and the West Side Flats as having some of the worst conditions in the entire city.

The districts were rated and compared for a number of attributes, including access to city water, sewers, and bathing facilities, presence of ash cans or garbage cans, degree of crowding, amount of light and ventilation, and extent of rubbish on lawn. The flats communities consistently ranked



"Flooding in Bohemian Flats." Taken by Karen Bayliss in June, 1929. Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library. (Note the trash lining the banks of the river.)

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below average on these conditions, particularly the Upper Levee, which completely lacked bathing facilities, access to city water or a sewer, garbage cans, or ash cans.[i] Pictures of the West Side Flats and Swede Hollow appeared in the report; the former was called out for the dilapidated boarding houses lining State, Robertson, and Wabasha Streets, while Swede Hollow was noted for its sanitation

issues, as the residents had constructed their outhouses above Phalen Creek to use the stream as their sewer.[ii]

Though the city of Minneapolis did not conduct an extensive survey like St. Paul, the Bohemian Flats was discussed in a 1915 examination of housing in Minneapolis. This report noted the limited supply of water at the flats,



“Swede Hollow, St. Paul.” Taken by Albert Charles Munson in 1910. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society. (Note the outhouses over the creek on the right side of the photo.)

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specifically citing a pump at the Bohemian Flats continued to provide water to much of the community though it had been condemned two years earlier.[iii] Contaminated water would have likely been a problem at many of the flats communities, as most of the residents received their water from pumps and springs. Spring floods would not only fill the homes with unsanitary silt and water, but also could have flooded these water sources, contaminating their water supply as well.

The lack of clean water, sewer systems, and garbage facilities, as well as the overcrowding of homes, provided the perfect breeding ground for infectious diseases, resulting in a number of outbreaks in these communities. The health and housing conditions at the river flats settlements provide a departure from the more common, nostalgic narratives, providing insight into the physical problems these immigrant communities were facing.

Further Reading:

- Carol Aronovici's report on housing conditions in St. Paul can be found online at Hathi Trust: <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009010997>
- The report on Minneapolis Housing Conditions has been digitized by Harvard University: <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/2574829>

Footnotes:

[i] Ibid.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Ibid.



“Woman pumping water from pump on Bohemian Flats, Minneapolis.” Photographer Unknown, taken in approximately 1935. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.