

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 WEST SIDE FLATS

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The West Side Flats in St. Paul has provided a home to a number of different communities. First occupied by the Mdewakanton Sioux, the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux opened land on the West Side to white settlement; many Native-Americans stayed and were joined first by French-Canadians and later by German and Irish settlers. [i] Then, abruptly, in 1882 a train arrived in St. Paul carrying over two hundred Russian Jewish refugees fleeing the persecution of Czar Alexander III. As Eastern European Jews continued to arrive, they permeated the flats, taking ownership of the community. Later, they would be joined by Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, and, beginning in the 1930s, started being replaced by Hispanic immigrants, mainly migrant workers from Mexico. The Lower West Side has been referred to as the Ellis Island of St. Paul, a stopping point for many new immigrants to the city.[ii]

However, through these changes, one fixture remained constant: the presence of the Neighborhood House.

In 1893, the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society established an Industrial School to teach new skills and “American ways” to the Jewish refugees on the West Side Flats. By 1897, the school, now known as the Neighborhood House, began catering to adults as well, and it was quickly realized the needs of the community extended beyond the Jewish population. In 1903, it reorganized to become a non-sectarian center, providing a number of services to the residents of the West Side Flats, including Americanization and English classes.[iii]

Scholar Lorraine Pierce, who wrote her Master’s Thesis on the history of the West Side’s Jewish community, noted



“Neighborhood house, Indiana Avenue and Robertson Street, St. Paul.” Photographer Unknown, taken in 1924. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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that many of the clubs at the Neighborhood House were segregated by ethnic group, indicating that it might not have been the “melting pot” it was often described as, yet many Mexican-American residents remember a peaceful coexistence. In a 1975 Oral History, former West Side Flats resident Frank “Kiko” Rangel noted that “the West Side was like one big family. Everybody knew everyone and anything that happened everybody would know right away.” When asked if the different nationalities got along, he answered yes. “There wasn’t any sign of...discrimination, yes. None at all.”[iv]

In his 2010 Oral History for the Lideres Latinos project, community leader Gillbert de la O echoed Rangel’s sentiment, stating that “there didn’t seem to be any of that, well, discrimination. I’m black. I’m Chicano. I’m Jewish..

All that kind of stuff, it wasn’t happening back then, not on the West Side.” He went further to discuss the cultural exchanges between the Mexican and Jewish populations, stating that “Just being able to go to school with some of the Jewish kids and get involved with their culture was great, and they’d get involved with our culture.”[v] A look at the population maps confirms a lack of segregation between ethnic groups; other than a general cluster of Jewish Eastern European and Hispanic households along State and Robertson Streets, the West Side Flats is startlingly integrated. A 1940 Neighborhood House survey found as many as 30 nationalities represented by its patrons.[vi]

As rumors of an industrial park at the West Side Flats began to circulate, the Neighborhood House created the “Old West Side Improvement Association” to protect the



“Dancing class, Neighborhood House, St. Paul.” Taken by Carl R. Ermisch in approximately 1920.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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interests of the community.[vii] As the Port Authority and the St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority made moves to acquire the entire community for urban renewal projects, this group was vocal in ensuring the West Side Flats residents would have adequate aid during the relocation process and worked to establish more public housing projects, though their efforts were unsuccessful. At the Neighborhood House, residents were able to meet with representatives from these agencies to better understand

their rights. Though assured by these representatives that urban renewal was in the best interest of the city, the West Side community resisted the change. Even former West Side residents joined the group, often still bound to the community by religious institutions or workplaces.[viii] When the remaining homes were demolished in 1962, the Neighborhood House followed members of the community onto the Upper West Side, where it continues to serve the needs of St. Paul's newest residents.



“West Side of St. Paul during flood.” Taken by the St. Paul Dispatch in 1952.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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Further Reading for those interested in the history of the West Side Flats:

- The Neighborhood House Website: <http://www.neighb.org/>
- The Ramsey County Historical Society's website about the history of the West Side Flats: <http://www.rchs.com/neighborhoods/westside.htm>
- St. Paul Historical Video Clip about the history of the West Side: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5dqBRmeWjg>
- Tour St. Paul's walking tour of the West Side: <http://www.historicsaintpaul.org/files/westside.pdf>
- 2013 Post from Bill Lindeke's blog, "Twin City Sidewalks," featuring photos from a walk through the West Side Flats: <http://tcsidewalks.blogspot.com/2013/07/sidewalk-of-week-west-side-flats.html>
- Excerpts from one of William Hoffman's books about his childhood at the West Side Flats: <http://saintpaulalmanac.org/saint-paul-stories/history/a-nostalgic-zephyr-william-hoffman-on-the-old-jewish-west-side/>
- An article by Lorraine Pierce on the West Side's Jewish past, who wrote her Master's Thesis on the community: http://americanjewisharchives.org/publications/journal/PDF/1976_28_02_00_pierce.pdf
- The Minnesota Humanities Center's Absent Narratives Project: <http://humanitieslearning.org/resource/index.cfm?act=1&TagID=0&CatID=0&SearchText=west%20side&SortBy=1&mediatype=0&lurl=1>
- Twin Cities Daily Planet article about the MHC Absent Narratives Project: <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/news/2011/02/07/videos-feature-history-culture-st-pauls-west-side-flats-and-district-del-sol>
- Video Clip about the history of St Paul's West Side featuring interviews with former Mexican-American residents: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xjf45k_the-history-of-st-paul-s-westside-part-one-remembering-the-flats_short-films

Footnotes:

[i] Pierce, Lorraine E. St. Paul's Lower West Side. Thesis (M.A): University of Minnesota, 1971.

[ii] Johnson, Hildegard Binder. "The Germans" in They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981.

[iii] Rosenblum, Gene. The Lost Jewish Community of the West Side Flats. Chicago, IL: Arcadia Publishing, 2002.

[iv] Moosbrugger, Grant A. "Mexican-American Oral History Project" Interview with Frank Rangel on August 4, 1975.

[v] Duarte, Lorena. "Lideres Latinos Oral History Project" Interview with Gilbert de la O on March 29, 2010.

[vi] Kimball, Joe. "For newcomers, a place to feel at home. For 100 years, Neighborhood House on St. Paul's West Side has served as a beacon for immigrants from around the world." Star Tribune 11 August 1997.

[vii] Pierce, Lorraine E. St. Paul's Lower West Side. Thesis (M.A): University of Minnesota, 1971.

[viii] Old West Side Improvement Association Files, 1960-1961. Neighborhood House Association Records. Minnesota Historical Society.