

# 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.

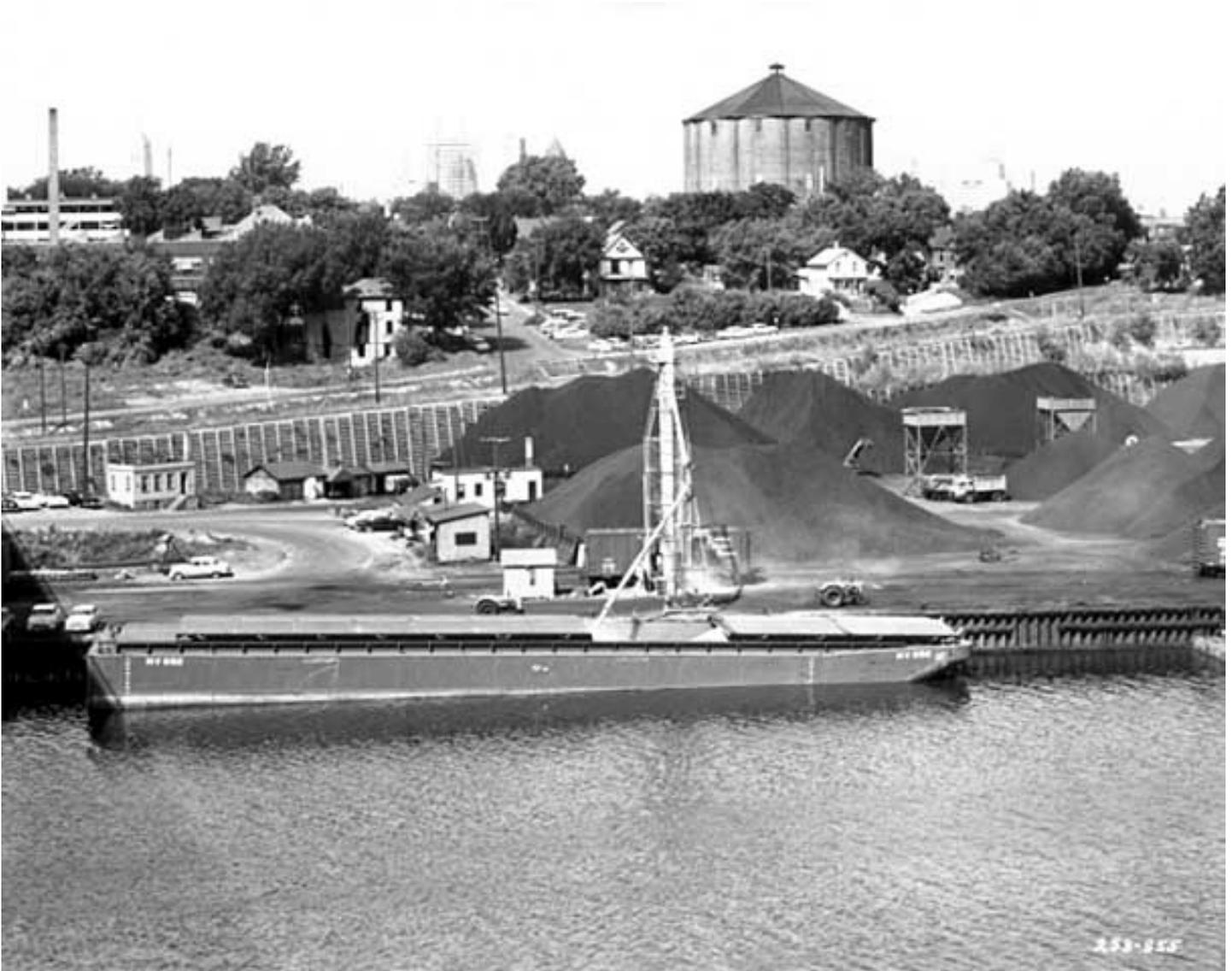
First published online for River Life at <http://riverlife.umn.edu/rivertalk> in December, 2014 with comments by Pat Nunnally, River Life.

# LIVING WITH THE MISSISSIPPI WHO OWNS THE RIVER?

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The status of the Mississippi Riverfront has constantly changed over time. Though today, the riverfront contains some of the area's most upscale housing, during the early 1900s, these areas were undesirable, home to some of the poorest communities in the Twin Cities. A 1917 report by Dr. Carol Aronovici, Director of Social Service for the

Wilder Foundation describes the West Side Flats, Swede Hollow, and the Upper Levee as some of the worst housing conditions in St. Paul and makes a few recommendations for their use, were the housing to be demolished and the residents relocated: "Phalen Creek and the banks of this stream are ideal for park purposes, while in their



Barge at Municipal River Terminal, Minneapolis. Taken by Norton & Peel in 1958.  
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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present state they constitute a menace to the health of the residents and to the community at large.” “The ‘Flats’ if properly treated would afford a splendid opportunity for the development of an industrial zone accessible to rail and river transportation instead of being what they are today, a slum of the worst character.”[i]

Though it took a few decades, Aronovici’s visions eventually came true. Swede Hollow became a public park in the 1970s, while the West Side Flats and the Upper Levee were used for industrial purposes beginning in the 1960s. The latter two communities, victims of intense flooding, poor housing conditions, and the city’s growing interest in urban planning, were dispersed throughout St. Paul. Today,

however, the industry at the riverfront has shrunk; the Upper Levee is home to the “Riverview at Upper Landing” apartment complex, while plans to give the West Side Flats a residential facelift are underway. When the residents of the West Side Flats were removed in 1962 by the St. Paul Port Authority and the Housing and Relocation Authority, the community, informed that they would have public housing options, assumed the public housing would be built on the flats, allowing the settlement to remain intact. To their dismay, public housing was never constructed on the Lower West Side, though there was plenty of room to do so.[ii]



“View of Mississippi River showing coal barges at Municipal River Terminal, Minneapolis.”  
Photographer unknown, taken in approximately 1940. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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Now, after over 50 years, housing will be built on the West Side Flats, with the quality of living improved immensely through plans for parks, a raised floodplain, and new facilities. Because the industrial riverfront is no longer lucrative, a residential riverfront will take its place. It begs the question, who owns the river? How will the river continue to be repurposed over time to take advantage of the changing economy? The residents at the Bohemian Flats, in Minneapolis, believed they owned their land; though they did not hold the lease to the land, they

maintained that it was wrong to charge rent for land on a river flat because it was claimed by the rising water each year.[iii] They were evicted to make room for a Municipal Barge Terminal which would allow for river trade routes. How long will the apartment complexes at the Upper Levee and the West Side Flats remain in place before another use takes precedence?



Riverview at Upper Landing Apartments.  
Courtesy of their website, <http://www.riverviewatupperlanding.com/>

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## Further Reading:

- West Side Flats Master Plan <http://www.stpaul.gov/index.aspx?nid=5166>
- Upper Levee “River View” <http://www.riverviewatupperlanding.com/>

## Footnotes:

[i] Aronovici, Carol. Housing Conditions in the City of St. Paul: Report Presented to the Housing Commission of the St. Paul Association. Amherst H. Wilder Charity, 1917.

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

[iii] “River Flat Squatters Lose Battle to Keep Rent Free Homes.” Minneapolis Journal 14 November 1923.