

ISSUE ONE : FALL 2015  
OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI



# KNOWING

BUY  
THE 420  
SEWING MACHINE. A.V.C. N.C.

<http://openrivers.umn.edu>  
An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy

FROM WASHINGTON D.C. 33-261-LOOKING UP STREAM

The cover image is of spring flooding at the Bohemian Flats in 1897. Image Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

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IN REVIEW

# “REMEMBERING THE BOHEMIAN FLATS”: AN EXHIBIT AND A PRACTICE OF PUBLIC MEMORY

By Laurie Moberg

*“Remembering the Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices,” exhibited at Mill City Museum, Minneapolis, April 30 through November 1, 2015.*

From fragments of stories, from the limited perspectives and sources available to us, we create our narratives of history. Yet in the process of representing this history in textbooks or museums, in policy or in practices, other stories are obscured or forgotten. Sometimes we erase these stories because they complicate or contradict;

other times we miss them simply because we are not looking for them. So what happens to the histories we tell when we look for these erased counternarratives, the stories that splinter from and enrich what we know about places, especially those places that seem so familiar? Where do we find these stories?

The exhibit titled “Remembering the Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices” at the Mill City Museum is one of these stories. Drawing from archival resources, the exhibit reveals a complex,



*“No Place Like Home”: Remembering the Bohemian Flats,  
Panel One from “Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices,”  
exhibited at Mill City Museum, Minneapolis, April 30 through November 1, 2015.  
Image courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

contradictory, polyvocal history of a place on the Mississippi River. Between the current location of St. Anthony Falls and the Washington Avenue Bridge, the Mississippi River curves through the limestone, shale, and sandstone banks. On its western bank, beneath the Washington Avenue Bridge that connects the East and West Banks of the University of Minnesota, is a narrow stretch of flats, now a park with manicured lawn, a place to come to the river for recreation. Yet less than a century ago, this area was a bustling neighborhood of immigrants 79 steps below the factories and industry centers that employed them.

Beneath the contemporary park lawn lies a history obscured, forgotten, and now unearthed in the self-guided exhibit of the Mill City Museum.

The exhibit is a history of immigrant communities that called the flats below the bluffs home. Comprised of six curated and thematically aligned panels, this history of Bohemian Flats remembers the immigrant communities through photos, maps, and primary source texts that capture the flats as both home and temporary residence, as filled with “good immigrants” and squalor, of neighborhood connection and



*“Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices,” exhibited at Mill City Museum, Minneapolis, April 30 through November 1, 2015.  
Image courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

eviction. The introduction explains the exhibit as a project initiated through the engaged curiosity and research of University of Minnesota anthropology undergraduate student Rachel Hines. She worked with Associate Professor Kat Hayes and graduate student Stefanie Kowalczyk, also from the University's Department of Anthropology, as well as students in Hayes' archives class. The team also collaborated with staff from the Mill City Museum and other members of the joint Minnesota Historical Society and University of Minnesota Heritage Partnership. The goal articulated in the exhibit introduction is to explore "how collaborative teaching could connect diverse students to public audiences and professional heritage management." The exhibit itself is this practice in action. The project claims two main objectives: to offer a critical perspective on how early immigrants, the primary residents of this flats area in the late 1800s and early 1900s, are represented in the archive and also to make these findings and interpretations public in collaboration with the Mill City Museum and Minnesota Historical Society. The exhibit is the generative product of these objectives and an invitation to the public see the flats afresh.

Located in the gallery just inside the museum's main doors the exhibit was free and open to the public during museum hours. As I lingered over the panels one afternoon, I noticed that many people spent only a few moments scanning the mostly black and white images and the larger headings on each board, pausing only on the images or stories that piqued their curiosity most. Yet even without a protracted viewing, the exhibit is designed to make an impact on viewers, to impart a fresh perspective on the now grassy flats, and to complicate ideas of local history.

The central device for producing this effect is contradiction: the primary source images show homes that once populated the flats and occasionally floated downstream during floods, bars that doubled as centers for cultural education for

children, and newspapers with headlines about evictions or crime beside headlines about good immigrants and the quaint village. The panels are a practice in contradiction, reproducing and upholding the contested nature of the site and its residents and revealing the variability of perceptions and opinions documented in historical records. Rather than attempting to create a unified narrative, the exhibit advocates for the multiple perspectives and experiences that populated the Bohemian Flats. This is public memory work at its best, allowing a space for voices that not only contradict the dominant story, but also diminish the idea that there is a singular story. Public memory work is becoming increasingly common in museums. Scholars Jens Andermann and Silke Arnolde-de Simine write that "by granting a voice to what has been left out of the dominant discourses of history, diversified and sometimes even incompatible narratives have supposedly been granted a locus in a museal space that seems no longer to aspire to any totalizing synthesis" (2012, 4). The Bohemian Flats exhibit as a project of public memory work not only resists simplifying or foreclosing this period and place, but also compels us as its audience to question how we contribute to the formation of history, and how we might be complicit in either opening space for alternative histories or obscuring them.

Throughout the exhibit, the panels pose provocative questions to engage even a fleeting audience. One in particular caught my attention and continues to resonate with me long after the exhibit has closed: the curators of the exhibit asked "How might we better remember the community that once flourished under the Washington Avenue Bridge?" The exhibit itself and the ripple effects it will continue to have on audiences provide part of the answer to this question. Yet the question is not about only this one site; it is about practice and the ways we practice memory and remembering. Perhaps part of the answer, then, is in the practice of advocating for the varied perspectives that shape our present before they become

obscured, before they need to be recovered in the archive. I wonder how contemporary immigrant populations in the Twin Cities, or anywhere, might respond to this exhibit. I wonder how they might answer the question about how we could better remember communities. Might we be able to see parallels between immigrant experiences

of the early 1900s and those of the early 2000s? Perhaps this exhibit is also asking us to work to ensure that our stories and communities are remembered well, to develop a contemporary practice of creating a polyvocal, contradictory, and rich public memory.

## Reference

Andermann, Jens, and Silke Arnold-de Simine. 2012. "Introduction: Memory, Community, and the New Museum." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 29 (1): 3-13.

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