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OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI



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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy

FROM WASHINGTON BY 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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PRIMARY SOURCES

A HOME WORTH FIGHTING FOR: THE EVICTIONS AT THE BOHEMIAN FLATS

By Rachel Hines

When University of Minnesota students walk across the Washington Avenue Bridge between the East Bank and West Bank campuses, they not only travel over the Mississippi River, but also over a public park located on the west

river flats. While few probably notice this nondescript, grassy strip of land, fewer still are aware of its history. This park was once home to the Bohemian Flats, an Eastern European immigrant community occupied from the 1870s until the

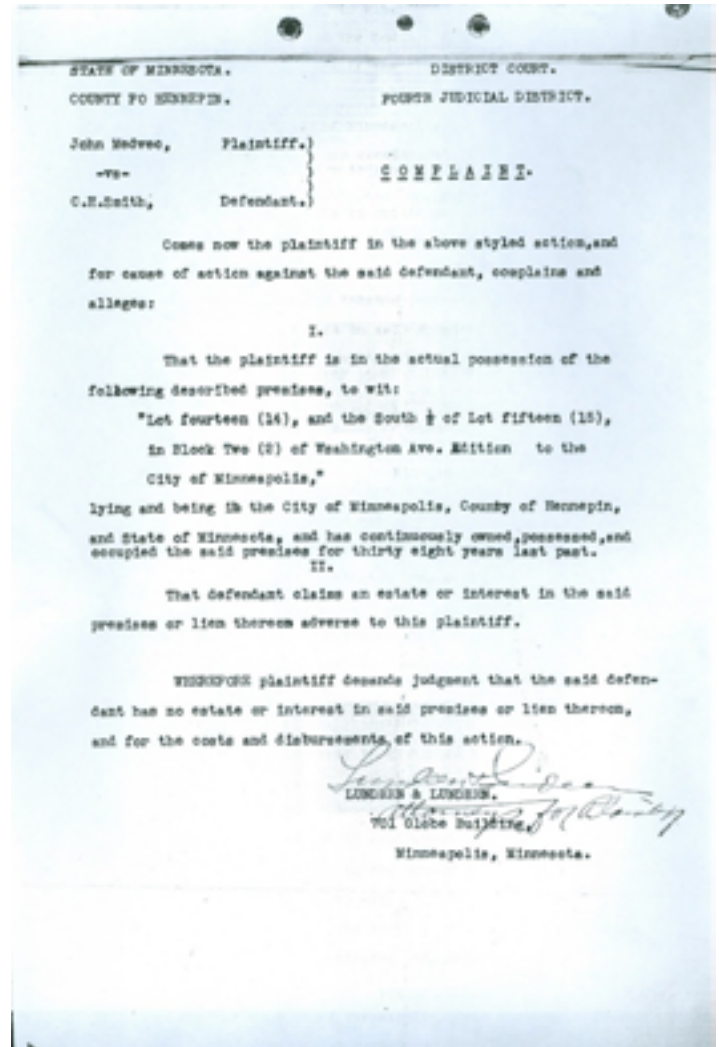


*Spring Flooding at the Bohemian Flats in 1897.
Image Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.*

1930s. Though today the riverfront is considered prime real estate, the neighborhood was viewed as a slum and faced issues ranging from spring floods and sanitation problems to poverty and crime. Yet, it was because the land was so unfavorable that the people of the Bohemian Flats were able to make it a home. The majority of the community immigrated from what is now the Slovak Republic and settled there upon their arrival in Minneapolis. Despite setbacks, many stayed for decades, finding the secluded neighborhood provided an opportunity to maintain traditional customs and speak native languages.

Though many living at the flats believed they owned their homes, they were considered squatters by law. With owners as prominent as D.W. Washburn of Washburn Mills (today General Mills) and Dorilus Morrison, the first Mayor of Minneapolis, the land changed hands a few times before it was sold to Charles H. Smith, a real estate developer, in 1921.[i] When Smith sent a rent collector down to the flats, many refused to pay a man they didn't know, prompting Smith to evict them. Led by John Medvec, eight residents, including John Blasco, Mrs. John Hreha, Mike Sabol, Susie Lash, Mike Rollins, Joe Filek, and John Gabrik, decided to challenge Smith in court in 1923.[ii] The documents from this case, kept in the Minnesota State Archives by the Minnesota Historical Society, tell a touching story about these people who once made their homes on the banks of the Mississippi.

The group of eight ranged from single young men to widowed housewives; the oldest, John Medvec, was in his 70s. They represented all social tiers at the flats, hailing from each of the three major streets: Mill Street, regarded as the upper stratum for its dry location on a terrace halfway up the bluff; Cooper Street, located in the middle; and Wood Street, known as the neighborhood's "lower class," located adjacent to the river. All eight residents were Slovak, illustrating the sense of place the Slovak community felt at the river's edge. Most of them had lived there for over a



*Excerpts from John Medvec's case file.
Image courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

decade; John Medvec had lived there the longest, his 38 years almost equaling the duration of the neighborhood itself.

When they appeared in court, the group tried to claim squatter's rights, arguing it was unfair for Smith to charge rent for a riverbed. They explained they would gladly pay rent to the city, which provided them with clean water and electric lights, but did not feel allegiance to a man who had never offered them help. Though

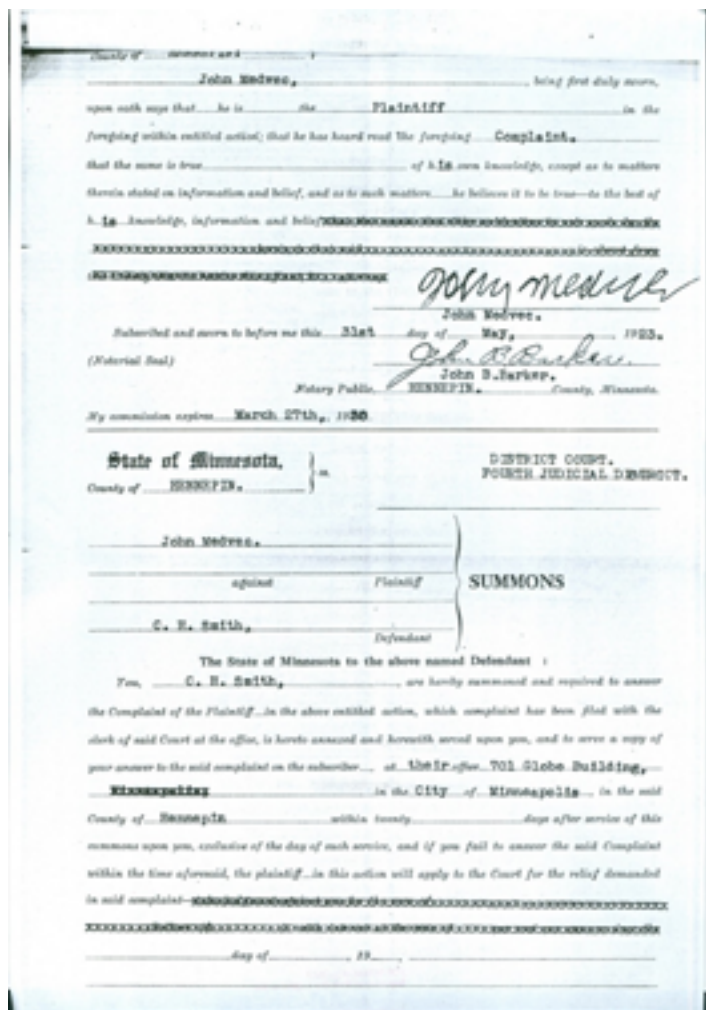
many held the title of landlord, none made repairs to the shanties or offered help during flooding season. The land owners remained distant until the land was deemed desirable.

The court case gives depth to the story of the Bohemian Flats. To the people who lived there, it was not an undesirable place to live, but a home worth fighting for. John Medvec poignantly stated in his testimony, “I bought that little house in May 1884. I paid \$210 for it but never paid for the land. I’m there all the time. I move in the spring because the river rolls over my floor. I raised my family there.”[iii] Though legal documents are often perceived as dull, these records elicit compassion for the people who lived there, anger toward the man who evicted them, and frustration with the court system they bravely attempted to navigate in a second language. The documents are more than words on paper; they represent the community’s refusal to accept an end to their life along the Mississippi.

Though it is easy to sympathize with their story, it is impossible to argue with the deed to the land. Ultimately, it was decided that the residents at the Bohemian Flats had to pay rent to Smith or face eviction. Not only did they have to cover court fees, but it was also determined that some owed Smith back rents as well.[iv] Some agreed to pay Smith rent, but many decided to move

away, dispersing the once cohesive community. Just eight years later, the land was sold to the city of Minneapolis and the neighborhood was demolished, making room for a municipal barge terminal. Over 300 houses once dotted the banks of the river, but by 1931 a mere 14 remained, crowded along the edge of the bluff.

The evictions at the Bohemian Flats represented a change in the way the river was valued. When a new lock and dam was constructed, the Bohemian Flats became a useful place for barges to unload coal and oil. What was once considered an eyesore was now valuable. Though many mourned



*Excerpts from John Medvec’s case file.
Image courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

the loss of the immigrant community, progress was regarded as inevitable and a barge terminal was deemed necessary. A *Minneapolis Journal* article noted that for the residents at the flats, “it was a losing fight. ‘Progress’ was against them—and progress always shatters traditions.”[v] In his review of *The Bohemian Flats for Minnesota History*, John T. Flanagan noted that the story of the flats “reminds us that the development of industry and commerce is sometimes possible only by sacrificing the picturesque non-conformity of our ancestors.” [vi]

Today, the Mississippi River is valued as a natural space. The Bohemian Flats has evolved along with it, creating a space to enjoy a view of the river. When Stefanie Kowalczyk and I created the exhibit “Remembering the Bohemian Flats: One Place, Many Voices” for the Mill City Museum, we not only portrayed the former immigrant community, but also presented the variety of ways the flats has been used over time and challenged our audience to question its future. Bohemian Flats Park is essentially a blank slate, with little interpretation and few facilities. How can we better

honor the people who once lived at the Bohemian Flats? The court documents are integral to telling their story. The fight for their homes differentiated the residents of the Bohemian Flats from those at similar communities, like Swede Hollow along Phalen Creek in St. Paul. There, immigrants quickly moved out of the ravine as soon as they possessed the necessary means. The Bohemian Flats was unique for its residents’ sense of place along the river and their willingness to fight for their home.

Notes

[i] Case Files 213203, 213256-213260 and 213291-213292. Minnesota. District Court (Hennepin County). Civil Case Files and Index. Minnesota Historical Society.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Works Progress Administration. *The Bohemian Flats*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1941.

[iv] Case Files 213203, 213256-213260 and 213291-213292. Minnesota. District Court (Hennepin County). Civil Case Files and Index. Minnesota Historical Society.

[v] “Picturesque River Flats Doomed Homes to Be Vacated by April 1.” *Minneapolis Journal*. 22 February 1931.

[vi] Flanagan, John T. “Review of *The Bohemian Flats*.” *Minnesota History*, 23 (1942): 68-69.

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About the Author

Rachel Hines is an archaeologist whose work has taken her to several rivers, including the Noatak River in Alaska and the Klamath River in California. The majority of her research has focused on historic immigrant communities located on the flats of the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities, one of which is the Bohemian Flats.