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OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI



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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

AN ENCHANTED LANDSCAPE: REMEMBERING HISTORIC SWEDE HOLLOW

By Stefanie Kowalczyk



*Photograph of Swede Hollow circa 1930.
Image courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

Tucked away in a glacially carved ravine along Phalen Creek, a tributary of the Mississippi River, just a stone's throw from the Minnesota state capitol, sits Swede Hollow Park. Many of the people who use this park—its green spaces and paved bike and walkways—would probably not notice the fragments of foundation walls or other miscellany, which, strewn around the wooded areas, are one of the only indications of the thriving immigrant community that once called this place home. Swede Hollow, or *Svenska Dalen*, the Swedish Dale, as it was called by Euro-American settlers¹, was home to numerous immigrant families between the 1850s and 1956. The area was initially used by Native American peoples and the remnants of six burial mounds in nearby Mounds View Park are a lasting testimony to the area's significance. When St. Paul was chosen as the site of Minnesota's capitol, its steamboat dock, and later railroad lines, became a main entry point for immigrants to the city. From here, it was easy for Swedish immigrants to walk to Swede Hollow, which is on the city's eastern boundary, beginning in the 1850s. They were followed by Italian and Mexican immigrants, among others, in the 1900s and 1930s respectively.

The community is infamous for being deemed a health hazard and burned to the ground in 1956 by the St. Paul Fire Department. Even at that time, the residents had no city water or sewer². One of the more famous images of Swede Hollow is that of a burning home; it speaks powerfully to the magnitude of destruction and loss the community and its inhabitants endured. Today, many of those people who grew up in the Hollow, or who had family who lived there, remember the fire, but they also remember something more. They tell stories of a difficult life and the struggle to move out of the Hollow. They tell of Swede Hollow as its own little world, something never quite a part of the larger city. They tell stories of comradery. This is the essence of Swede Hollow as it is remembered today. These feelings are captured in an etching simply titled *Swede Hollow*

by George Earl Resler, a Minnesota printmaker. The etching, dating to 1915-1925, is currently part of the collections at the Minnesota Historical Society. I came across this photo while conducting background research on Swede Hollow in preparation for an archaeological excavation. Many of the black and white photographs, such as the image of the Hollow from the 1930s, show either no people, or one or two individuals standing stiffly side-by-side. As a result, these photographs often make it seem as though the residents of Swede Hollow were isolated, not only from the city, but from each other as well. The etching is different. The feeling of community is brought to life in the simple action of women doing laundry together while children play underfoot.

Life in the Hollow was not easy. Homes, many of which were originally fur-trapper cabins, had a ramshackle appearance as additions and repairs were done using repurposed wood as well as new lumber. The steep incline in parts of Swede Hollow meant that most houses clustered along the banks of Phalen Creek, which was problematic when the creek overran its banks. As a result, many homes were built so that the front portion was raised on small stilts and the backside was built right into the hill. In addition, outhouses lined the creek. Some were erected on stilts over the water, but some were simply placed over boards spanning the creek. Families sometimes kept small pens of animals, like chickens and pigs, and grew gardens on terraces along the hillside if they could. There were no roads into Swede Hollow. Instead, residents followed a set of stairs down from the city above. Railroads and tenement housing lined the bluff along Swede Hollow and, to the north, Hamm's Brewery dominated the landscape. Noise and garbage from the city above were inescapable.

While it was undoubtedly chaotic, there was also comfort in living in the Hollow for many residents. Away from the prying and judgmental eyes of the city, many immigrants were happy to



*Swede Hollow by George Earl Resler, circa 1915-1925.
Image courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

be able to continue practicing traditions and using native languages. Nels Hokanson, whose family immigrated to Swede Hollow in 1887, wrote of his time living there, saying, “They lived much as they had in Sweden, with a penchant for snuff, potato sausage, pickled herring, *flat bröd*, and especially coffee, which they drank at all hours. Friends often came to share the warmth, drink coffee, take snuff or smoke their curved Swedish pipes...under a picture of King Oscar II of Sweden”³. Gentile Yarusso, an Italian immigrant who lived in the Hollow in the early 1900s wrote of his time there, “Our people chose this place because they were with their own countrymen with familiar faces, familiar noises, gestures, facial expressions”⁴. Yet even when they were seemingly not the same, residents of the Hollow would help their neighbors. Alberta Silva Rodriguez, one of the last people to live in Swede Hollow, remembers her mother giving onions, garlic, and peppers to their

Italian neighbors in exchange for homemade bread. She remembers, “I don’t know how [they communicated], but they did”⁵.

For many, Swede Hollow was a stepping stone, a temporary stop on the way to a better life. Resler’s etching of the community, a community which was for a long time officially ignored by the city⁶, reflects the poor living conditions for the residents and the hardworking people who called it home. But it also stands as an illustration of the pride felt by those whose families had humble beginnings in the Hollow. While Swede Hollow may not have been an ideal place to live for most, it was for some a physical manifestation of their determination to begin a new life in Minnesota.

Notes

1 Nyberg, Polly and Jerome Bette. “Swede Hollow: A Community’s Love Affair With Its Past.” *Common Ground*. 3(Fall 1974): 4-11.

2 Price, Mollie. “Swede Hollow: Sheltered Society for Immigrants to St. Paul.” *Ramsey County History*. 17 (1982): 12-22.

3 Hokason, Nels M. “I Remember St. Paul’s Swede Hollow.” *Minnesota History*. 41 (1969): 362-371.

4 Trimble, Steve. “The Sage of Swede Hollow.” St Paul Historical website. <http://saintpaulhistorical.com/items/show/294>

5 Ibid.

6 Price, Mollie. “Swede Hollow: Sheltered Society for Immigrants to St. Paul.” *Ramsey County History*. 17 (1982): 12-22.

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About the Author

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