

# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Ramsey County Historical Society

The Mississippi and St. Paul:  
Change is a Constant for River  
And the City That Shaped It

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COVER PHOTOS: These two photographs contrast the romance with the reality of the Mississippi River at St. Paul. In C.P., Gibson's photograph, top, two women gaze out over the river from Indian Mounds Park about 1910. This view was a favorite before development of the barge terminal. The reality was not so romantic. The large photograph, by Illingworth, shows the Lower Levee about 1868-1869.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: All photographs are from the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. The drawing of the Pig's Eye Lake Coal Terminal on page 9 is from the St. Paul Planning and Economic Development Department files.

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# The Mississippi and St. Paul

## Change is a Constant for River And the City That Shaped It

By Paul Hesterman

In the 1970s people started to buy and rehabilitate 19th century homes in the Irvine Park neighborhood and other parts of the city. When the City of St. Paul began to seriously plan for the future use of the Mississippi River corridor within the city in the 1970s, it found a river in much the same condition as those old homes. Though often structurally sound, the houses had often been altered almost beyond recognition as successive owners tried to adapt to the aging of the house and the changing city. Floor plans were changed, rooms subdivided, bathrooms and kitchens added, walls covered with stucco or tarpaper siding. Changes which may have made economic sense at the time had eroded the houses' value over the years, and many had to be gutted in order to be restored.

Similarly, the Mississippi River valley has been remodeled piecemeal time and time again. As the city grew and its economy changed, the riverfront was reshaped to adapt to those changes, which were national in scope, and people found new ways to make use of the river and its resources. Over the years, the riverfront accumulated the relics of abandoned use, so that when people began to look at the river anew, they asked themselves, like the new homeowner, how the previous owners could possibly have allowed the property to deteriorate so much.

Since the late 1960s, riverfront development in St. Paul has been controversial. How should the riverfront be used? Should it be a continuous park, available to the public for recreation? Should it be a site for industry? If so, what kinds of industry? How much of the riverfront should be devoted to the barge and tow industry? Can the environment of the river be protected while it is developed economically? People with conflicting values and priorities have argued over the answers to those questions, argued about what the city's needs are and how the river should

be used to meet those needs.

The answers to those questions often have been very different in the past. Operating within different economic and political systems, with different values and priorities, the people of St. Paul have tried to adapt the river to make it more useful, leaving a legacy of change. Today's river is different from the mid-19th century's river in virtually every way, from the contours of its banks to the chemical composition of its water to the variety of species which inhabit it. Within St. Paul, the Mississippi is an urban river, reshaped by the city that stretches along it.

In many ways, however, St. Paul is also a river city shaped by the stream flowing through it. Initially, the city's growth stemmed from its position as the best landing point on the east bank of the Mississippi below Fort Snelling. Until the 1870s river transportation was the city's lifeblood, and economic activity in the city started and stopped with the opening and closing of the river. After the advent of the railroads and the alternative transportation route they offered to the east, the city no longer was dependent on the river; still, the Mississippi continued to shape the city, defining neighborhoods, supplying industry, providing open space within the city. The story of the Mississippi and St. Paul is really a hundred stories of how the river affected where people lived, where industries located. It even affected the children who grew up exploring its banks and (to their mothers' dismay) its caves.

The Mississippi is a working river, a resource for economic development; a neighborhood river, a place where people lived (or chose not to live); and a recreational river. Through the years these roles have changed, as has the river itself. This article, and a new Ramsey County Historical Society exhibit, will develop those themes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Paul Hesterman is principal investigator for the year-long Riverfront Planning Grant the Ramsey County Historical Society has received from the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has a doctorate in American history from the University of Minnesota and

is assistant to the coordinator of pre-major advising in the university's College of Liberal Arts. This article is based on his research for his doctoral dissertation, *Interests, Values and Public Policy for an Urban River, A History of Development Along the Mississippi River in St. Paul, Minn.*



## The Changing River

Before white settlement, the Mississippi that flows through St. Paul was much shallower, wider, more rocky, and its water clearer than it is today. In 1817 Major Stephen Long described the water of the Mississippi above the mouth of the St. Croix as, "...entirely colorless and free from everything that would render it impure, either to the sight or taste."<sup>1</sup> Above the mouth of the Minnesota, the river ran faster and at a lower level through a series of rapids, the current broken by numerous islands. Below the mouth of the Minnesota, the river's channel was more variable, its banks marshy and often indistinct. The river bottomlands were a mixture of forest, marsh, and open water. What is now the Upper Levee district occupied by the Northern States Power plant and the Kaplan scrap yard was similar to the Crosby farm area: its shoreline was marshy, lakes dotted the flood plain (at least during high water), and it was densely forested.<sup>2</sup>

Sandbars, some large enough to be considered islands, studded the river and lined its shores. The river ran almost to the foot of Dayton's Bluff and to the bluff between Wabasha and Robert Streets in what became the downtown district. The Phalen Creek/Trout Brook valley was a cove in high water, with boats able to penetrate to what is now Third Street. During low water the area was an almost impenetrable marsh, broken by the two flowing creeks. The flats on the west side of the river also were marshy and frequently flooded, and a large lake, Lamprey Lake, occupied most of the present-day Holman

*St. Paul from Dayton's Bluff in 1865, above; in 1894, opposite, above, and in 1942, below. These photographs taken from the same perspective show how the riverfront was filled to permit construction of railroads and highways. In the above photo, note the trestle constructed along sandbars into the river to convey the first railroad to the Lower Landing.*

airport site. In general, the West Side flats in their natural condition closely resembled the Pig's Eye Lake area of today. On both sides of the Mississippi several minor streams ran through the bluffs to the river.<sup>3</sup>

As people built a city along the Mississippi, they changed the riverfront to better suit their needs. Today's riverfront is almost entirely man-made, the accumulation of piecemeal changes. As soon as the Lower Levee or Landing at the foot of Jackson Street became a landing point for steamboats, people began filling low spots and extending the levee farther downstream to accommodate more shipping. The most dramatic changes in the riverfront, however, were made in order to build railroads and highways.

When St. Paul's businessmen began building railroads in the 1860s, the river was the city's only connection to the east, which was the source of goods and people for the west, and the outlet for the region's exports. Initially the railroads were built to provide better transportation to and from the river, and they focused on the Lower Levee because it had become the head of navigation on the upper Mississippi. To run tracks to the levee, the first lines were built on trestles running through the marshy Trout Brook/Phalen Creek valley and out into the water along the line of sandbars paralleling the shore. Similarly, the Minnesota Valley Railroad was built



along the Upper Levee, well out from the normal high-water shoreline. Soon the area between these trestles and the shore was filled, providing more land for new tracks. Between the Upper and Lower Landings, the bluff was blasted back to provide a river-level connection between the two landings. Dayton's Bluff also was cut back to provide room for rail lines

running south and east. In the process, most of Carver's Cave was destroyed and the river narrowed by several hundred feet.

Later development brought more changes, some gradual and some swift. In the 1880s and 1890s, the city provided \$1 a year leases to businesses such as American Hoist and Derrick and M.A. Gedney Pickl-

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ing Company, who would build a levee on the west side of the river. On the opposite bank, along the Upper Levee, Polish and Italian families gradually filled inland from the levee, providing more room for a growing neighborhood. Development of Holman Field in the 1920s and 1930s filled in most of Lamprey Lake. Harriet Island was cut back on the river side and the channel separating it from the mainland was filled. Construction of Shepard and Warner Roads further encroached on the river, especially through the Trout Brook/Phalen Creek area. The flood control project which protects Riverview Industrial Park, the dredging of the Southport barge slip, and the dredge and fill in the Pig's Eye lake area to construct Red Rock Industrial Park also show further remodeling of the riverfront.

Some changes were beyond the scope of the city of St. Paul, and some even were unintentional. Settlement of the upper Mississippi and Minnesota River valleys, with the cutting of the forests and the breaking of the prairie, led to changes in drainage and runoff in the entire region, making the river's flow less stable and its water more clouded by silt. The most dramatic alteration, however, came in the 1930s, when the federal government built the system of twenty-six locks and dams which changed the river from a free-flowing stream into a series of slack-water pools, flooding broad areas of land. Though the water level in St. Paul was not greatly affected, this massive project made commercial navigation on the river possible once again. As river traffic increased, so did the demand for riverfront land for terminal use, increasing the value of St. Paul's riverfront property.

But, the most dramatic and unintentional change in the river - the severe pollution of its water - was due simply to the growth of the two cities. Like other American cities, St. Paul and Minneapolis built sewer systems to solve the drainage problems caused by the cities' expansion and their development of municipal water supply systems. St. Paul grew from about 20,000 people in 1870 to more than 270,000 in 1930; by 1922 more than 37,000 St. Paul homes were connected to the city's sewer system. Both cities' sewers dumped directly into the river without any treatment. By 1930 the combined capacity of the sewers emptying into the Mississippi within the Twin Cities was two-and-a-half times the normal flow of the river. Construction of Lock and Dam #1 trapped the sewage deposited upstream behind the dam, turning the pool into an open cesspool.

By the mid-1920s, the river had been declared a health hazard by the state health department, and it was considered hazardous even for boaters. Huge rafts of raw sewage floated down the river. A 1927

survey found almost no dissolved oxygen in the river from the pool above the dam to the confluence with the St. Croix River at Hastings. This degree of pollution made the river a nuisance rather than an asset, even reducing property values near the river. Though public attention to pollution did not develop until the 1920s, it is clear that poor water quality limited the use of the river well before that. Commercial fishing was never as important in St. Paul as it was downstream, undoubtedly due in part to the pollution problem which began as soon as lumber mills in Minneapolis began sawing logs and dumping sawdust into the river to rot. In the early 20th century, the pearl button industry thrived along the Mississippi downstream from Lake Pepin, as clammers harvested beds of freshwater mussels. No useable clam beds, however, were found much north of Lake Pepin, due almost certainly to the mussels' intolerance for pollution. The Harriet Island beaches which had drawn enormous crowds around 1910 were closed finally as pollution became more severe.

Pollution still limits the usefulness of the river for recreation -- for swimming and other water sports and for fishing because it also limits the population of game fish. Some current pollution problems are more complicated than those of the past, due to the introduction of PCBs and other complex chemicals. Combined storm and sanitary sewers still flush raw sewage into the river after heavy rains, but the river is much cleaner now than it has been in the past. The first sewage treatment plant, built at Pig's Eye, was not opened until 1939. Delayed for years by politics and rivalry between Minneapolis and St. Paul, it finally was built by a combined Minneapolis-St. Paul Sanitary District, one of the first collaborations between the two cities.

The Pig's Eye plant immediately eliminated the crisis conditions within St. Paul, if for no other reason than that the sewage was being dumped downstream of the city. Design compromises limited the level of treatment provided by the plant, however, and by the mid-1950s the two cities were adding as much of a pollution load to the river as before the plant was built. The plant has been greatly expanded and improved since then, and today's water quality is as good as it has been since early in the century. Still, water quality limits the value of a river that is far dirtier than the river described by Stephen Long.

The Mississippi River within St. Paul, then, has changed dramatically. But the people and the economy have changed, too, as the city has grown. All of these changes have affected how the people and the city have seen and made use of the river as a working river, a neighborhood river, and a recrea-



tional river.

## The Working River

Like many other river cities, St. Paul usually has viewed the Mississippi as an economic resource. The city owed its start almost 150 years ago to river transportation; today the transportation of grain, petroleum and other bulk products by barge and tow has again made the river an important transportation route. The river has other uses: it provides water for cooling, for industrial processes, for disposing of wastes; it provides power for generating electricity; and its shores have offered sites for industry, and raw materials for making bricks and glass.

This economic usefulness has varied dramatically throughout history. In St. Paul's earliest years, river transportation was its lifeblood. The railroads, however, reduced the city's dependence on river transportation to virtual insignificance from the 1890s until the 1930s when construction of the nine-foot channel recreated river transportation. The desirability of the river for other economic uses, from brewing beer to growing mushrooms to generating electric power, also has changed as technology has changed and the national economy has developed. People living within different economic systems have

*The river, looking toward the Upper Levee from Third and St. Peter Streets in this Illingworth photograph, circa 1870s. Like the Lower Levee, this area was filled from the original shoreline to accommodate the railroad lines.*

found the river used in changing ways.

In some ways, the patterns of development in the river valley are like the current of the river itself. In each stretch there is a main channel carrying the dominant flow. But along with the main channel there are undercurrents, eddies, side channels, and backwaters which also affect the nature of the stream so that even an experienced pilot might have trouble locating the channel.

Before white settlement, the Dakota, or Sioux Indians and their predecessors found many resources in this part of the river valley. Until about 1840, the Kaposia band of Sioux maintained a seasonal settlement near Pig's Eye Lake. The mound groupings at Mounds Park and other evidence suggests that this area may have been one of the earliest settlements in Minnesota. For the Indians, the valley provided fish and shellfish from the river, game in the floodplain and uplands, fertile soil for cultivation in the lowlands, freshwater from numerous springs and streams. The Mississippi was a major route in a trading system that reached from the lower Mississippi to upper Michigan and beyond. But for the Indian man who was a hunter

and the Indian woman who cultivated crops and gathered food, the advantages of the site itself were more important than its location within a broader transportation system.

## Frontier - To 1850

Within a few years, around 1850, the elements of St. Paul's growth as a commercial entrepot at the head of steamboat navigation came together and the town began a dramatic growth spurt. Before that time, the relatively few number of early inhabitants had settled in St. Paul for other reasons, such as its closeness to Fort Snelling. When steamboats were less important than canoes and keelboats, the region's economy centered around Fort Snelling, the fur trade, and the negotiation of the Indian treaties that opened land on the east bank of the Mississippi to white settlement. These were more important influences on the establishment of St. Paul than the site's potential as a river terminal.

Throughout this period, the river and its valley were exploited just as the early settlers found them. The

river had not been "improved", so steamboat navigation depended on the stage of water and the skill of the crew. Landings were made at natural levees where the main channel of the river approached an accessible bank. Animals were trapped and hunted and trees cut in the bottomlands, but the area was, at most, a suburb of Fort Snelling.

The site that became St. Paul was not the only focus for settlement at this time. There were as many families living downriver at Pig's Eye as were clustered about the Lower Landing. However, a series of political decisions made the site of St. Paul increasingly important. Fort Snelling, built in 1820, provided a concentration of people and a market for goods, especially liquor. Treaties with the Sioux in 1837 opened the region between the St. Croix and the Mississippi to settlement. When Fort Snelling's commandant, Major Plympton, cleared all settlers from the Military Reserve, an area around the Fort that ex-

*Minnesota Boat Club shell races on the river with Harriet Island in the background, about 1890. The boat club was the first recreational organization to make use of the river.*





tended almost to present-day downtown St. Paul, the site became the nearest landing to the fort and to the Falls of St. Anthony. In 1842, Henry Jackson opened a store near Jackson Street and the river, so settlers did not have to travel to Mendota for supplies. Within the next few years, John Irvine began cutting wood for steamboats on the Upper Landing, Louis Robert opened a warehouse on the Lower Landing, and, in 1847, the Red River ox carts, backbone of the fur trade, made St. Paul rather than Mendota the terminus of their trip from the Red River country.

## 1850-1870: Steamboat and Iron Horse

St. Paul's image of itself as a river town and the head of navigation on the Mississippi, stemmed from this relatively brief period, a time of explosive growth when the region west of the Mississippi was opened and settled, when St. Paul was the jumping-off point for that settlement, when people and supplies destined for St. Anthony and the wide region beyond all had to pass through St. Paul. This is the period which has created our images of historic St. Paul, images of steamboats lining the levees. In these years, the steamboat landings, the interchange points between river and land transportation, were the engine driving St. Paul's economy. In 1850 the first steamboat arrival of the season was a cause for celebration, as "the very heart of the town leaped for joy."<sup>4</sup>

As historian J. Fletcher Williams wrote, the first steamboat arrival in 1850 was "... opening communication with the rest of the world, after months of isolation." He also noted that by 1873, "... the opening of navigation has ceased to be of any importance or interest. Our railroads have changed all that."<sup>5</sup> The river, however, was an unreliable and capricious mode of transportation which was frozen shut for six months of the year. By the 1860s St. Paul's leaders had begun to develop a rail system which would focus trade on the city, but eliminate the city's dependence on the Mississippi. Before an all-rail connection to the east was established in 1872, however, the railroads fed the river traffic rather than competing with it.

Initially, the Upper Landing and Lower Landing were competing centers, although the Upper Landing and Upper Town, may have relied less on the Mississippi and more heavily on the Minnesota River steamboat trade. That trade, however, peaked in 1862 and collapsed with the Sioux Uprising that year. Navigation of the shallow, snag-filled Minnesota was always treacherous, and was abandoned when the Minnesota Valley Railroad was completed between Mendota and St. Paul in 1866.



*Pig's Eye Lake Coal Terminal. Strong environmentalist opposition defeated attempts to build terminal.*

The river also was an obstacle to development of the West Side. Ferries crossed the river at both the Upper and Lower Landings until the St. Paul Bridge (the Wabasha Street Bridge) was opened in 1858. Both the bridge and the elevated road that was built across the West Side flats were subsidized by city bonds in an attempt to attract trade from south of the river which might otherwise go to the competing center at Hastings. Until the West Side was annexed and bridge tolls eliminated, however, the swampy, frequently flooded region remained undesirable.

To establish the city as the commercial capital of the region, its citizens and entrepreneurs vigorously pursued a policy of building a rail system focused on St. Paul. City government subsidized most of the early rail lines with the sale of city bonds, and St. Paul businessmen were prominent investors and officers of the companies. The St. Paul Chamber of Commerce worked to facilitate this development and to guide the city's commercial growth. As the rail system grew, businessmen built warehouses to make the transfer of goods among rail, river, and wagon more efficient. James J. Hill's transfer warehouse built along the river at the Lower Levee was one of the most prominent. However, it was the interchange among the modes of transportation, not any one mode alone, that defined St. Paul's economic role. The city's early leaders moved among the different transportation systems. As James J. Hill progressed from steamboat line clerk to coal merchant to railroad baron, Commodore William Davidson, best known as a steamboat operator, invested in the Minnesota Valley Railroad and elevators along the railroad as well as in his own river packet line.

## Rail City, 1875-1920

Between about 1875 and 1920, St. Paul was a railroad town. Riverfront development was driven by the location of railroad lines and by industry oriented towards those lines. Though steam packet lines continued to operate and even to expand their terminal

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facilities into the 1890s, they were no longer important to the city's growth. From early in the 20th century until the 1920s and the opening of the nine-foot navigation channel, river transportation virtually did not exist except for a few excursion boats, some local movement of sand and gravel, and a few unsuccessful attempts to demonstrate the feasibility of river transportation, such as hauling coal upriver during World War I.

Even along the riverfront, railroads dominated. Initially, the railroads had been built along the river to reach the Upper and Lower Landings and to take advantage of the level routes provided by the river valley. Rail trackage dominated the floodplain. The St. Paul and Pacific Railroad had been built on trestles extending out into the river and skirting its bank from the mouth of Phalen Creek to the Lower Landing. Now the land inside of that track was filled, extending the shoreline as much as 300 feet from its original line. The Lower Landing became the site of the railroad terminal and of the Union Depot first built in 1880 and rebuilt in 1884 and 1915. The St. Paul and Sioux City line was extended from Mendota to the Lower Levee, initiating similar filling on a smaller scale, connecting the Upper and Lower Levees and completing the barrier of rail tracks between the city and the riverfront.

The commercial and industrial development within the river valley also was oriented to the railroad, not the river. The McMillan packing plant on the Upper Levee and the St. Paul Union Stockyards downstream in South St. Paul used the river only to dispose of wastes. Industries such as American Hoist and Derrick, Joesting and Schilling, and St. Paul White Lead and Oil Company located on the West Side to take advantage of the \$1 per year leases offered by the city government to encourage industrial development, and not to use the river for transportation.

By 1920 the river probably was less important to St. Paul than at any time before or since. River transportation virtually did not exist, a fact that the Interstate Commerce Commission recognized in setting rail rates on a "dry land basis" so rates did not reflect competition from river transportation. Within the downtown district, the riverfront that once had been the vibrant commercial heart of the city had become the back alley of rail depots and rail-oriented industries, crowded by trackage, inaccessible and undesirable. Pollution made the river itself offensive to the eye and nose.

## **Redevelopment, 1920-1965**

After 1920 the riverfront became the focus for a

series of governmental initiatives designed to make the river more useful. Development of the sewage treatment system removed a major barrier to use of the river. The riverfront also became a focus for development of three new transportation systems. When air travel became viable, the city built an airport (now Holman Field) on the West Side flats, a location that was expected to be easy for pilots to find as they navigated by following the river. Emergence of the automobile led to the development of Kellogg Boulevard as a traffic distributor and bypass of downtown. Warner and Shepard Roads followed the railroads' example by filling the river to provide a right-of-way. Most important, the federal government rebuilt the river by dredging the nine-foot channel and constructing the twenty-six locks and dams that made navigation viable for the huge new diesel towboats and their strings of barges.

Development of the nine-foot channel was the result of a carefully orchestrated campaign to convince the federal government to subsidize the revival of river transportation. Several St. Paul businessmen were among the leading waterways activists, most prominently George Lambert, for whom Lambert Landing was named. Lambert had worked for river terminals and revived river transportation since about 1910, and was instrumental in creation of the St. Paul Port Authority to manage the city's terminals and encourage the renewal of shipping on the river.

While the 19th century steamboats had handled general merchandise and passengers and focused development on the Lower Levee, the new river traffic which began in the 1920s and expanded rapidly in the 1950s was very different. Though the development of Lambert Landing anticipated a revival of general shipping, the new traffic instead consisted almost entirely of a few bulk commodities. This shifted development along the river to areas where bulk storage could be established and also made the volume of traffic dependent upon the demand for relatively few products. Initially, almost all shipment was coal and oil from the south. Later, the downstream traffic in grain developed. Terminals were spread throughout the river valley -- at Barge Terminal #1, numerous sites upstream from the Upper Levee, and at the new Southport and Red Rock terminals a little later. Grain, however, was increasingly loaded upstream in the Minnesota River valley. St. Paul became more and more a place to assemble and break down fleets of barges rather than a terminal site.

Rapid increase in barge traffic not only led to the development of many new terminal sites, but also to the re-emergence of river-oriented industries. Other

river valley development, however, was oriented to the new transportation systems that used trucks and highways. Riverview Industrial Park, the Port Authority project which replaced a neighborhood on the Lower West Side, is a transplanted piece of suburbia, featuring low-density commercial and industrial development served by highways rather than river or railroads.

## 1965 to the Present

Since the mid-1960s, opposition to further industrial development of the riverfront has emerged, as people have increasingly seen the river valley as a place for recreation and retreat rather than as a potential industrial site. The city has been working intensively to plan for the future uses of the river, and

*"Little Italy," at right, a view of the St. Paul "flats" from the old High Bridge during the high water of 1897. Below is the same neighborhood in 1959. St. Paul Pioneer Press photo.*

to reconcile conflicting perceptions of its usefulness. Meanwhile, changing economic circumstances have continued to affect the working river.

Although barge traffic since the creation of the nine-foot channel has far exceeded the volume of river traffic in the 19th century, it has been less important to



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the city's overall economy because of the variety of other available transportation systems. Though barge traffic grew rapidly through the 1970s, it also has proved vulnerable to shifts in the price and shipping patterns of the relatively few commodities it moves. The shift of power plants from high-sulphur southern coal to low-sulphur western coal shipped by rail; increasing reliance on pipelines to transport petroleum products from the south; and sharply dropping grain exports all have undercut the barge industry in the 1980s. Rail traffic has continued a decline begun as early as the 1920s, making riverbottom land formerly occupied by rail tracks, depots, and shops available for other uses.

### **Government and the Riverfront**

Much of the economic use of the riverfront has come from public subsidy as much as from economic demand. American cities have been considered economic entities since at least the early 19th century, and the well-being of the people of the city often has been understood to be tied to the economic prosperity of the city as a whole. City governments have been expected to do their part to promote the city's economic vitality. Though plans and proposals to do so usually have originated outside of the government in the city's commercial leadership, city government has been a tool used to promote the economic prosperity of the city from its founding until the present day.

A survey of major economic developments along the riverfront in St. Paul is virtually a list of incidents of public subsidy or sponsorship of private economic activity. From the very beginning, city government maintained the public levees and public markets. When civic leaders sought to make St. Paul a rail center, the city government granted rights-of-way within the city, even when railroad tracks obstructed the levee and the city's streets, and purchased railroad company bonds which financed construction. The concentration of industry along the levee on the West Side was the direct result of public subsidy in the construction of the levee and the awarding of \$1 per year leases to encourage industrial development.

This pattern continued in the 20th century. At the insistence of St. Paul's business leaders, the city abandoned its attempts to publicly develop the power at Lock and Dam #1 in favor of supporting Ford Motor Company's application for the site in order to encourage Ford to build its plant in St. Paul. The first major economic revitalization project for the city, the United Improvement Council bond issue of the 1920s, used public bonding to construct commercial facilities: Barge Terminal #1 at the foot of Dayton's

Bluff, the Municipal Grain Terminal at the old Upper Landing, and Holman Field. The Port Authority, when created in 1929, represented a grant of public land and bonding authority to the businessmen who had lobbied for revival of water transportation. Its mission was explicitly to encourage the development of water transportation, and it did so by subsidizing development of terminal facilities. The Port Authority was reorganized in the 1950s as the economic development arm of city government. It has since used its relative autonomy to develop River-view Industrial park, Southport Barge Terminal, and Red Rock Industrial Park and barge terminal. In fact, commercial navigation of the river would not exist had the federal government not built -- through dredging and the locks and dams -- what was virtually a new river at massive expense to accommodate the barge and tow industry.

Most riverfront development, then, has been in part the result of the use of government to further economic development. The very success of these efforts, which led to the rapid expansion of terminal facilities, barge fleetings, and industrial development in the 1950s and 1960s, helped spark the reaction against commitment of the riverfront to industrial and commercial use. This reassertion of the importance of the river valley as a natural and recreational resource helped lead to current planning efforts.

### **Diversity of Economic Uses**

The decline and revival of water transportation is the main theme in any discussion of the Mississippi as a working river, but the river and its valley have been economic resources in a bewildering variety of other ways even though, as the city grew and economic systems changed, many past uses have become extinct as development of national markets have changed the economic options available.

Waste disposal sometimes has been the most important economic use of the river. From the city's beginning, garbage and cesspool material was dumped into the river to be carried away by the current. As St. Paul and Minneapolis grew, sewers built to drain the cities increased the sewage load and packing plants such as the McMillan and Union Stockyards and other industries dumped their wastes into the river. Though the river was able to assimilate most of this material without creating nuisance conditions until the 1920s, pollution very early limited the uses of the river. St. Paul never relied on the river for its water supply until the chain of lakes north of the city had to be supplemented by river water drawn upstream from Minneapolis. St. Paul banned cutting of ice from the river very early. By the 20th century,

pollution prevented the river from being a valuable resource for commercial fishing or clamming. By the 1920s, it can even be said that waste disposal had eliminated virtually all other economic uses of the river water, as it became too polluted even for industrial cooling and other processes.

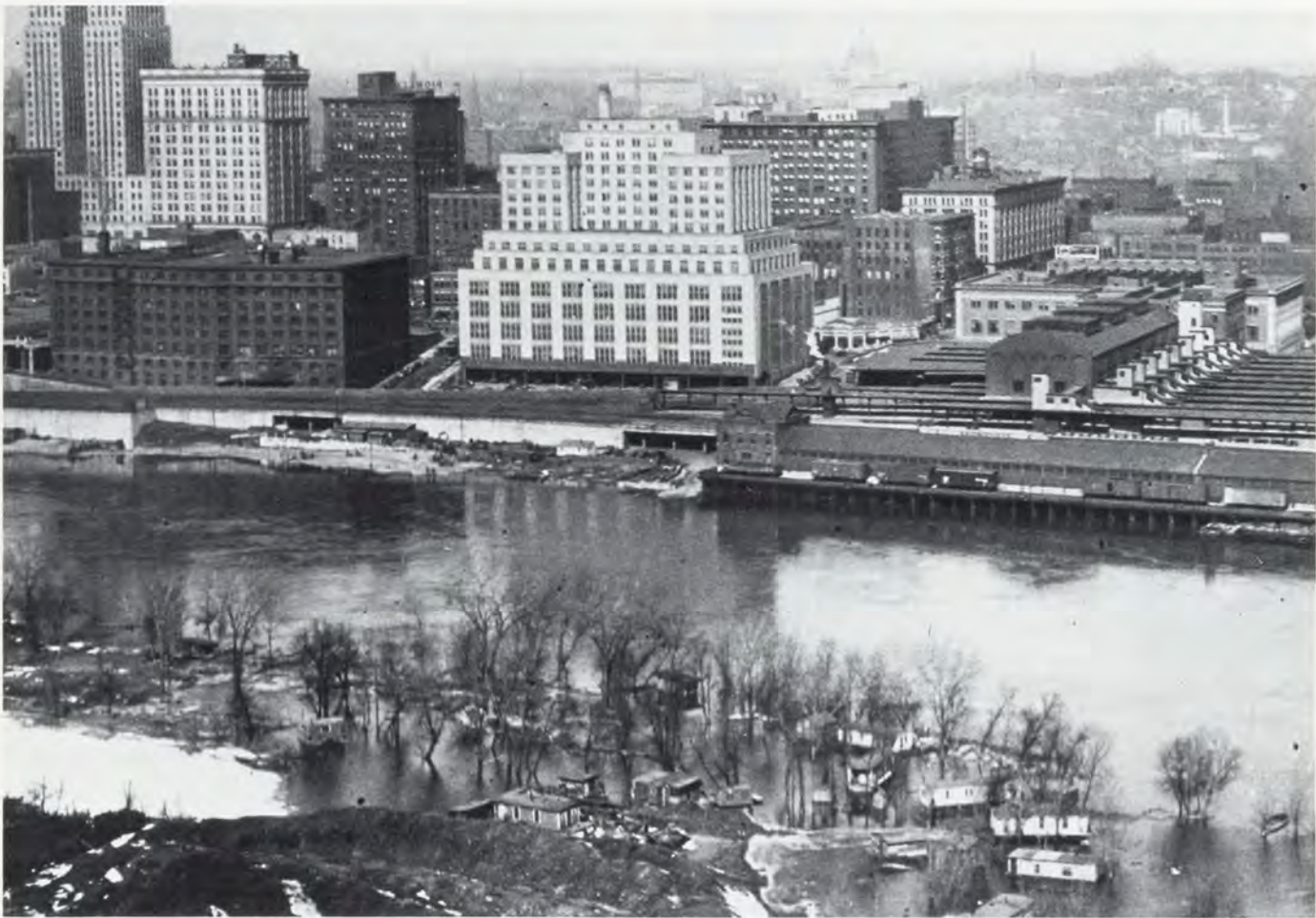
Before that happened, however, river water was used in other ways. Although St. Paul never developed a lumber industry on the same scale as Minneapolis, the river was used to float logs to a number of sawmills built along both sides of the river. With no water power to draw on, these mills were steam powered, and served primarily the local market, providing the lumber needed to build the rapidly growing city. These mills often were short-lived, and all were gone by the turn of the century.

River water was also a crucial resource for the electrical power industry which began to grow in the early 20th century. St. Paul long envied Minneapolis its water power, and sought numerous times to develop a water power site above the mouth of the Minnesota River. Lock and Dam #1 finally made that a reality, and the Ford Motor Company power plant has

generated hydro power since the 1920s. The steam power plants built near the Upper Levee -- the Island Plant, originally built by the St. Paul Gas Light Company and Northern States Power Company's High Bridge Plant -- both relied on the river for cooling water essential to their process. Their operations have changed the river by discharging enough warm water to keep the river open most of the winter. Built after 1910, before the reopening of water transportation, both plants originally were built to accept coal shipped by rail but later were adapted to barge delivery of coal.

The river valley has also provided an unusual array of resources which have been economically valuable at particular times. The floodplain has been farmed, from the Indian settlements before white contact until the 1950s, when the last farms in the Pig's Eye and Crosby farm areas were eliminated. The river's bluffs were mined: Twin City Brick dug clay from the bluffs near Pickerel lake for the first half of the 20th century, Ford once mined sand to use in

*A view of downtown St. Paul from the river in 1936. Note the squatters' cabins in the foreground.*



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making glass, and rock and gravel have been mined at various times.

The thick layers of sandstone soft enough to dig by hand have had several unique economic uses. Before cheap electricity made artificial refrigeration economical, caves dug into the sandstone provided storage for brewers who located along the river valley to take advantage of spring water as well as cave storage. The systems of tunnels dug still exist - some literally extending underground for blocks. One 19th century writer described the Stahlman Brewery's system of caves as resembling "the catacombs of Rome."<sup>5</sup>

On the West Side similar caves were used in other ways. From the 1880s until the 1960s caves were used by mushroom growers such as Lehman Brothers, who discovered that they offered an ideal microclimate. This industry declined when national marketing combined with the creation of artificial growing environments made natural locations less advantageous. In the 1930s, and again more recently, caves hosted night clubs including Mystic Cavern, Castle Royal, and The Cave.

Many of the ways in which the river operated as a working river have come and gone with changing technologies, markets, and prices. Change has affected both major and minor uses of the river valley. From the 1870s until the mid-20th century, the nation's transportation system was built on railroads, and railroad tracks, depots, terminals and shops such as the Omaha Shops near the Upper Levee dominated the river front. Rails dictated industrial location, and industrial development within the river valley often had more to do with the railroads than with the river. As highways replaced railroads, rail facilities in the river valley were abandoned and industries located to take advantage of rail transportation have often moved away. This has opened up new possibilities for future development.

But as St. Paul plans for the future of the river, it must acknowledge the lesson of the past. Future economic changes also will change the perception of and demand for economic use of the riverfront in St. Paul. Predicting the nature of those changes, however, will be difficult, and so will predicting their effects on St. Paul's riverfront.

### **Working on the River**

The experiences of people working on and near the river have been as diverse as the economic uses of the river and the river valley. The lives of industrial workers at American Hoist and Derrick, brewers at Stahlman or Yoerg Brewery, mushroom growers in the caves, brickmakers at Twin City Brick, railroad

workers at the Omaha Shops, and barge and tow crews differ greatly, but their stories are not much different from those of other workers in St. Paul.

Despite its self-image as a river town, however, it is worth noting that St. Paul was never a town whose people worked on the river as other towns sometimes were. Steamboats never were built in St. Paul. Even when William Davidson's White Collar line was headquartered in St. Paul, the boats were built elsewhere -- usually on the Ohio River. St. Paul was at the extreme end of the river transportation system and cut off completely for the winter months, so steamboat captains and crew members tended to live further south, closer to the center of the system. Though there were a few commercial fishermen among the Poles who settled along the Upper Levee, neither fishing nor clamming played the central role in St. Paul that they did in other river cities. Only in the heyday of the steamboats did the life and activity of the levees color the personality of the city as a whole. Since then, the experience of working on and along the river has been the diverse experiences of individuals and small groups.

Within St. Paul, the Mississippi has been a working river, a river valued as an economic resource. The nature of that resource, and its relative importance to the city have changed dramatically and repeatedly as the economies of the city, region, and nation have changed. As the city considers the future of the working river it must recognize the inevitability of similar - and often unpredictable - changes in the future.

### **Neighborhood River**

St. Paul is a city of neighborhoods, and the pattern of those neighborhoods resulted in part from the pattern of hills, valleys, bluffs, and plateaus cut by the Mississippi River and its tributaries. As people have built the city and its neighborhoods, the river and its valley have played a peculiar double role in defining the nature of St. Paul's neighborhoods. From a distance, the river and its valley can provide a magnificent view, and St. Paul's elite have often sought out bluff-top locations for their houses to capture that view. Up close, however, the river has been much less pleasant -- dirty, smelly, unpredictable, and prone to flood. Those who actually have lived in the river valley, therefore, often have been people who had few choices but to seek out the least valuable and least desirable land, land unused for other purposes. Because the river valley's neighborhoods have been considered marginal, they became the targets for redevelopment efforts. Today the river valley is no longer a place of neighborhoods, because the



neighborhoods have been replaced by industrial and park development.

For the Kaposia Sioux who were the inhabitants of the river valley, the floodplain provided the water, transportation, food and fuel they needed. To the whites who built St. Paul, however, the high ground was much more desirable for building permanent

*Two views of St. Paul from the High Bridge a decade apart -- in 1894, top, and 1905. Note the changes in Harriet Island.*

homes - better drained, more stable, and not subject to flooding. The earliest definable residential areas of St. Paul were located on what were then the outskirts of the city -- on the east around Smith (now Mears)

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Park and Lafayette Park, and on the west in Irvine Park. Both areas were elevated above the river, and provided attractive views of the river valley. Governor Ramsey's house in Irvine Park was described by Swedish author Fredericka Bremer as "...upon a hill, a little out of the city, with beautiful trees around it, and commanding a good view of the river."<sup>6</sup>

As the city grew, railroad and commercial development encroached on these neighborhoods, and the city's elite moved to higher ground farther away from the noise and bustle of the commercial and industrial city. By 1900 their homes in the Lafayette Park neighborhood of Lowertown had been replaced by warehouses and railroad tracks. Norman Kittson, James C. Burbank and others had moved to the mansions they built along the Summit Avenue bluffs with a view of the river below. Others, notably steamboat magnate William F. Davidson, built on Dayton's Bluff. Davidson's house presents the clearest example of a house designed to take advantage of the view of the river, featuring a replica of a steamboat pilothouse at the house's peak. In 1883 the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce boasted that the city's "... principal residence localities offer magnificent views of the romantic valley of the Mississippi, and of the beautiful lake region north of the city."<sup>7</sup>

Bluff-top views of the river valley were not the only factors that influenced where St. Paul's elite lived. Clearer air and distance from industry were others. While Summit Avenue followed the bluff for only a short distance, it still maintained its reputation as the city's elite address even though many of the houses built along the bluff actually turned their backs on the river. In the 1920s and 30s, the foul smell of polluted water reduced the value of land near the river, but the view of the river valley has remained an amenity. Above Highway 61 in Highwood, along Cherokee Heights and the bluff-top road to Mendota, along the Mississippi River parkway, and most recently along Shepard Road houses and condominiums have been built to take advantage of the view below.

If the view of the river from afar could inspire awe, the sight and smell of the river up close could inspire disgust, especially before 1939 when the Pig's Eye sewage treatment plant opened. Most of the river valley was low, swampy, poorly drained, and subject to flooding. By the 1880s, it also was lined with railroad tracks and spotted with factories, railroad shops, packing plants -- the very kinds of noisy, dirty, and disruptive development which drove those who could afford it to live as far away from them as possible. The very undesirability of much of this land left it available for those who could afford to go nowhere else. Like the whiskey sellers and Fort Snell-

ing hangers-on who were the first to live along the river in St. Paul, those who lived in the river valley by the last years of the 19th century were the marginal people of St. Paul. One of the major roles of the river valley was to provide a place for those who had no place.

Two distinct neighborhoods, both now gone, were home to some of the people who lived in the river valley. The Upper Levee neighborhood, often known as "Little Italy," occupied the site today of the Kaplan Scrap Yard until it was cleared for redevelopment in the late 1950s. Across the river was the Lower West Side community, a neighborhood occupied by a succession of ethnic groups, primarily eastern European Jews and Mexican Americans, until replaced by River-view Industrial Park. These two, however, were only the largest and most obvious of the squatter colonies and other clusters of people who lived along the riverfront. At Pig's Eye, Crosby, and even on the West Side, there were farms within the city. Tucked underneath the bluff above the Upper Levee were the houses along Barton and Omaha Streets, many of whose inhabitants used caves dug into the bluff for cold storage. In 1959, after her family had lived there for forty years, Mrs. Robert Fishbach still recalled that they were, "... not exactly early settlers. Squatters might be a better name."<sup>8</sup>

If some squatters eventually became established and gained legal title to the land, others, even more marginal, did not. Squatters' shacks lined the riverfront during the Depression, many built on riverbottom that was exposed during the period of prolonged low water in the 1920s and 1930s. While some squatters built on unused land, others tied up houseboats along the shore.

The river valley neighborhoods had several things in common. Unlike Irvine Park and other districts which began as upper or middle class and deteriorated to become low-income neighborhoods, the Lower West Side, the Upper Levee, and Lilydale, a similar colony across the river from the Crosby farm, were always marginal neighborhoods, somewhat like Swede Hollow in the Phalen Creek valley. The Upper Levee and West Side were both within walking distance of downtown and nearby industries and provided their dwellers with access to jobs without transportation costs. Both were built up gradually on flood-prone land, and many houses were substandard. Heavily damaged in the major floods of 1951 and 1952, land and dwellings were cleared for industrial development because the city thought it too expensive to provide flood protection for substandard neighborhoods. Though similar in many ways, the

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neighborhoods also were different. In ethnic composition, employment, social structure, and many other ways, the two showed how similarly situated neighborhoods could differ.

### **The Upper Levee**

The Upper Levee community was smaller, more homogeneous, more stable, and more tied to the river than the West Side. The neighborhood began life as a series of squatters' shacks along the public levee occupied by Irish and Poles. A wave of Italian immigration around 1900 made it predominantly Italian. As the levee became crowded, people built tarpaper shacks on piles set back from the river. Over time, the street layout was regularized, the shacks replaced by frame houses and the land filled with refuse diverted from the city dump. Many residents eventually bought title to their homesites.

When social worker Alice Sickels studied the district in the 1930s she found a community of 200 buildings, almost all of them single family homes and all facing the river along three streets which ran parallel to the Mississippi.<sup>9</sup>

The neighborhood had 410 people in ninety-eight families. Of the 410 people, 316 were pure Italian, and most residents found it hard to believe that there

*Harriet Island in its heyday, a photograph by C. P. Gibson taken about 1910.*

were more than seventy non-Italians on the levee. Most of the Italians, in fact, had come from two small towns in Abruzzi-Molise in southern Italy. Most of the Poles had moved away by that time; those left were members of two families who had arrived in the United States around 1880. The Italians came a little later, but virtually all had arrived by 1914.

When Sickels visited, most of the residents were semi-skilled workers or day laborers, and the largest group worked for the city. Earlier, many of the Poles had worked in the Omaha Railroad shops farther up the levee. Most of the Italians originally had worked as section hands on the railroads and were away from home for much of the year.

The river valley neighborhoods and their residents had surprisingly little to do with the river, since most boat captains, pilots and crews lived in Illinois and Iowa and their boats were built along the Ohio river. In its early years, the Upper Levee community depended heavily on the river, but as the river became more polluted, that dependence decreased, and the river became as much a nuisance for this community as for the city as a whole.

The oldest residents Sickels found on the levee told

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of a community which at one time had made frequent use of the river, however. Guiseppe, the oldest Italian resident, remembers when, "The water in the Mississippi was clear and shallow. Harriet Island was a popular boating and picnic beach reached by row boats from the Levee." Women washed clothes in the river. Residents scrounged the bark and waste wood from the sawmills for fuel and for supplies for their shacks, though they had to avoid using any logs marked by the logging companies in building on to their houses. Log booms provided diving platforms for the levee's boys. Mary, the oldest Polish resident, remembered Polish fishermen seining carp and buffalo fish to sell commercially in the city.

Soon after the turn of the century, however, all that changed. The fishermen disappeared as pollution worsened. With the northern timberlands cut-over, the sawmills closed. By the time of Sickels' visit, she noted that, "The stench from the polluted waters of the Mississippi is at times very bad."

The people Sickels talked with remembered 1888 as the only year in which the entire levee was flooded to the roofs of the houses, but they also remembered frequent minor flooding. The major floods of 1951 and 1952 did more severe damage. City plans for building Shepard Road along the levee would take out some of the houses. To city planners, the existence of this small island of houses surrounded by industry, highways, and railroads, without sewers and other municipal services, clearly called for clearance and redevelopment. Thus the area was cleared by the St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority, which intended to replace it with intensive, "non-noxious industry." They had trouble finding such a user, however, and eventually they leased the land to the Kaplan Brothers Scrap company. Their yard, intended to be a model of an aesthetically pleasing scrapyard, was later described as "an obscenity" by *St. Paul Dispatch* editor William Sumner.<sup>10</sup>

## The West Side

Thanks to an exceptionally literate and devoted group of people who grew up there, the lower West Side is one of the most romanticized neighborhoods in St. Paul. The success and fond memories of people who grew up on the West Side flats are tributes to the capacity of people to survive and even thrive under adverse conditions. From the beginning until it was cleared in the early 1960s the lower West Side was one of the least favored neighborhoods in St. Paul, a place to live until you could accumulate the means to live elsewhere, a classic entry-level

Towne described it in 1956 as, "...a neighborhood in the city which few know, seldom visit and are reluctant to admit exists ... It is a seamy side. An area of hovels and sagging porches where the ratio of bathtubs is not always one to a building ... And where on hot days, the flats radiate heat like a griddle and at night the fetid air is pushed down as if by a huge, unseen sweaty hand."<sup>11</sup>

The story of this neighborhood has been told frequently and well. After the opening of the Robert Street bridge, in the 1880s, which coincided with a wave of immigration from eastern Europe, the West Side flats were settled by a mixture of ethnic groups in which eastern European Jews dominated. Over time, they developed a distinctive community knit together by institutions such as the Neighborhood House (a settlement house) and a variety of Jewish religious and social organizations. Immigration restrictions ended the eastern European immigration in 1920, and gradually the Jewish dominance weakened as Chicanos began to move into the area. Originally seasonal workers recruited for the sugar beet crop during World War I, the Chicano population grew rapidly, with the church of Our Lady of Guadalupe emerging as a major community center.

The West Side community seems to have had the relationship with the river that the early Upper Levee neighborhood had. Though neighborhood children swam in the river and made use of the Harriet Island Public Baths, the Jewish community in St. Paul, Marilyn Chiat's research reveals, tended to view the river as an enemy.

The river flooded homes. Perhaps even more important, the river was sometimes seen as a symbolic barrier to those in the Jewish community on the West Side. Often crossing the river on foot daily to work for the better-established German-Jewish merchants and in other jobs in downtown St. Paul, they longed for the time they could leave their ghetto on the West Side and cross the river to become full members of this new society.

The river, in fact, was an enemy to the neighborhood. Long an area of substandard housing, like the Upper Levee, the West Side deteriorated further during the Depression. The social coherence of the neighborhood weakened as the second generation of the Jewish families moved across the river to Highland Park and elsewhere, and as the ethnic composition of the neighborhood became even more diverse. Finally, the 1951 and 1952 floods severely damaged most of the lower West Side. As with the Upper Levee, city government was hesitant to spend the money for a flood control project to protect substandard houses. It decided to clear the

neighborhood instead, and replace it with the River-view Industrial Park and related development in the early 1960s.

When the Ramsey County park department acquired the town of Lilydale to convert the town site into a park, the final significant river valley neighborhood was eliminated. Since the 1950s, as the people of St. Paul have looked to the river to provide places to locate industry and to play, the riverfront has become the focus of debate about whether it serves the city better for industry and commerce or for open space and recreation. Lost in most of the discussion has been the traditional role of the neighborhoods down on the river as havens for those who could not afford more desirable locations. Recent residential development along the river follows the lead of those who first built along Summit Avenue, enjoying the view, but not the up-close experience. If a remnant of the river valley's role as sanctuary exists, it may be in the shadowy way the abandoned river valley caves become re-opened and, perhaps, become a sanctuary for some of the city's homeless and marginal people.

## The Recreational River

Just as the Mississippi has been a working river and a neighborhood river, it also has been a recreational river for the people of St. Paul. Often, however, its recreational use has been residual -- areas available for recreation were those not being used for something else. People who have worked to protect the recreational use of the river often have had to fight hard against the presumption that development for private productive use should take precedence, and against a reluctance to devote public money to so-called frivolous uses.

Today, we sometimes think of recreation in terms of sports -- running, skiing, playing softball -- all activities which have taken place in the river valley. Recreation, however, is more than play. It is activities designed to refresh or renew or re-create the people who take part in them. In this more profound sense, the river has been a place of recreation for many years.

Something about the river, its constantly moving power, perhaps, or the magnificent sweep of river and valley, has inspired awe and drawn people to the heights above the river. The Indians attached spiritual significance to the river; to Carver's Cave, that mysterious expanse under Dayton's Bluff; to the massive granite boulder for which Red Rock was named. Their choice of the crown of the bluffs at Mounds Park to bury their dead speaks of their sense of the specialness of that place, with its view up and



*Harriet Island baths and pavilion about 1910.*

down the valley.

Red Rock also was a place of spiritual renewal for later settlers. From 1869 through the 1880s, and continuing into the 1930s, Red Rock was the site of annual camp revival meetings. As many as 10,000 people in a day would come to the services and retreats on special river packets and trains, some coming for just the day, but others staying in tents, cabins, and even a hotel for several days at a time.<sup>12</sup>

In a less spiritual sense, 19th century advocates of river front parks, such as H.W.S. Cleveland and Dr. Justus Ohage, the St. Paul public health officer who created the public baths at Harriet Island, expected parks to contribute to physical renewal and to promote spiritual and moral renewal as well. As the city grew and became dirtier and more crowded, the open spaces, vegetation, and fresh air of the parks were expected to counteract the unhealthy aspects of city life.

The river valley's role as a recreational resource, then, has been as complex and shifting as its economic role. People have looked to the river valley for different forms of recreation, from frontier camp meetings to contemporary cross-country ski trails. While organized efforts to provide park and recreational facilities can be easily documented, perhaps the most distinctive forms of recreation have been "unofficial" and less easily documented. Some of St. Paul's first white occupants were whiskey sellers, providing illegal recreational facilities for Fort Snelling soldiers, a tradition that was maintained by the bootleggers and speakeasys which were legendary during the Prohibition years. However unconsciously, the teenagers today who find the river valley and its caves inviting refuges for illegal "beer busts" are upholding a St. Paul tradition dating back to the 1840s and to Pig's Eye Parrant's saloon in Fountain Cave.

Indeed, perhaps some of the special recreational roles the river valley has played for the people of St. Paul have stemmed from its wild and untamed character, so different from the city. It is quite possible that more recreational hours are logged by young people exploring this wilderness within the city - by

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"kids wandering around" than by other uses of the river. Whether fishing or swimming in the river despite pollution or exploring the forbidden caves, many who have grown up in St. Paul have found a refuge and a challenge in the river valley which has had an important influence on them. Today the elaborate network of footpaths in the most inaccessible parts of the valley, the frustration of the city workers who seal up caves only to have enterprising youngsters dig new entrances, and, unfortunately, the frequent remains of campfires littered with beer cans clearly demonstrates that the river valley has not lost its lure for St. Paul's youth.

More legitimate and organized recreational activity also has been important. The Minnesota Boat Club was organized in 1870. It operated from an old flat boat at the foot of Robert Street until the club purchased half of Raspberry Island in 1877. The current clubhouse on the island was built in 1905 and recently remodeled. For awhile a refuge of the city's elite, the organization has had a fluctuating membership but it has survived the worst years of river pollution and is enjoying a resurgence today. The St. Paul Boat Club (later the St. Paul Yacht Club) was organized in 1912 to provide docking space for club members, and has been active since, sponsoring picnics, excursions, and boat races. During most of its history, its docks and clubhouse have been at Harriet Island.

Before about 1920, river excursions and picnics along the river were popular activities at various clubs and organizations such as the Motor Boat Club and the St. Paul Commercial Club. Leaving from downtown, the excursioners would travel by boat downstream to Red Rock or beyond or upstream to Crosby farm or into the Minnesota River valley. The Willowbrook Fish Hatchery below Mounds Park was also a popular tourist attraction and picnic spot during the early years of the 20th century.

The years between 1900 and 1915 were also the heyday of Harriet Island, a different kind of park. During this time, Harriet Island was controlled not by the city park board, but by the health department. Dr. Justus Ohage purchased Harriet Island, a low, wooded sandbar, and financed filling, riprapping of the banks, and construction of bathhouses and swimming areas, then donated it to the city. Free except for a small charge for rental of swim suits, soap, and towels, the public baths at Harriet Island were intended as a public health measure as well as a place of recreation. In his 1906 annual report, Dr. Ohage noted that, "Cleanliness is essential to the maintenance of good health and the St. Paul Public Baths are not a small factor in this direction."

The facilities were also "a school of deportment and

wholesome recreation," where "no improper conduct is allowed, the rule has been from the beginning that no woman or child should ever see or hear anything on Harriet Island they ought not to." Harriet Island included a zoo, picnic grounds, public kitchen, outdoor gymnasiums, tennis and handball courts, and free day care facilities which served 33,640 during 1906. Ohage reported that six million people, including almost one-and-a-half million actual bathers had used the Public Baths between 1900 and 1906.<sup>13</sup> Up to 25,000 people visited the park in a single day during its peak years.

By 1915, however, pollution of the river was becoming so severe that some questioned whether Harriet Island was a public health help or hazard. As the water pollution crisis developed in the 1920s, the river valley became much less attractive as a place for a pleasant outing. A hot summer day ideal for a picnic would raise foul odors from the river. Though the Boat Club and Motor Boat Club survived, Boat Club members avoided the river and Yacht Club members moved much of their activity to the St. Croix. The Harriet Island baths were closed, and the park facilities began to deteriorate. When the Pig's Eye sewage treatment plant opened in 1939, people anticipated a resurgence of use of the river. Membership in the Yacht Club boomed, and plans were made to develop a recreation center above the High Dam. But water pollution remained a problem, although the river has been perceived as more polluted than it really is. It is still underutilized for recreational boating, however, and still unsafe for water contact sports.

Through St. Paul's history, the most consistent advocates of the recreational use of the river valley have been the St. Paul Park Board and its successors in city government. Since the 1870s people have argued that the city needed to acquire river bluff and valley land to preserve it for public use and enjoyment and to protect it from private development. Two characteristics have epitomized attempts to develop river-oriented parks in St. Paul: a surprising consistency of plans over a period of more than a hundred years, and the absence of effective administrative and financial structures to implement the plans, at least until recently. From Horace William Shaler Cleveland's first proposals for a city park system to the Ramsey County Open Space and St. Paul River Corridor plans, there has been a consensus that St. Paul's park system should feature parkways which follow the river, preserve the river valley and bluffs in as natural a state as possible, and tie into Minneapolis' parkway system. Yet the acquisition of land and the actual development of the system has been



slow, inconsistent, and sporadic because no reliable mechanism for funding the park system was developed.

H.W.S. Cleveland, the landscape architect whose vision shaped the park systems of both Minneapolis and St. Paul, continuously stressed the importance of maintaining prominent overlook points, and of maintaining the riverfront and bluffs in a natural condition:

*Preserve above all the wild and picturesque character of the river banks, and do not suffer them to be stripped of their foliage or*

*The view, top, from Indians Mounds Park about 1910, photographed by C. P. Gibson, and contrasted with the same view photographed in 1956 by Kenneth M. Wright. These photographs capture the changes, created by commercial development, in one of the most magnificent views of the river valley.*

*scarred and seamed by excavations. The day is not distant when the thickly wooded banks, the deep and dark ravines, the rugged and precipitous rocks, and the picturesque cascades which form the shores of the majestic river will be regarded as your choicest possessions for the unique*

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character they will confer upon the city.<sup>14</sup>

Cleveland compared the landscape gardener to the "high priest of nature," who should touch her work only "with very reverent hands."

The park board of that era, led by Joseph Wheelock and Frederick Nussbaumer, worked hard to develop a coherent plan and to acquire land for parks, but was frequently thwarted by the reluctance of landowners to sell their land and by the reluctance of the city to spend money to acquire parkland. They moved, however, to acquire key overlooks at Mounds Park, Cherokee Heights, and Summit Outlook, and began work on the Mississippi River Boulevard.

In 1911 Alphaeus B. Stickney, prominent St. Paul railroad man and organizer of the St. Paul Union Stockyards, developed a plan for riverfront parks which built on the park board's conception. Stickney proposed that virtually the entire river valley within the city, including the Crosby, Pickerel Lake, and Pig's Eye areas, become a continuous forest park, and that a Grand Summit Boulevard be built to form a continuous parkway from Mississippi River Boulevard along the brow of the bluffs all the way to the state capitol and then to Mounds Park. While Cleveland had seen the park system as an "ornament" to the city, Stickney also saw it as a place for outdoor recreation: "yachting, boating, canoeing, fishing...camping and picnicking."<sup>14</sup> Stickney's conception of a continuous river valley park has inspired advocates of parks and helped lead to acquisition of Lilydale and the Crosby farm for parks, but he coupled his plans with financing schemes which further hamstrung attempts to purchase the necessary land.

The development of Kellogg Mall, which opened the downtown to the river, illustrated the difficulty of financing such development. Though advocated since the 1850s, it took twenty years of work to put together a proposal which could be passed and financed.

Increased interest in outdoor recreation after World War II eventually led to revived interest in riverfront parks in St. Paul. The effectiveness of the St. Paul Port Authority's economic development efforts in the river valley led to a reaction by people who feared that the entire riverfront would be given over to industrial use. Increasing interest in protecting the natural environment contributed to this reaction, although those wanting recreational facilities and those wanting to protect the natural environment did not always agree. The current efforts to plan for the future of the riverfront, which have included commitment of most of the river valley upstream from the old High Bridge for parkland, have been the results of that controversy.

## Conclusion

Within St. Paul, the Mississippi River has been a working river, a neighborhood river, and a recreational river. The ways the river has been perceived and used, however, have changed frequently as the city has grown, and as transportation systems, economic systems, and people's values have changed. The future holds more change that will affect how the river will be understood and used. The changing city, however, must recognize that the river changes too, and that the quality of the river's water as well as the development along its banks can limit its usefulness and desirability.

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"Little Italy"



Harriet Island in 1910.



St. Paul about 1894.



Minnesota Boat Club shell races, ca. 1890.

The Gibbs Farm Museum, owned by the Ramsey County Historical Society, at Cleveland and Larpenteur in Falcon Heights.



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