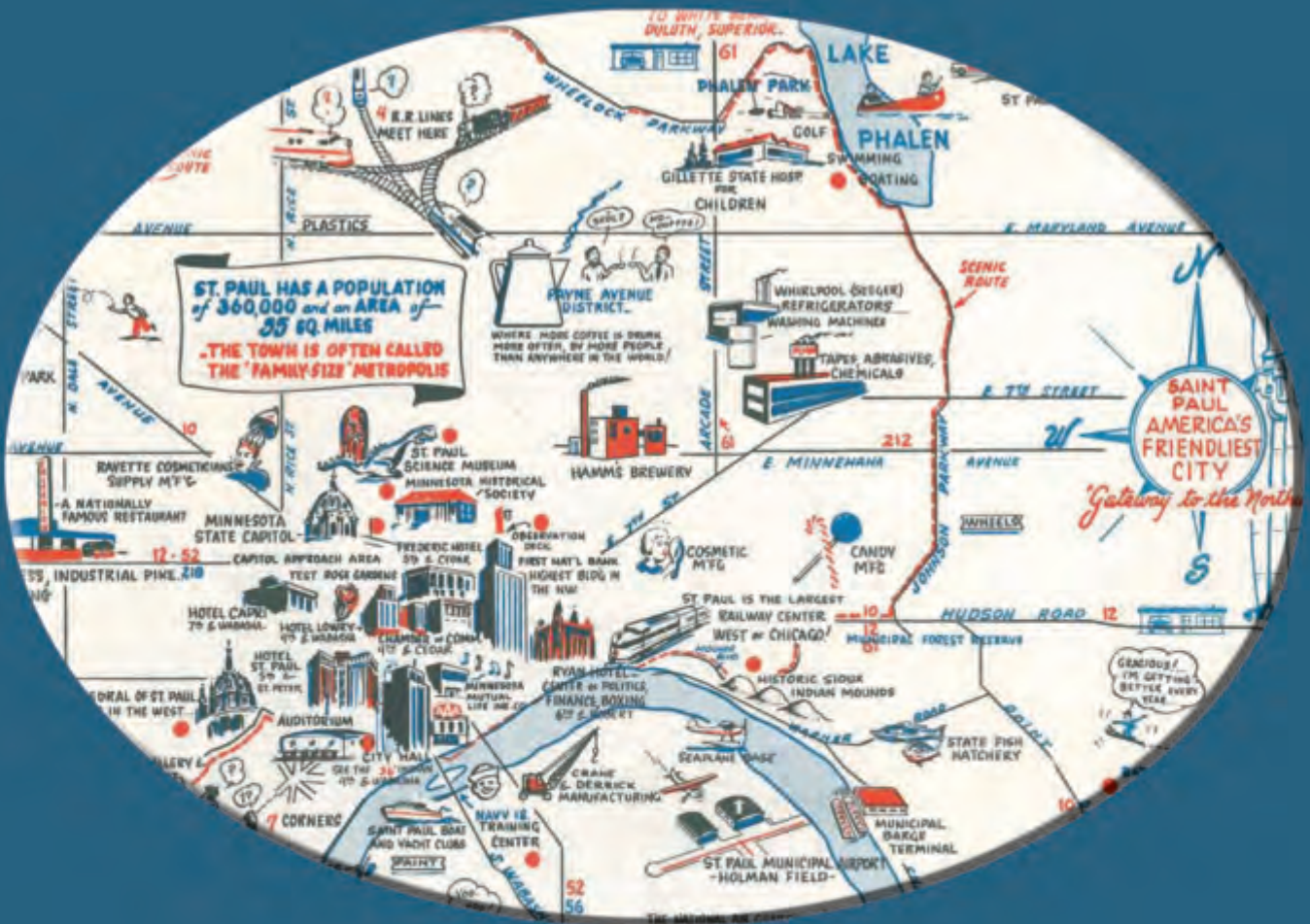


*“It Was Like Living in a Small Town”*

Three St. Paul Neighborhoods That Worked:  
Dayton’s Bluff, Payne Avenue, and Arcade Street  
in the 1940s and ’50s

Steven C. Trimble

Page 3



A portion of the “Souvenir Guide Map of Saint Paul, Showing Pieces of Historic, Scenic and General Interest” that was circulated by St. Paul’s leaders in 1957. The area reproduced here concentrates on the city’s East Side and highlights the Hamm’s Brewery, the Whirlpool (Seeger) plant on Arcade Street, and 3M’s headquarters and large manufacturing facilities (identified as “MMM”) that turned out “tapes, abrasives, chemicals.” Photo by Maureen McGinn; courtesy of the Collections of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 45, Number 3

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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*Publication of Ramsey County History is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon*

## A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue celebrates the history of St. Paul’s East Side. In our lead article, Steve Trimble examines the ways in which three East Side neighborhoods—Dayton’s Bluff, Payne Avenue, and Arcade Street—worked through national mobilization during World War II and the challenges of adapting to peacetime and the changes of the 1950s. These East Side communities had a strong sense of place that helped them to weather wartime hardships and to prosper despite the challenges of the 1950s and ’60s. In our second article, Paul Nelson profiles the people who called the one-block-long Decatur Street, which ran above Swede Hollow, their home between the 1890s, when the street was platted, and the early 1930s, when the city of St. Paul decided to eliminate Decatur so that Payne Avenue could be connected to East Seventh Street. The Ramsey County Historical Society is especially thankful for the generous support and encouragement for the publication of this in-depth look at the East Side that it received from the Chairman of the 3M Company, George W. Buckley, himself an enthusiastic reader of history, and the 3M Company.

RCHS recently announced at its annual Members’ Event that Barry L. and Joan Miller Cotter had won the 2010 Virginia Brainard Kunz Award for the best article published in *Ramsey County History* in 2008–2009 for their two articles on Truman M. Smith, St. Paul banker and horticulturalist. Because the Cotters were not able to be present to accept their award, they have communicated their thanks in an email that says that winning the Award is a “very gratifying surprise.” The Cotters also stressed that the work they did “was only possible because of the warm and encouraging response” they received from RCHS and the Society’s policy of carefully considering manuscripts written by “people who may not be historians by training but want to add their bit to the ongoing story of Ramsey County history.” Congratulations to Barry and Joan Cotter.

*Anne Cowie, Chair, Editorial Board*



## *Once There Was a Street Called Decatur*

*Paul D. Nelson*

**G**eorge Washington slept here.” Much local history writing consists of a variation on this theme: a great figure, a big event, a gruesome crime, a deadly catastrophe visited our town.

Our town is the more or less familiar setting. The visitors bring pleasure, excitement, drama. We feel a connection to even long-ago events just because they happened here, much the way we feel complimented when a celebrity deigns to visit today. We who write local history trade on these feelings and probably experience them more acutely than our readers do.

At the risk of losing readers . . . this article tells no story of crime, disaster, or celebrity. This one is about the setting; to be more precise, about an insignificant bit of our Ramsey County setting. It is about a single block of a single St. Paul street where, over forty years, nothing of importance happened. George Washington slept somewhere else.

### **Decatur Street**

Decatur Street perched on the western rim of Swede Hollow, roughly midway between East Seventh Street on the south and

Minnehaha Avenue on the north. Hamm’s Brewery loomed a few blocks northeast.

Though laid out in 1857, it came to life, to practical existence, 25 or so years later, as St. Paul’s population boomed thanks to national prosperity and the railroads. In the early 1880s six buildings went up, frame houses and one or two commercial structures.

They were part of a neighborhood we now call Railroad Island. Railroad Island still exists but Decatur Street does not. It lasted over forty years, and all that remains today are three buildings on its west side, the traces of a stairway down to Swede Hollow, memories of a few who lived there, scattered mentions in the historical record, and a trove of files and photographs at the Minnesota Historical Society.

If there is a story here, it begins with the photographs. They were all taken in the early 1930s as Decatur Street got ready for its destruction; they do not show a living street, as most of the houses were

already abandoned. Still, they permit us almost—almost—to reconstruct the entire one-block streetscape (east side only). There are lots of photos of individual houses in the public record, but whole blocks are rare.

This piece aims to recreate that streetscape and to bring the people back to Decatur Street. Who lived there? Where did they come from? What was their work? The fact that nothing important happened there makes Decatur Street an unusually true bit of history, for this is precisely what happens on most streets, in most cities, most of the time.

### **Origins**

Decatur Street was first dreamed into existence by John Irvine (namesake of Irvine Park), one of the many real estate speculators operating in St. Paul in the 1850s. He platted the street in 1857, and named it for naval war hero Steven Decatur. The original plat was a bit fanciful—the map showed the east side houses with ample (for the time) back yards, while in fact those back yards were more vertical than horizontal—they plunged into the Hollow.



**598 Decatur, built 1889.**

**1895:** Frederick Moberg, Swede. Arthur & Mary Donlon, son Archie.

**1900:** Christina Nelson, children Nels, Axel, John, Swedes, Edward & Anna. Herbert & Margorie Walker, children F\_\_ & Mary; in-laws Margaret & Nora O'Halloran.

**1905:** John & Catherine Sullivan, Irish; children Patrick & William. John & Mary Crinnian (?), children Roy, Mildred, Irene & Clarence. William & Bell Horan.

**1910:** Nels & May Nyquist, Swedes, children Florence, Nels, Abelin, Anna & Lilly.

**1920:** Lee & Millie Hanson, children; Harold, Russel, Eleanor, Joe & Roy.



**596 Decatur, built 1894.**

**1895:** Edward & Annie Erickson, Swedes, daughter Ester; Gust Erickson, Swede. Oscar & Augusta Moberg, Swedes; daughter Ella; John Moberg, Otto Oberg, John Bjorklund, Swedes.

**1900:** Edward & Anna Erickson (see above), children Ester & Earl. Axel Berlin, Victor Nelson, Anna Johnson, daughter Hilda; Ella Larson, daughter Violet., all Swedes except the children. Carl Nelson.

**1905:** Edward & Anna Erickson, see above, children Esther, Earl, Edward & Ethel. Hilda Olson, Swede. Annie & Hilda Johnson, Ellen Larson, see above.

**1910:** Robert & Louisa Petterson, Danes, sons B\_\_, George, Warren, Herman.

**1920:** Tony & Virginia Masto, Italians; children Richie, Joe, two more names illegible. William & Lenora Burdick, Rex & Leona Bayles, daughter Elizabeth Asa Tidball, roomer.

**1930:** No census entry.



**592 Decatur, built 1889.**

**1890 CD:** Frederick Moberg (a.k.a. Moberg) grocery; Albertina Peterson.

**1895:** no census entry. 1900: Louis & Eva Cottrell, children Ruth, Mabel, Maud, Hazel, and Margaret; Leroy Cottrell (brother.)

**1905:** No census entry.

**1910:** August & Josephina Henrickson, Danes; adult children Agneta & Adolph.

**1920:** Joe & Mary Damiani, Italians, children James, Rosie, & Frances. Vincenzo, Damiani (father) Italy.

**1930:** No census entry.

No matter; the platting came just in time for the financial panic that wrecked many on-paper real property and banking fortunes in the city and suppressed St. Paul's economic activity until after the Civil War. Decatur Street existed only on paper for the next quarter century.

St. Paul's railroad-led boom brought Decatur Street into corporeal existence in the mid-1880s. The city lept up, at last, from the original downtown bowl and spread east, west, and north in a frenzy of building, much of it hasty and careless.

The first known structure to appear on Decatur Street was a modest Queen Anne at 564 in 1880. It stood alone for a few years, but 534, 556, and 566 came along in 1884, 573 and 577 across the street a year later, and by 1891 the block was nearly complete. We do not know who the first settlers were; alas, the 1890 U.S. census records that might have told us were lost in a fire.

The 1890–91 St. Paul city directory

gives us an incomplete (no children, for example) but still very useful view of the block's quick development. By 1891 the block was about as full as it would get (there were always empty lots, though not always the same ones). The west side, always more commercial than residential, had eight businesses: Ernest Mohaupt's bakery, Charles Daniels's confectionery, the Campbell & Dempsey livery stable, two smithies—William Kautt's and Sorenson & Olson's—the Globe Tea Co. grocery, George Anderson's contracting business, and Anderstrom & Fagerstrom flour and feed.

The east side of Decatur was always more residential than commercial, and the businesses there reflected this. There was a shoe store (Juleen

& Wallgren), John Norman's saloon, Martin Erickson's butcher shop, and two groceries—Frederick Moberg's and Erickson & Norquist. There were also at least 61 adults living on the block.

In less than a decade Decatur Street had gone from nothing to a bustling and vigorous and very urban street of mixed (that is, unplanned) development.

### The Peopling of Decatur

Starting in 1895 we can put together a substantially complete composite of who lived on Decatur, at least at five and ten year intervals. The state census taker in 1895 (C.J. Palmer, who himself lived at 581 Decatur) found 19 households, 15 of them on the east side of the street, on the edge of Swede Hollow. There were 142 people. Eighty of these were immigrant Swedes, and 13 more their U.S.-born children. There were five Germans, two Irish, two Norwegians, and one Englishwoman. Just under 74% of this street of St. Paul people were immigrants and their children.





**590 Decatur, built 1889.**

**1895:** Cornelia Lalone; Kittie Streeter; Freddie Smith; Edith Bennett, English.

**1900:** John Miller, German; wife Josephine, Canada; children Andy, William, Maude, Rose & Emory. Peter Olson, Swede.

**1905:** John Hohmeister, German; wife Lydia; adult children Jessie & Ledda(?). Eddie & Adelaide Wolf.

**1910:** Hohmeister family (see above.)

**1920:** Gus & Emelia Hildt, children, Fred, Charlie, Elvina, Henry & Eda. Albert & Madalene Lentsch, children Albert, Helen, Howard, Orville, Catherine & Lawrence.

**1930:** No census entry.



**588 Decatur duplex, built 1889.**

**1895:** Theodore & Augusta Lundholm, Swedes; children Elizabeth & Annie. Nels Fredlund, Swede.

**1900:** Joseph Wilson, Swede; wife Maria; children Richard, Donald & Bernie. Victor & Hilda Johnson, Swedes; daughter Helen.

**1905:** Albert & Catherine Cook, children Maud, John & Joseph. Martin & Bertha Olson, Swedes.

**1910:** George & Alfreda Lang, children Florence & Elizabeth. Mary Clang, son Peter Clang, Swedes.

**1920:** Frank & Nellie Strain, children Lloyd, Dolly, Earl, John, Frank & Maud. Robert & Edna Boyle, children Agnes, Rebecca(?), Bernardine, Harold.

**1930:** No census entry.

**586 Decatur duplex, built 1889.**

**1895:** Emil Kensberg, German; wife Theresa, son Leon. August Anderson, Andrew Anderson, Charles & Anna Ek, infant child Ek, all Swedes.

**1900:** Kensberg family (see above); Michael & Carrie Larson.

**1905:** Kensberg family (see above.)

**1910:** Kensberg family (see above); William & Margaret Tucker, daughter Therese Jameson, Canadians; granddaughter Margaret.

**1920:** Sam & Antoinette Munti, Italians, H.W. Martin & Helen Knaps, children Hazel, Leonard & Pearl. Charles & Helen Smith. John Thorson, John Thorson)

**1930:** No census entry.

By now you can imagine the surnames: Anderson, Nelson, Lundgren, Moberg, Larson, Loranson, Olson, Johnson, Peterson, Wellander. And the language of the street? Probably not English. Not for nothing was the hollow down below called Swede. Just five years later, 1900, the street had already changed a lot. Though still Scandinavian, the percentage of immigrants had fallen to 46%—58 Swedes, six Germans, four Canadians, four Norwegians, three Irish, a Dane, a Bohemian, and a Frenchwoman. Many of the people there in 1895 had moved on; evidence of the instability that comes with rapid growth.

Between 1895 and 1900, nine households on the one block of Decatur street turned over completely. Sixty-seven people there in 1895 were gone five years later. Only eight families living on Decatur in 1895 were still there in 1900. It's as though the Scandinavian immi-

grants, tied to the native soil for centuries, once freed by emigration could not abide permanence. They had to move.

The census records suggest a world though physically near and not so distant in time, yet irretrievably strange. No one owned a car, and there was no public transport except the Payne Avenue street-car line that skirted the neighborhood. People walked, hence the need for many small stores close by. Families were often big, many households were multigenerational, and lots of people took in boarders.

A fine example of these composite households was the Lorentson (also spelled Loranson) family, who resided for more than a decade in the small house at 552 Decatur. In 1895 the Swedish immigrants William and Mary lived there with their six children (three born in Minnesota), plus two infants from Children's Home Society,

and five boarders (all Swedes), three single men and a married couple. They had a different set of boarders in 1900 and a different set still in 1905.

Decatur Street got even more crowded over the next five years. When the state census takers came through in June of 1905 they found 201 people living in 22 dwellings. That's an average of nine per household, (the city-wide average in 1900 was 6.1) but it misleads slightly as averages so often do. Twelve of the 22 households held ten people or more; 25 lived in the little house at 550 Decatur Street alone.

To offer a contemporary comparison, the author's modest Merriam Park block consists of 24 dwellings, counting apartments and duplex units, not more than 70 people, and no household larger than six.

The taking of boarders contributed to density. An extreme example from 1910 was 573 Decatur. Louis Torgerson, a carpetlayer from Norway, lived there with



**566 Decatur, built 1884.**

**1895:** Peter & Christina Nelson, children August, Oscar, Otto, and Henry, all Swedes. August & Lina Jacke, Swedes, and children Walter & William.

**1900:** Carl & \_\_ Anderson; Olof & \_\_ Anderson; E\_\_ & Cary Pearl & 4 children, all Swedes.

**1905:** Otto & Annie Larson, Swedes, children Victor, Edgar & Otto. John & Minnie Peterson, Swedes, children Fred, Jessie, Tillie, & Daniel. Thomas & Lena Bell, children Lily, Chester, William, Clarence, Florence, and Nellie. Olof & Elizabeth Anderson, Swedes.

**1910:** Carl & Johanna Erikson; Signe Lundquist; Ellen Lundquist, all Swedes.

**1920:** Sam & Florence Riccio, children James, Mary, Frank, \$ntonette & Johnny, all Italians. Sam and Sarafina Ollanio, Italians, and children Ida, ) iore, & Elmida. Frank Ciafeldi, Italian, roomer.

**564 Decatur, built 1889.**

**1895:** Nicholas Landy, Irish; wife Lizzie, son Vernie. Thomas Fitzgerald, Irish. George Gibhart. Arthur Greggs.

**1900:** Otto & Anna Backstrom, Swedes; children Arthur & Ray. Charles Rudeen, Swede.

**1905:** George W. & Mamie Wells, children Jessie & John. George C. Wells. Harry & Carolina Nelson, Norwegians; children Harry, Mary, Walter, 9iolet, Lilian & Mildred.

**1910:** Richard & Nina Beverstadt, Norwegians; children Mable, Clara & Viola. Oscar Johnson, Swede.

**1920:** Joseph & Frances Gatto, son Freddie, Italians, and children Albert, Fannie & Amelia. Salvatore Calabrese, Italian.

**1930:** Joseph & Frances Gatto (see above), children Fred, Albert, Fanny, Emma, Emelia, & Lena.

**562 Decatur, built 1890.**

**1890 CD:** Erickson & Nordquist grocery; Swan Berg, Frank Johnson, Gottfried Johnson.

**1895:** Frank Nelson, Charley Rudeen, Amanda Nelson, Oscar & Elizabeth Anderson, Swedes.

**1900:** Frank & Olivia Norman, daughter Anna, Swedes, sons George & Roy.

**1905:** James Payne, wife Matilda, German; Amelia Scherandt, German, & daughter Violet. Frank Olson, Carl & Johanna Erickson, Swedes.

**1910:** Edward & Ida Johnston, children Zaurah(?), Devine, \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, & Lillian. Fred & Luisa Luchsinger, Emil Wanke, Germans.

**1920:** Frank & Dora Yarusso, Italian, children Ernest, Dante, George, Lorenzo, Bernice & Marie. Thomas Donnelly & Matilda Donnelly, Swede.

**1930:** Yarusso family (see above.)

his wife and two children, 16 and 21 . . . and seven boarders, all men in their 20s and 30s, six of them railroad workers. Boardinghouses were common in those days; the 1903 city directory lists 107; the 1915 directory lists an astounding 321 (189 operated by women). This is another institution that has vanished and is barely imaginable today, but it filled a need. Between 1900 and 1910 St. Paul grew by nearly 50,000; the newcomers had to have somewhere to live.

Children dominated Decatur. From the 1905 census we have ages for 187 of the 201 people. Seventy-eight (41%) were 16 years of age or younger. Try to imagine 78 children on a single block. Of the adults (17 or older), 26 were 17 to 29 years old, 37 in their 30s, and 31 in their 40s. (Try also to imagine today a

block with so many small children and a dozen or so unmarried men in their 30s.) Only 15 of the 187 were 50 or older. By today's demographic standards, Decatur Street was a third world country.

**Work**

People reading this article have probably sought, and many achieved, work in which they not only earn an adequate living, but also find some expression of their talents, interests, and values. Such a conception of work would probably not have occurred to many residents of Decatur Street.

These were people of hand tools. For men, in 1900 for example, the most common occupation was simply, "laborer." Railroads were the biggest employer: on that Decatur block in 1900 there was one

railroad laborer, one brakeman, one cook, two switchmen, two firemen, two engineers, and three car cleaners. There were many tradesmen—two butchers, two bartenders, two carpenters, two blacksmiths, a tailor, a plasterer, five teamsters (with actual teams!), a harness-maker, a sausage-maker, and a sewer pipelayer. Though the Hamm's brewery stood within easy walking distance, only one brewery laborer appears, though the two stationary engineers who in the record might well have worked there too. Three men were what we might call entrepreneurs today: two storekeepers and a contractor. Five worked as clerks, and one as an office boy.

The reader may now wish to guess the occupations of the people on his or her block; there's probably no one nearby



**552 Decatur, built 1889.**

**1895:** William & Mary Lorentson, children Othelia, Eva, Annie, Swedes, Edward, Jennie & Oscar, plus two infants from the Children's Home Society; Albert Odberg, John Rosenkrantz, Peter Olson, Michael & Carrie Larson, all Swedes.

**1900:** Lorentson family (see above), though spelled Andrew (instead of William) Loranson this time; Charles Carlson, Selma Johnson.

**1905:** Lorentson family (see above) minus Othelia, Eva, and Annie. John Rosencranz, Swede; Thomas & Alice Burns and son Alfred. Alfred Gagnier, A.M. Ingalls.

**1910:** Russel Van Wyck, Canadian, wife Dagmar, Dane; Marie Loranson.

**1920:** John & Annie Papa, daughter Rose, Italians; children Paul, Louise, Helen & Antonette.

**1930:** Papa family (see above) minus Rose & Antonette.

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who can repair your harness or grind you a sausage.

Almost all of the married women were housewives, whether they had no children or six. Widows and unmarried women worked as domestics, seamstresses, or laundresses; the nearby Overall Laundry at 565 Decatur would have been attractive for its location. The laundry worker who shows up in 1910 strikes a modern chord: Christina Nelson, 47, from Sweden, was, to use today's language, a single parent (in her case, a widow) with five children 16, 14, 12, 6, and 4. The 16-year-old contributed what he earned as an office boy. They lived at 598 Decatur.

Though few women worked for pay outside the home, households had more than one source of income. No family



**550 Decatur, date unknown.**

**1890 CD:** Martin Erickson meats; Sabrina Caulson, John Ekstrom, Edward Erickson, Nels Nelson.

**1895:** Nels & Sarah Nelson, Swedes; daughter Lillie; additional children Johnny Sundin, Annie Anderson & infant from Children's Home Society. Charles Lofgren, Swede, and wife Mary, Bohemian; Elizabeth Lundgren and children George & Annie, Swedes.

**1900:** Nelson family (see above); Will Cook and wife Anna, a Swede; Charles Lofgren & Mary Lofgren (see above), children Charles & Carl. Frank O. Nelson, Swede.

**1905:** Nels & Mary Nyquist, Swedes, and children Florence, Norbert, Carolyn & Annie. Alfred & Alfreda Wahlund and daughter, Florence, Swedes; additional children George, Ruth & Edith. Harold Hanson, Swede. Valentine Kennedy & daughter Pearl. George Kennedy; Henry & Helen Hanson and son Harold. Wilmer Larson. Nels & Mary Nelson (see above.) H.W. & Minnie Wall and daughter Katie.

**1910:** Lydia Franc, Swiss, son & daughter (names illegible.) Mary Dumont & son William, Irish. Nicholas & Catrina Schaeffer, children Parin(?) & Alfred. Bernard Allen, English, wife Ellen, children James & Ellen. Edward Mahoney, Irish.

**1920:** No census entry.

**1930:** No census entry.

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emerges from the record as typical, but some may serve as examples.

The Millers of 590 Decatur: John Miller, 39 and from Germany, worked as a plasterer. Wife Josephine, 29 and from Canada, tended the children, Andy, 13, Maude and Rose, both 10, and Emory 7. Six people on one income? Not quite: they had a boarder, Peter Olson, a teamster from Sweden.



**536 Decatur, built 1891.**

**1890 CD:** John Norman saloon (though the address given there was 540).

**1895:** John, Ernest, & Anton Norman, Swedes.

**1900:** John & Ernest Norman (see above), Josephine Norman, Swede; Ernest Hayne; Joseph & Kathryn McCauley & children Marie & Jenny.

**1905:** Godfrey & Hannah Johnson, and Charles Johnson, Swedes; Frank & Annie Augustine, Swedes, and children Fredric, George & Eloisa; Annie Anderson, Andrew Carolson, John Faulk, Swedes.

**1910:** John Hanson, Swede.

**1920:** C. & Olga Erlander.

**1930:** Vacant. The building appears to have been a saloon from the beginning, and after 1920 possibly a speakeasy. In 1930 it was owned by Hamm's Brewery.

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Next door at 588 Joseph Wilson, 28, a Swede, supported wife Maria and four children, all Minnesotans, on his earnings as a tailor. But he had some help; the Wilsons shared the household with a Swedish immigrant couple, Victor and Hilda Johnson and their infant daughter. Victor worked as a railroad car cleaner. It would not be surprising if the Johnsons were kin.

By 1920, with the fading of some traditional trades, there was less variety of work among Decatur Street men; railroads continued to dominate, with packinghouse work now prominent. Skilled or semi-skilled work has almost disappeared. There is one teenaged tinner, two factory cabinetmakers (possibly at the Seeger plant) and, for the first time, a truck driver. The hand tool days are just about over.



**534 Decatur, built 1884.**

**1895:** John & Martina Karlson, Swedes, son Arthur. Built as a store, it appears to have served as a grocery and billiard parlor, joined with number 532.

## Ciao, Paisani

The people who lived on Decatur Street rarely put down roots there. This was not a place where you and your childhood chums grew up together. By 1910 most of the great 1905 gaggle of 78 had moved on, and the street's population had fallen from 201 to 110.

And by 1920 the character of the street had been transformed by the arrival of Italians.

St. Paul has never had a large Italian population. In the early 20th century those who came from Italy mostly settled in two neighborhoods, the Upper Levee (sometimes called Little Italy), and Railroad Island, with Swede Hollow home to many. (Michael Sanchelli's unpublished but readily available memoirs, at MHS, portray Swede Hollow at this time as a transplanted Italian village.)

The Hollow, however, could only hold so many, and it may be that some immigrants aspired for better than living in a ravine with no city services and out-houses perched on the edge of a creek. Some chose Decatur Street.

By 1920 the surnames Nelson, Loran-son, Erickson, Larson, and Olson had mostly been replaced by Yarusso, Papa, Gatto, Caruso, Caliguire, Pallone, and Cocchiarella. These families were often large, and with their coming the human



**532 Decatur, built 1884 (same building as 534).**

**1900:** Fred Dickoff & wife, Germans, children Joseph, Irene & Francis; Minnie Weber, German.

**1905:** George & Maria Patterson, children John, David & James. Swan Nyberg; Bernard Allen, Irish, and wife Ellen; Magnus Nelson, Swede; John Anderson, Norwegian; Nicholas & Katie Shafer, children Irene & Alene [these may be the Schaeffers at 550 Decatur in 1910]. James & Mary Handy (or Hardy) & daughter Mary.

**1910:** Ernest & Jenny Lehder, infant daughter (name illegible); Margaret (surname illegible); Frank W\_\_\_ (illegible); two more illegible names.

**1920:** Frank Pallone and wife Francis(?), children Peter & Fanny, Italians. Dominic Terrazzo; Nicola Esposito, Italians.

**1930:** Angelo de Palma Billiards.

density on the street spiked again. In 20 households there were now 132 people, 83 of them (63%) either immigrants or children of immigrants from Italy. Swedish was no longer the language of the street.

These families tended to stay. By 1930 the number of households on Decatur had dwindled to seven; five of them were occupied by Italian families that had been there in 1920. And unlike their Scandinavian predecessors, they built lasting institutions, such as St. Ambrose Church and the Societa de Mutuo Socorso, also known as the Christ Child Center.

It was an Italian family that created the only Decatur Street institution that can be said to have a living descendant today. Matteo Cocchiarella ran a grocery at 583 Decatur, and because it was on the west of the street, it escaped demolition. There is still a grocery at that location

**530 Decatur, built 1889.**

**1890 CD:** Juleen & Wallgren shoes; William Hendrickson, tailor.

**1895:** George & Eva Garry.

**1900:** Ole Saarsted, wife and two daughters, Norwegians.

After 1900 this ceases to appear as a residence; it is a grocery, with the adjoining stores on Decatur and Bedford the commercial hub of the neighborhood.

today, La Palma, serving yet another immigrant population.

## Progress

One does not need to have lived too many years in this great land of ours to have observed that the imperatives of efficient transportation are hard for planners and politicians to resist. Countless neighborhoods have been marred or destroyed by freeways, to give an obvious example. What is gone is soon forgotten.

It was the same for Decatur Street. Though St. Paul is organized mostly on east-west axes—University Avenue, Summit, Grand, Randolph, East Seventh, East Third—there are important north-south corridors too: Snelling, Rice, Payne, Arcade, White Bear.

But there was a problem with Payne Avenue. It extended north only from Minnehaha Avenue, which crossed the northern tip of Swede Hollow, leaving a populous and thriving North End neighborhood with no good road connection to downtown. Yet there was East Seventh, at the foot of the hollow, less than a mile away to the south. The solution was obvious: extend Payne Avenue south to East Seventh, turn right, and



you're downtown. To make it happen, the east side of Decatur Street had to go.

No one knows exactly when the project began to take shape, but 1929 is a plausible guess. Some condemnation preparations had begun in early 1930, and when the census takers came around in mid-1930 many buildings were already vacant: Only seven addresses appear in the 1930 count. We have photos of Decatur Street only because the city had them taken as part of establishing the values of the properties for compensating the owners. Though a few of the owners contested their condemnation awards, there does not appear to have been any organized resistance. According to Joe Russo, who lived many years in the neighborhood, people did not see the destruction of Decatur Street as a calamity.

The houses came down in the early 1930s, and Decatur Street ceased to exist. Is this to be lamented? Probably not. This was mostly poor-quality housing. With the possible exception of the brick saloon building at 536 Decatur, there was nothing on the street that might have been gentrified decades later.

The neighborhood survived the loss of Decatur. In fact if you visit Railroad Island today, as you should, you will see that most of the houses there today were there when Decatur Street went down. In your mind strip away the newer siding, the addons, the garages, and the tall trees, and you can almost see the neighborhood 80 years ago. It is not beautiful, it is not very prosperous,

but, then, it never was; Railroad Island has survived remarkably well.

## Remembering Decatur

What good is local history? That it has any value or utility at all is not self-evident. One hopeful answer, though, is suggested in the works of urban theorist Richard Florida. In his view, the American cities that will flourish in the coming economy are those that offer diversity, tolerance, entertainment, and a strong sense of place. Here is where local history may offer something of genuine value.

For the most part, all that we who live in St. Paul today have in common with one another is place. This is a good start, and leads to many other connections. What history adds, uniquely, is time. For those willing to embrace it this temporal element brings depth and vast new (though intangible and to some degree imaginary) connections, to people long dead and events long ago. There is pleasure in this that resonates with many people and contributes to a sense of place that many find important. Phoenix can never catch up to Boston; Apple Valley can never overtake St. Paul. One place has history; the other does not.

But history does not create itself—it has to be researched, imagined, and written. For a place like Boston the events people want to remember were national and international in significance. We don't have much of that here in Ramsey County. Our history is local, for us.

If you have traveled on Payne Avenue past Swede Hollow, you probably have not thought much about it. No longer. Now you know there was Decatur Street, and where you drive Christina Nelson struggled to raise her five children on a laundry worker's wages; here Swedish and Italian-speaking children swarmed the streets (though not at the same time); here was a bar (then probably a speakeasy) where the workingmen squandered some of their pay; here the Papas and the Gattos peered out that back windows at their countrymen in the hollow; here the Loransons took in homeless infants and crammed their little house with boarders to make ends meet. If you engage your imagination—the essence of history—this short stretch of road, this featureless detail, will come alive.



Plat map of Decatur Street in its prime, from the collection of Donald Empson. The houses shown in this article are in the area labeled "Irvine's." Note the many vacant lots. Decatur Street never filled completely.



"If you wish truly good wares at inexpensive prices, go to Ek & Hillstrom General Store. Good butter and fresh eggs always on hand." H. Peterson, "dealer of coal and firewood at the lowest prices. With delivery to all parts of the city carefully and cheaply." Vart Hem, 8 February 1895.

The only reason to remember Decatur Street is to pause and reflect on what connects the people of St. Paul to each other today and to those who went before us.

## Sources and acknowledgments

The photographs and one drawing of the buildings in this article all come from the St. Paul Assessment Files files at



Advertisements from the 8 February 1895 edition of Vart Hem (Our Home), one of St. Paul's Swedish-language newspapers. Ed. Erikson's Meat and Food at 540 was either in a short-lived building, or, more likely, the address became 536. His slogan: "My Principles: Good goods! Cheap prices!" According to Debbie Miller of MHS, Fred Moberg would have spelled his name Mobery to approximate in English the correct Swedish pronunciation. This ad promotes Orebro snoose—just as good or better than Copenhagen!



The original idea of this piece was to re-create the Decatur streetscape photographically by stitching the images together. This proved impractical because the photos were taken at such different angles. It may still be worth the effort, however, and here is one attempt. Readers may be able to reposition some of the buildings in their minds. Photoshop work here and in the composite of 562-564-566 Decatur, above, by Frank Nelson.

MHS, 124.F.7.2(F), Box 1, and are reproduced here with permission. The plat map comes from the private collection of Donald Empson.

I am grateful to Debbie Miller for her translations and comments on the manuscript, and to Joe Russo, a longtime Railroad Island resident whom I interviewed about the neighborhood over seven years ago, when I started this project.

Paul Nelson's last article in this magazine profiled the life of sculptor Lee Lawrie in the Winter 2009 issue. He is a member of the Society's Editorial Board.



Above is the stub of Bedford Street, also wiped out in the Payne Avenue extension, just around the corner from 530–534 Decatur. This corner formed the commercial hub of the neighborhood. MHS photos, joined in Photoshop by Maureen McGinn.

## A Voice from Railroad Island Recalls Decatur Street

Ralph F. Yekaldo (1911–1987) lived in and around Railroad Island as a young man. As an old man, in 1987, he composed memoirs of his younger days, preserved at the Minnesota Historical Society as *Down in Swede Hollow* [sic]: *Things I Remember and the People I Grew Up With*. He recalled Decatur Street. We have preserved his inventive spellings.

When I was a young guy I would roam up and down old Decatuer St. There was two Blacksmith's on old Decatuer St. "Sorenson and Sorenson" and "Mahle Blacksmith and Wagon Works."

I used to stand in the doorway and watch them shoe horses. When they filed the horse with that hot shoe, the huff would burn and that smell really was something. And when he would take the horses huff and put it between his legs and start to nail that shoe. It felt like the nails were going into your feet.

Mr. Yekaldo's narrative took him around the neighborhood from place

to place. In the excerpt that follows, he has returned to Decatur Street, not quite halfway up the block.

And right above the railroad track [that is, the track down below on the floor of Swede Hollow] was a red house [probably 562] where Martin Lundgreen lived with a couple of his pals. They was always drinking. This one morning he should of stay in bed. Just in his underwear he went down to the track. He fell on the track and just about that timer the comuter train from Taylor Falls come around the curve. And that was the end of Martin.

The house next door [552 Decatur], Mr.-Mrs. John Papa lived. They had a big family. He was a rough looking guy, a big black mousatche and a dark complexion. He had more gold in his mouth than the mint had. He had a voice that sounded like a fog horn. But he sure was a classy dresser. Panama straw hat, striped silk shirt and tie that had all the colors of the train-bow. He had just bought himself a brand

new car a "studabaker." Shiny black was he happy.

And the next place on Decatuer St. [536] was a salloon. The country was still selling beer. [Before national Prohibition went into effect in 1921.] . . . The Saloon was owned by some Swedish people [this had been the John Norman saloon—in 1920 it belonged to couple named Erlander] and when the country went dry Tony Scandel and John Shetela [Cetela] took over. They put in a couple pool tables and it was a "Speak Easy." [Joe Russo confirms this.]

Up stairs of the salloon lived some black people. He worked on the railroad. Pullman Porter. They were nice p[eople]. And next door was a shoemaker. He was there for years. And next door [532-534] was Frank Polony [Pallone] Grocery.

And next door [at 530] was the Miller Bros. Grocery. A real old time grocery store. That smell when you walked in was out of this world. The pickle barrel, the cheese blocks, the fresh fruits and vegetables, the bakrie.

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*Colorized photo of the 3M campus, probably in the 1950s. Note the older version of the 3M logo on the tall stack in the lower right foreground. Photo courtesy of Sheila Strobel Smith. Photographic reproduction by Maureen McGinn.*