

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Spring 2015

Volume 50, Number 1

Growing Up in St. Paul

*Payne Avenue:
Memories of Mora,
Bocce Ball, Shining Shoes,
Gardens, and Swede Hollow*

Richard A. Sherwood

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*When Adapting to Change Was Not Enough
Brings Is Gone: The Life and Death
of a St. Paul Family Business*

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With the St. Paul Cathedral in the background in this undated photo, a Brings and Company wagon driven by two teamsters is on its way. Imagine lifting over 100 bales of hay onto this wagon, each of which weighed between 60 and 80 pounds, then driving one of many teams of horses that Brings owned over the years to deliver the hay! Photo courtesy of the Kremer Family Collection.

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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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A Message from the Editorial Board

Wander around St. Paul with this magazine and your imagination, and you will learn all kinds of stories. The stone building now located at 178 Goodrich Avenue was once the home of Joseph Brings, patriarch of the Brings family and founder of the Brings Company, the legendary feed business. Marcia Kremer outlines its origins and flexibility in providing first hay for carriage horses, then feed for the circus and the zoo, and finally landscaping products. The Soldiers and Sailors Memorial at the eastern end of Summit Avenue is crowned with a sculpture of Josias King, whom Patrick Hill restores to his rightful status as the first Minnesota volunteer in Lincoln’s Union army. Hill’s article carefully dissects the surrounding events and discredits a competing claim. And the current Swede Hollow Park provided a natural playground for Richard Sherwood and his friends growing up on the East Side of St. Paul in the 1940s. The Second World War was a backdrop, but the boys were able to build forts, explore the woods, and even follow Phalen Creek to fish in the Mississippi River. Write your own Ramsey County story and share it with others too!

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

Payne Avenue: Memories of Morra, Bocce Ball, Shining Shoes, Gardens, and Swede Hollow

Richard A. Sherwood

It was 1942, during World War II, when my family and I moved from Frogtown to Payne Avenue in St Paul. We lived in a fourplex on the corner of Collins Street and Payne. At that time it was a low-income neighborhood, and our apartment reflected that.

As an eight-year old, I felt as if I had moved to a foreign country. Most of our neighbors spoke Italian. At the corner store, Morelli's, there was always a group of older men sitting outside playing morra, smoking small, twisted black cigars, and speaking Italian. Morra, I later learned, was a game that dated back to Roman times. All the players threw out a single hand showing zero to five fingers at the same time calling out their guesses as to what the sum of all fingers shown would be. The correct guess won a point and three points won a game. Sometimes there was money wagered and emotions ran high. It was exciting for a kid to watch, and I was fascinated. I never really learned to speak Italian with the exception of some basic words and counting up to twenty. Watching morra, however, I did learn to swear, which got me into trouble on occasion.

Understanding My Neighbors

Besides language, another difference between our family and our neighbors was religion. They were Catholic and we were Episcopalian—we were the only non-Italian, non-Catholic family on the block. One day an Italian kid came up to me and asked if I believed in the Pope. When I replied, "Who is the Pope?" it was bam! bam! and we were on the ground fighting. There were more fights; some I won and some I lost. Eventually I was accepted into the neighborhood and made many long-term friends.

One of the things I noticed about my Italian neighbors was the importance of

their church, St. Ambrose. Church worship and activity was a major part of their lives. There were a lot of church holidays, each of which was celebrated. There were church clubs, and of course there were bible school classes, and confirmation study. Some of my friends asked me to go to class with them. One of them was Matthew Morelli, who lived on Payne Avenue. The priest gave me permission, and I used to enjoy these classes, sometimes more than some of the other guys, probably because I didn't have to be there.

I particularly liked classes that were about church history. I was also impressed with the church's art: sculpture, paintings, the use of marble, and the confessional booth, which was mysterious to me. Matthew Morelli used to ask me to become a Catholic; however I remained the Episcopalian that I was. I don't recall any of the priests trying to convert me, but I do remember that they treated me with respect, probably because I was a good listener.

I also recollect there was what was called the "Boxcar" church. It was literally a boxcar which was placed on the side of a hill on the southeast side of Swede Hollow. It was a Catholic church, and there were some Mexicans that felt it was placed there so that they would not climb the stairs up to Payne Avenue and attend St. Ambrose. Contrary to what one would think, a good share of the Mexicans living there at that time was not Catholic. I am told that many of them were Seventh Day Adventists, their families having been converted by missionaries in Mexico.



The author decked out as a cowboy astride an itinerant photographer's pony when he was about eight years old. Photo courtesy of Richard A. Sherwood.

Another characteristic of the neighborhood was the gardens, which I will never forget. It seemed that every house had a garden. There were tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, radishes, and all manner of other vegetables. I can say that in the summer whenever I wanted a tomato or a cuke, it was so easy slipping into someone's garden and picking what I wanted.

Prior to moving to Payne Avenue, foods outside of our English/Swedish ethnic background were largely unknown to us. We soon learned to appreciate the wonderfully seasoned foods and sauces of the Italians. Most Italian homes had a clay oven in the backyard, and many times our family was given wonderful bread fresh

from the oven. After a time, my mother learned to bake some of those breads.

My mother worked as a cook at Matt Weber's, which was a working-class bar and restaurant at 20 East Seventh Street, just off Wabasha. She learned to make real Italian spaghetti and meatballs in the Payne Avenue neighborhood, however. Two Italian housewives came to our home to teach her. Unfortunately, both women had their individual ideas of the best way to do it. Neither of them spoke English; so it became chaotic when they disagreed. I remember that they argued for four to five hours while cooking and in the end my mother had to learn by watching both of them. The result was that to present day our whole family feels she made the best spaghetti and meat balls ever eaten, and my daughter and niece still use her recipe.

Life on Payne Ave was not without a downside, and for a kid the downside was chores.

One of my jobs was to buy ice for our ice box. That meant walking six blocks to the ice house, buying the ice, putting it on an ice cart and quickly walking the six blocks back home without it melting too much. No stopping and talking with friends, which for a kid was not an easy thing to do. Once home, I had to empty the heavy ice water pan, add the new ice, and then pull the cart back to the ice house.

Another chore was paying the rent. Each month the rent was paid in cash, and our landlords were the parents of the late Bruce Vento (of course the name meant nothing to me at the time). I carried the rent money to the Vento home which was about a half mile away; being very careful not to lose it. I remember that Mr. Vento must have been a good fisherman because he had fish heads nailed to his garage wall, and some were very large Northern Pike.

Grocery shopping was also a chore, and my brother, Don, and I often had to go to Morelli's. I remember there were "charge books" behind the counter with family names on them. After picking out groceries, we had to sign for the charges. Tony and Matt Morelli liked to tease me. Tony would grab my arm and say, "Sherwood you're going to grow up to be president someday," and I believed him. Sometimes the butcher at Morelli's



Lincoln School on Collins Street, seen here in 1931, served children, including the author, who lived in the Payne Avenue and Swede Hollow neighborhoods. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

would grab me by the wrist, place my hand on the butcher block and tell me he was going to chop off my hand. He'd raise the big cleaver and they'd all start laughing. Of course I always knew that he was joking—I think.

There were, of course, a lot of fun things to do on Payne Avenue, and for young boys, fun often meant mischief; mischief such as pulling the trolley handle on the streetcars. A trolley wheel was the device that hooked a streetcar to the overhead line to secure electricity. A rope from the wheel hung down to the car's exterior. The trick was to go to a corner where the streetcar had to slow down to make a turn. Then running very fast, grabbing the trolley rope and pulling down very hard, you could disconnect the trolley wheel. The lights would go out and the streetcar was unable to move. At which point you needed to run like hell! If you were lucky there would only be one motorman who had to get the streetcar running again. If there were two motormen, you were running for your life because the second motorman would be after you. I don't remember that we were ever caught because we always knew where to hide.

When I was about eleven years old, I found mischief at Yarusso's Bar where bocce ball games were played. I wanted to play the game, but being a kid that was

not allowed. Therefore, on a quiet afternoon I managed to "borrow" several of the balls from an outside court when no one was playing. I carried the balls home, and was playing bocce in my backyard when Frank Yarusso (the bar owner) showed up. With Mr. Yarusso's "assistance" and prodding, I carried the balls back to the bocce court.

My only thought during the walk back to Yarusso's was the fervent hope that Mr. Yarusso would not tell my father. Which of course he did, and I then caught hell from my dad. Some people may say that punishment does not deter crime. I have to say, however, that I never again "borrowed" a bocce ball. I also learned that when Frank Yarusso told you to move, you moved!

I should also mention another attraction near our homes, and that would be Lake Phalen. We kids thought nothing of walking the three miles to the lake. Not only did we swim at the beach, but we also swam in the channel that ran through the park. We always wanted to go swimming as early in the year as possible, and once we encountered ice in the channel. Sometimes children are beyond fear; how did we make it to adulthood!

An activity for Payne Avenue kids that didn't require running and hiding was attending the Christ Child Center



The Christ Child Community Center was located in the Hope Chapel, which was also the home of the Italia Society, at Bradley and Partridge Streets when the author was growing up. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

at Bradley and Partridge Streets. It was a community settlement house for the neighborhood. They had a basketball court where we could play games, and we also learned crafts and attended social events such as Halloween and Christmas parties. I remember one of those parties in 1945. My mother could not afford to buy me a costume so she dressed me up in a long underwear suit, covered my face with a white hood, and then stuffed the suit with newspapers. It made me look very fat, and I was able to bump other kids around and fall down as much as I liked. Everyone laughed at how I looked, and I won second or third prize for best costume. It felt like a great honor, and I loved that costume so much I wore it for a couple more Halloweens.

Besides the Christ Child Center, we also had the Union Gospel Mission. At the time it was located one block north of Seventh Street in Lowertown. The Mission had a program whereby if you attended a certain number of their Bible classes during the winter, you were given a free week at a summer camp that was way out on Rice Street at Snail Lake. The Mission issued each of us membership cards, and each time we attended a class it was punched; I believe that 7 or 8 classes were required for camp. I can't say that my buddies and I were the most

pious in the room; however we did attend these classes for several years and earned our weeks of camp.

The Mission camp was great, and it had a nice swimming beach. The food was very good, and there were hikes and various camping games. Without the Mission camp, poor kids such as those of us from Payne Avenue could not have gone to camp, and I have always felt that the Mission deserves a lot of credit for that service.

Because we came from families who had so little, we Payne Avenue kids were always in need of money for candy, pop, or the movies. One way to earn money was to shine shoes on the street. First you had to make a shoeshine box, which held the polish, shine cloths, and shoe brush. Then on top of the box, you mounted a small square piece of wood to rest the foot and shoe to be polished.

We found the best way to earn money was to go into the bars and ask customers if they wanted a shine. You never knew which bartender would allow you into the bar, and sometimes the same bartender would let you in one night but not the next. Kids were always in competition for bars on Payne Avenue and on Arcade Street where they could shine shoes, and fights established who got which bars.

While living on Payne Avenue, I fell in

love twice. Who can ever forget their first "puppy love"? My first time it was with a classmate and her name was Marlene Lombardi. The second time, it again was a classmate named Deloris Dinzeo. Our relationships consisted of talking in school, sometimes going for awkward walks in the neighborhood, and maybe sometimes holding hands. All of this was a far cry from today's young love. After I moved away from Payne Avenue, I lost contact with both of these girls. Later I did, however, read about Marlene when the *St. Paul Dispatch* printed an article about her doing an Italian dance at the International Institute's *Festival of Nations*.

Poor families like ours didn't have money to spend on pets, but we did have a dog when we lived on Payne. His name was Tippy and he was a rat terrier, which was good because our building did have rats. You could sometimes hear the rats crawling inside the walls of our apartment, and Tippy was able to kill many rats over the years.

Payne Avenue, however, was a busy street, and Tippy was twice hit by cars. The first time he was struck, my brother, Don, and I carried Tippy to the nearest veterinarian, who was at the Pomeroy Pet Hospital on East Seventh Street (it is still there). When two kids showed up at the door with an injured dog, tears in their eyes and no money, Dr. Pomeroy was unable to turn us away. He put Tippy's leg in a cast, and sent us home without a bill, and later removed the cast (again without charge) and Tippy was back to normal. A few years later Tippy was again hit by a car on Payne Avenue and was killed. It was a terrible loss for my brothers and me.

Swede Hollow

The best memories of growing up on Payne Avenue involve Swede Hollow. We kids did not refer to Swede Hollow as Swede Hollow, however; we simply called it the Creek. Swede Hollow was just across the street from our apartment, and you could descend into the Hollow by walking down two flights of wooden stairs. The first set of steps ended at the train tracks and the second took you down to the creek.

The Hollow was a heavily wooded oasis in the heart of St Paul. It seemed enchanted and full of mystery, and playing



The Phalen neighborhood and Swede Hollow are visible in this 1962 photo that was taken from the east side bluffs of St. Paul. St. Paul Dispatch & Pioneer Press photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

down in the Hollow was to forget that you lived in the city. My buddies and I often played at being soldiers and we'd fight the Germans and Japanese in the caves along Phalen Creek and up and down the hills of the Hollow. I don't recall that we fought the Italians, and I suppose that was a reflection of the neighborhood.

In any case it was a perfect place to play war. We could fight either in the caves or along Phalen Creek, or in the woods and up and down the hills. We did not play, however, around the houses where the Mexicans lived. In fact, we rarely had any contact with them. I learned later that their parents forbid them to play in or around the caves, and I believe that they had chores to do and were also more comfortable among themselves. They all seemed to have gardens, and many families owned farm animals, such as chickens, ducks, and rabbits. My classmate, Thelma Tamayo, told me that her family had three goats, which her mother had secured because Thelma was unable to drink cow's milk.

The caves in the Hollow were a big attraction for us guys. We played a game

called "Phillips 66" in which several boys would hide in the caves, and the other boys would have to find them. When you found someone, you had to hold him while counting to 66, and then say "Phillips 66" which knocked him out

of the game. I assume the name came from the Phillips 66 gas stations which were prevalent at the time.

Another thing we did was to stay inside the caves when a train passed overhead. It was noisy and chunks of the ceiling would fall to the ground. If you ran out of the cave, you were considered a sissy, which no one wanted to be called.

There were times when my buddies and I would follow Phalen Creek down to the Mississippi River to fish. This was about a mile walk. We did catch fish sometimes with our homemade poles. Once, while near Phalen Creek, I found a lizard with two tails. I brought it home and someone, my mother or a neighbor, called the newspaper and a picture of it was taken and printed in the paper. This was a big deal for a kid.

The walk through the woods to the river was another example of being exposed to nature in the middle of the city. Once in a while our mothers would send us down to the creek to fetch spring water in gallon jugs on hot days. It was ice cold and tasted very good. We sometimes pretended that the woods were a jungle and that we were walking to a lost river.

On one occasion we could see some Pullman cars along the tracks near the mouth of the creek at the Mississippi. So we (Jerry Weber, Ed Berneche, and I) decided to explore them. While looking



The Mexican-American community on St. Paul's West Side was substantially larger in numbers than the community on the city's East Side. Consequently some Mexicans who were Roman Catholics living in Swede Hollow worshipped in this "boxcar" chapel, a chapel built inside a surplus railroad boxcar, which is seen here in 1949. St. Paul Dispatch photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society



This modest, wood-frame house was the home of the author's great-grandparents in Swede Hollow in the early years of the twentieth century. Photo courtesy of Richard A. Sherwood.

through the cars, a railroad cop saw us and started in our direction. We began to run and headed into some wetlands along the river. As we ran deeper into the wetlands, our footing became more and more dangerous as the patches of land became further and further apart and the water became deeper and deeper. I believe that the railroad cop could see that we were in trouble and he gave up the chase. Once we were sure that he was not following us, we stopped, waited, and slowly made our way back to dry land. Another fun day came to an end, and we walked by the Dayton's Bluff cliffs and back into Swede Hollow where we passed under the Seventh Street Bridge, then went up the hill to Payne Avenue and home.

A big event at the cave we boys always talked about was the "beer keg theft." A group of older boys stole a keg of Hamm's beer from a boxcar at the brewery above Swede Hollow. It was a hot summer day and they rolled the keg a long distance down to the caves. They didn't have a keg tap so one of them went home and returned with an ax. Success in

chopping open the keg resulted in no beer but plenty of foam for as far as the eye could see.

While I was living on Payne Avenue and spending most of my playing time in the Hollow, I was unaware that my maternal great-grandparents had been some of the first Swedes to settle in Swede Hollow in 1872. By 1882, the family had moved out of the Hollow and was living on York Street just east of Payne. The shack in which they had once lived while in the Hollow was on the hill above the caves on which I played many times, but I didn't know that I was playing in my great grandfather's former yard.

The Swedes had been the original settlers in the Hollow (1870s), followed by the Italians (1890s), and then the Mexicans (1930s). When the Swedes moved "up to the street," they generally settled further up Payne Avenue; several blocks beyond Minnehaha Avenue, while the Italians moved up to the immediate area. The Mexican families were still in residence in the Hollow when I was a kid, and their small village that was nestled

in the wooded valley of Swede Hollow made it seem that the Hollow was even more out of the city; more like a rural area and perhaps even an area in Mexico.

I recall one winter in about 1943 that one of the houses in the Hollow caught fire. Our whole Payne Avenue neighborhood stood on the hill and watched it burn. There was nothing to be done, as there were no roads into the Hollow for fire trucks. And even though by the late 1930s, electricity and phone service had been established in the Hollow, there was still no running water. We walked down to the Hollow the next morning and the ruins were still smoldering—a portent for the future when in 1956 the city burned all of the homes still remaining in the Hollow.

The War Years

During World War II, the Italians on Payne Avenue were very patriotic, and joined the military to show their loyalty to America. As a result, many Italian soldiers sent home war souvenirs. I took a liking to them and began to collect German, Japanese, and Italian medals, pins, arm bands, and swords. One day, as a dumb twelve-year old I went out wearing a Nazi armband. A friend and I were walking up Payne Avenue and as we passed Yarusso's Bar, a man of about twenty-three walked out of the door. He said, "Come over here." When I did, he grabbed my arm and ripped off the armband.

My friend and I began to run, and after a short distance I stopped and threw a walking stick I had been carrying. As luck would have it, the stick hit him; it did no injury, but he was very angry. He hollered to my buddy to bring me back and he would give my buddy five dollars. My friend shouted back that he and I were friends and that the man could keep his money. My friend and I then ran across Payne Avenue, and near Geno's Bar and Restaurant we headed down into Swede Hollow knowing that in the Hollow there was no way that he could find us. Several years later it dawned on me that the guy was probably an Italian-American veteran of the war, and was understandably not happy seeing a punk kid wearing a Nazi armband.

Everyone on Payne Avenue was involved in some manner in the war effort



During World War II, the author was a collector of souvenirs brought home by returning GIs. Here he wears a German Iron Cross medal on his belt, carries a bayonet at his side, sports the distinctive "coal scuttle" battle helmet on his head, and displays a Nazi banner. Photo courtesy of Richard A. Sherwood.

and our family was no exception. My brother, Don, planted a "Victory Garden" on the boulevard of Payne. Don got gardening advice from the many Italian gardeners in the neighborhood, and he was very proud of the "V for Victory" garden stake that the city of St. Paul gave him to place in his garden.

My father, George, was exempted from the wartime draft because he was a radio repairman, and he worked at St. Paul's Holman Field along the Mississippi River installing radios in B-17 and B-24 bombers. Sometimes he was required to fly on test flights to insure that the radios were working properly, and all my friends thought my dad had the greatest job.

As younger kids, my friends and I would collect Vander Bies ice cream lids wherever we could find them including the street and trashcans. We would take them to the Vander Bies office across from the Christ Child Center, and exchange them for 8x10-inch war posters which we all used to decorate the walls in our bedrooms.

We also participated in scrap metal

drives going door to door to ask for any spare metal item that could be used to make military equipment. It was amazing what people would donate; everything from bikes to pots and pans.

When I was about eleven-years old, I helped an older kid sell "extra newspapers." They were papers that were published when an important event took place such as a war victory or defeat. We would pick up the papers at the *Dispatch*



The author at about age thirteen demonstrating his prowess in catching fish in the nearby Mississippi River. Photo courtesy of Richard A. Sherwood.

and *Pioneer Press* offices in downtown St. Paul, and then walk around yelling: "Extra, extra, read all about it!" I recall that we charged twenty cents for an "extra," and that the regular paper was five cents. I remember selling papers when the atom bombs were dropped and when German, Italy, and Japan surrendered.

One of my most vivid memories from the war years on Payne Avenue is the sudden death of President Franklin Roosevelt on April 12, 1945. I had been downtown for some reason, and had stopped at Matt Weber's restaurant to see my mother, who was a cook there. When I walked in, I discovered that everyone, including my mother, was crying. My mother told me that the president had

died, and I'm not sure why, but I thought that the world would be ending. The entire neighborhood was in shock for days. My classmate, Thelma Tamayo, who lived across Payne in Swede Hollow at the time, told me that her girlfriend was so overwhelmed by the public grief that she thought that God had maybe died.

Growing up on Payne Avenue and living next to Swede Hollow was a great experience full of rich, childhood memories that I have been fortunate enough to share with my grandson, Eliot. When he was still young enough to play at being a cowboy, he would put on a badge, hat, and cap guns, much as I did as a boy, and he too would run up and down the hills of the Hollow in pursuit of bad guys. Consequently this unusual area of St Paul is also a part of his childhood memories.

Inspired by Mike Sanchelli's account of his youth in Swede Hollow in our Spring 2014 issue, Richard Sherwood decided to write about his early years in the same neighborhood. He is a life-long resident of St. Paul who earned his degree at the University of Minnesota and had a long career working in social service, particularly helping recent immigrants to get settled in their new home.



In a photo from a few years ago, Eliot, the author's grandson, poses in his cowboy gear in the woods of Swede Hollow. Photo courtesy of Richard A. Sherwood.

R.C.H.S.

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Bright sun illuminates the details of John Karl Daniels' bronze casting of a Union Soldier that was modeled on Josias R. King more than a century ago. The statue stands atop the Soldiers and Sailors Monument in Summit Park in St. Paul. Photo by Robert Muschewske. For more on Josias King, see page 18.