

SWEDE HOLLOW

A Capsule History of

a Famous

Saint Paul, Minnesota Landmark

Presented by

The Saint Paul Garden Club

1976

Picture of former Hamm's residence, courtesy of
Minnesota Historical Society

Other photos courtesy of Park and Recreation
Department, City of St. Paul

Historical data from article by Nels M. Hokanson,
Minnesota History, Winter, 1969

In one of the most densely populated and industrialized areas of St. Paul, Minnesota lies an eighteen-acre ravine picturesquely called Swede Hollow. For many years it was the focal point of St. Paul's immigration population.

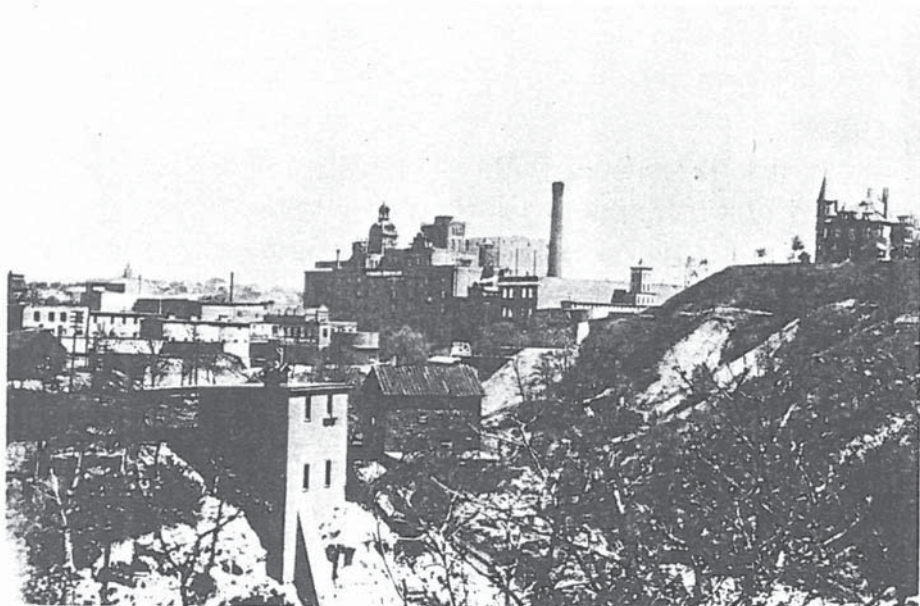
Due to lack of sanitary facilities and unstable housing structures, all buildings were condemned as a health hazard and demolished in 1956. Since then Swede Hollow has been an uncontrolled dumping area. It is hard to realize the magic world of history, geology and ecology that lay hidden behind the trash and debris.

Leaving the hubbub of the streets and entering thru a tunnel into this deep ravine is like going back in time a century ago. It is quiet and peaceful. One is engulfed in an environment of diverse wildlife and vegetation. A special feature is the stream running thru the site, a magnet for the wildlife and vegetable types which could not survive without its life-giving moisture. The ravine holds a cross section of most of the native vegetation of Minnesota.

For 120 years Swede Hollow was inhabited first by trappers - - then succeeding generations of immigrants: Swedish, Irish, Italians, Poles and finally Mexicans.



Recent view in the Hollow



Former Hamm's residence on top of the hill overlooking Swede Hollow

Its History is as varied as the cultures that have existed there, and it began before St. Paul was even incorporated as a City.

Edward Phalen made a claim above the creek which bears his name, at the site of the present Olympia Brewery, formerly owned by Hamms. The ravine offered protection, isolation and a good life for a trapper. Others soon followed. Shoddy Hovels were put up along the marshy bank of the stream. Hunters, trappers, and timber cutters found the ravine comfortable in winter and cool in summer with its swift-flowing stream, high bluffs and luxuriant growth of trees and shrubs. In the valley they found plenty of wild deer, rabbit, squirrel and partridge, as well as wild duck, goose and fish.

The California Gold Rush lured Phalen and others out of this serene setting and provided the basis of a settlement for future generations.

In 1849, when Minnesota became a territory, St. Paul had only 900 residents. By 1860 the number had increased to 10,000 due to immigration. The abandoned shacks of Phalen Creek offered quick, cheap, and easy shelter to many Swedes who took up residence there. They named it Svenska Dalen or Swedish Valley, later shortened to Swede Hollow.

The new settlers had no concern about building or health regulations. They set out houses on stilts over the water and laid two-foot wide bridges for access to the single spring which supplied drinking water. They cleared away trees and bramble in order to build a rough road for access "to the top". Some of the new homes were plain, others were attractive structures with porches and gardens.

Most were members of the Swedish peasant class, illiterate and unskilled, forced to take menial jobs like picks, shovel, saw and ax work on early railroads or in the woods. Their children attended the nearest English school. Parents with a desire to succeed in the United States attended the same school at night to improve their knowledge of the English language.

In 1881, Bishop John Ireland was responsible for moving 24 Irish peasant families from Connemara in County Galway into the Hollow. Their number grew along with their chickens, ducks, pigs and goats.

As the Swedes prospered and moved to the top, followed by the Irish, other immigrants moved in. The Italians, the Poles and the Mexicans took over the old shanties or built new ones among those already there.



Swede Hollow of years ago.



View of St. Paul and Swede Hollow in foreground

Each ethnic group left an imprint of its music, traditions and mores on the Hollow. Each nationality also helped increase the congestion and unsanitary conditions to a point which finally brought drastic action.

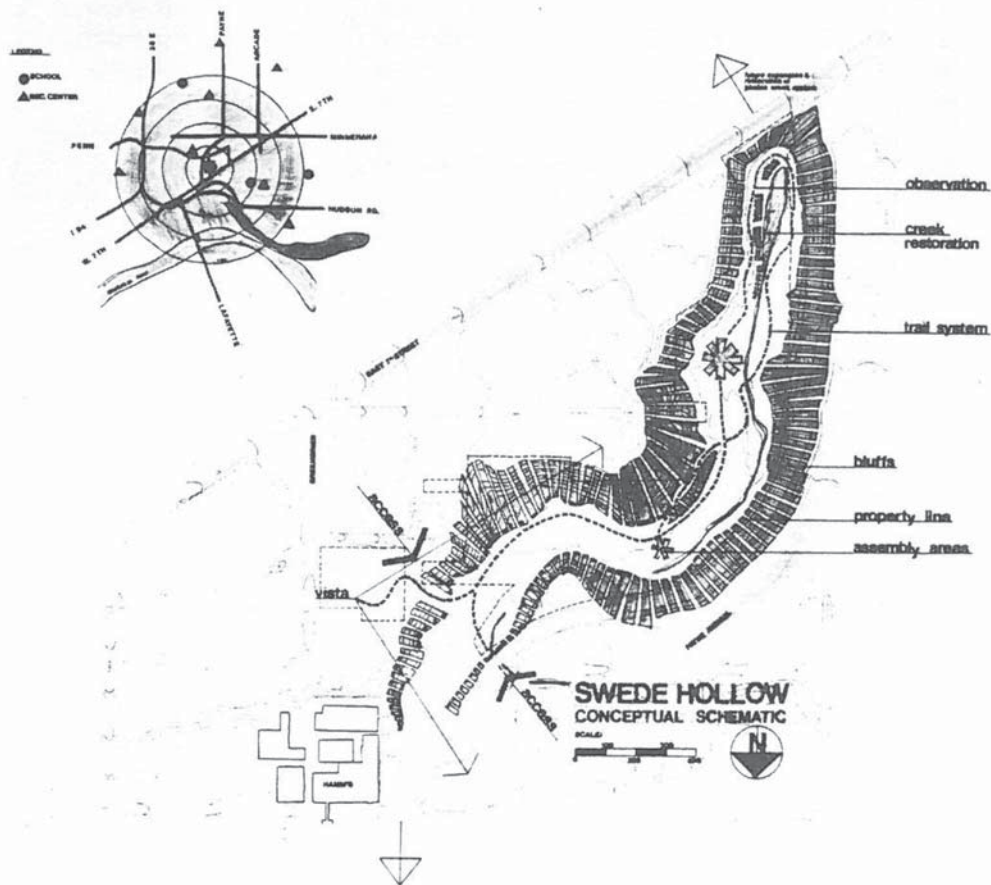
In December 1956, a check by the Health Department revealed that the Spring was contaminated and the area was declared a health hazard. Eviction notices were served on the 16 families who still lived there. After they had gone, the Fire Department burned all of the shacks, shanties and outbuildings left in the Hollow. Nothing remained of this fascinating settlement which for over 100 years has been known as Swede Hollow.

After 1956, the Hollow became a dump. At one time it was thought to fill the Hollow for use by Highway 212 but, fortunately, that was stopped. Other equally drastic ideas were suggested and dropped.

By the summer of 1973, interest in ecology, ethnic cultures, reviving cities gave Swede Hollow the wider audience it needed.

The St. Paul Garden Club, recognizing the historical, ecological and geological value, took on as their project saving this invaluable open space area. Working with the City and the East Side Community, the dream is at last on its way to reality and one of our foremost and most important sites will be preserved for all time.

Another plan for the future would connect Swede Hollow - - central point in this City - - by bicycle trails to existing open space areas all the way to the Mississippi River, an open space system comprised of 1,000 acres of River Bottom land.



Swede Hollow 1973-1995
Capsule History Addendum

In 1973 the clean up began with gusto. Members of the Dayton's Bluff Community Council, Hayden Heights Citizens League, Merrick Center Teens, Payne-Minnehaha Community Council and Phalen Area Community Council helped clean up debris. The St. Paul Garden Club worked with the City Parks Department planning trails. By the summer of 1974, the city kept the momentum going purchasing tax forfeited land, removing large concrete pillars which were dumped there and announced plans for a city nature park to open by summer's end. The Neighborhood Youth Corps hired 150 east side youths to continue the clean up.

The Swede Hollow Committee was organized. \$50,000 was budgeted by the city for the park. The St. Paul Garden Club agreed to fund and plant native trees and plants to further restore the area. For the next couple of years trails were completed, trees and flowers began to flourish and the community took great pride in this treasure it created.

October 15, 1976 became Swede Hollow Park Recognition Day. Ceremonies were held and honored Nels Hokanson whose valuable assistance helped with the history of the hollow. The Johnson High School Band played, Gov. Wendell Anderson and Former Governor C. Elmer Andersen were amongst the many dignitaries present to honor this "special Place".

In 1977, the St. Paul Garden Club was awarded the Founder's Fund Award by the Garden Clubs of America. The money was used toward interpretive planting of the varied "eco" systems of prairie, pond and wooded banks and limestone cliffs. The park grew to over 22 acres with \$125,000 aid from federal, state and local funds. The expanded area travels the Phalen Creek bed below the old Hamm's brewery.

For every obstacle that came up, the community pulled together and tackled it. Such challenges as security, maintenance and annual clean up are on going issues. Occasional problems such as sewer work, flooding and landslides have been addressed. Picnic areas and a beautiful overlook have been added.

The 1990's are bringing the trails issue forward. The plans to connect West 7th Street through Swede Hollow and Phalen Park to Pine Point Park in Stillwater have been approved. A federal grant of \$593,000 matched by city funding of \$148,000 will be used to construct the Ramsey Co. Regional Trail starting in spring of 1995. Also, there has been discussion of light rail transit following the old Burlington railroad line through the park.

The Swede Hollow Neighborhood Association continues to keep a watchful eye for both opportunities and problems. Swede Hollow is an historic site in a proud community of caring people.