



I Remember

ST. PAUL'S SWEDE HOLLOW

NELS M. HOKANSON

MR. HOKANSON was born of Swedish parents in Denmark in 1885. Two years later his family immigrated to St. Paul. The Hokansons lived in Swede Hollow in 1889 and the early 1890s and then moved to Aitkin. Mr. Hokanson, who graduated from the University of Chicago and the John Marshall Law School, engaged in banking and real estate business in and around Chicago for fifty years. He is the author of Swedish Immigrants in Lincoln's Time (1942) and received a medal from King Gustavus V of Sweden for his part in establishing the Swedish Pioneer Historical Society in 1947. He is now retired and lives in California.

THE FERTILE LANDS between the Mississippi and St. Croix rivers, including the southern parts of Crow Wing and Aitkin counties and the northern part of Pine County, were opened to white settlement in 1838 by the ratification of treaties with the Chipewya and Sioux Indians. About the same

time Edward Phelan (whose name is variously spelled) received his discharge from Fort Snelling and settled on a tract of land bounded approximately by the present-day Eagle and Third streets in St. Paul. He secured the adjoining claim for a fellow soldier and Irishman, John Hays, who came to live with him in the spring of 1838.¹

Hays supposedly had some savings, and the two men held personal property in common. When Hays' mutilated body was found in the river near Carver's Cave in mid-September, 1839, Phelan was immediately suspect. He was held at Fort Snelling and then tried in Prairie du Chien, the county seat of Crawford County, Wisconsin Territory. Following his acquittal due to insufficient evidence, Phelan staked a claim in a deep and narrow ravine in St. Paul which became

¹Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 129 (Minneapolis, 1963); Henry A. Castle, *History of St. Paul and Vicinity*, 1:35 (Chicago, 1912).

known as Phalen Creek valley because of the swift-flowing stream rushing through it.²

When I try to imagine what the ravine looked like when Phelan first set foot in it, my mind always goes back to a place in Wisconsin called Little Norway. Like Phalen Creek, it has a spring, stream, and high bluffs; its bluffs are covered with a luxuriant growth of trees and shrubs. Phalen Creek may have been just as beautiful.

Hunters, trappers, and timber-scalers, who like Phelan found the ravine comfortable in winter and cool in summer, put up shoddy hovels along the marshy banks of the stream. In the valley they could supplement fresh and dried deer meat with that of rabbit, squirrel, and partridge, as well as wild duck, goose, and fish, all of which were plentiful.

Some of the habitants doubtless spent summers getting the season's catch of furs

ready for the local trader or shipment by steamer to places like St. Louis or Chicago, where prices were higher. They would also sharpen axes and knives and repair snowshoes, traps, and other equipment in readiness for the next winter's work. Between chores they climbed the rugged, zigzag Indian trails to the top of the bluff and made their way to Fort Snelling and the trading post. There they could purchase necessities and exchange drinks and gossip with the soldiers, Indians, half-breeds, and other trappers.

Swedes began coming to Minnesota in the 1850s. Some moved into the Phalen Creek valley when they discovered how inexpensive it was to live there. In lieu of land title and taxes, the residents paid the city a fee of five dollars a month for each house. These immigrants, the first ethnic group to settle in the area, found that the Hollow also offered escape from bully-boys who chided the "dumb Swedes" for their stupid attempts at speaking English. They called their valley home *Svenska Dalen* (Swedish Dale or Valley). Officially it was spoken of as Phalen Creek or the Swede Hollow Settlement, but the latter was soon corrupted to "Swede Hollow" and it is still commonly known by that name.³

The new settlers rehabilitated derelict shanties left by former owners and when necessary added extra rooms to accommodate children or relatives. They had no concern about building or health regulations. They set outhouses on stilts over the water and laid two-foot-wide bridges for access to the single spring which supplied drinking water. They helped clear away a jumble of brambles and trees to make possible the building of a rough road for access to "the top."

With lumber readily available they could build more substantial houses on the hilly slopes or on level ground where space permitted. Some of these new homes were plain; others were attractive structures with porches and gardens. A few were large enough to shelter two families or single

² The stream was called McCloud Creek according to George C. Nichols' "Map of the City of Saint Paul" (1851); it appears as Phalen's Creek on the 1857 "Map of the City of Saint Paul" of Goodrich and Somers (both maps are in the society's atlas collection). Castle, *History of St. Paul*, 1:36; Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names: Their Origin and Historic Significance*, 440 (St. Paul, 1969).

³ For a comprehensive study of Swedish immigration to Minnesota, see Helge Nelson, *The Swedes and the Swedish Settlements in North America*, 174-246 (New York, 1943). There is some doubt about when and by whom the \$5 fee was collected. Apparently Swede Hollow was never platted, and it is virtually impossible to pinpoint all the individuals who have had title to land there. It is known that John Wagener, sheriff of Ramsey County from 1911 to 1926, owned seven lots on either side of Seventh Street in 1887. By 1903 he had purchased all of the Hollow between North and Sixth streets, excepting one block just south of North Street, which was owned by Edward H. Cutler. Hamm's Realty Company held the land north of North Street. These owners may have charged the Hollow's residents \$5 a month, as several long-time occupants recall this sum. Records in the office of the land commissioner indicate that Hamm's owned the majority of the Hollow by 1937. In that year and in 1940, the company tax-forfeited the land to the state. Ramsey County collected \$5-a-month rent from the occupants from that time until 1956, when the Hollow was burned. *Curtice's Standard Atlas of the City of St. Paul* (St. Paul, 1887) and Sanborn Map Co., *Insurance Maps of St. Paul*, 1903, vol. 4 (New York).



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men who planned to send for wives or sweethearts when they had earned enough money to guarantee that these would not become wards of the state.

Most were members of the Swedish peasant class, illiterate and unskilled, forced to take menial jobs like pick, shovel, saw, and ax work on early railroads or in the woods. They lived much as they had in Sweden, with a penchant for snuff, potato sausage, pickled herring, *flat bröd*, and especially coffee, which they drank at all hours.

They rallied around when a neighbor was in trouble, favored midwives, depended on family remedies, and called an American doctor only as a last resort. Funerals were simple, expedient, and inexpensive. I recall my father and mother in a cab on their way to the cemetery with a casket across their knees. It contained the body of my oldest sister.

The Swedes attended religious services when their choice of a Swedish church was

available and sent their children to such choice for summer school. During the regular academic year the children attended the nearest uptown English school. Parents with a desire to succeed in the United States attended the same school at night to improve their own knowledge of the English language. When the linguistic challenge had been surmounted, they left the Hollow for places which offered better opportunities, a home or farm of their own, and an improved life for their children.

MY FAMILY lived in the Hollow in 1889 and the early 1890s. I was born in Frederiksberg, Denmark, on May 6, 1885. My father and mother, Karl and Botilda (Nielson) Hokanson, moved the family to St. Paul from Sweden in 1887.

Our first home was a cottage on Cook Avenue, which Father rented or purchased on the advice of his brother, Nils Monson, who had preceded us to this country. I do not

know why we left that cottage, but my uncle intimated that Father lost money in a land deal and could not continue payments on the house. In any event we moved to one of a row of smoke-encrusted houses along railroad tracks. I remember the place because of a kindly lady who lived a few doors from us. She shared her cookies with my sister and me and gave us our first English lessons.

From there we moved into part of a two-family cottage in Swede Hollow. The house was set on posts which were boarded in except for a small door. The resulting space provided storage for bulky items like wash-tub, bucksaw, sawhorse, shovel, and rake.

⁴There were people living in the Hollow south of Seventh Street as early as 1865. In that year, according to the *St. Paul Daily Press* of October 14, three destitute Swedish families took shelter on the side of Trout Brook, a tributary of Phalen Creek. The Sanborn Map Co.'s 1903 map (vol. 4) depicts "cheaply constructed board shanties" extending throughout the Hollow down to Sixth Street, and a turn-of-the-century photograph in the society's collection shows a cluster of houses beside the creek just north of Sixth Street.

In 1854 when the city of St. Paul was incorporated, the Hollow included the entire Phalen Creek area, which is bounded in part by Payne Avenue and East Seventh Street. Thirty-five years later, Swede Hollow for me was the portion down in the valley which began at the Hamm's brewery at Payne and Minnehaha avenues, the original site of Phelan's cabin. A large pipe protruded from the brewery or at one side. Water from this pipe tumbled noisily into a pool several feet below, where men fished and big and little boys, naked as birches in winter, swam unrestrained by rules or regulations. Overflow from the pool formed the part of the creek which coursed through the Hollow and disappeared into a tunnel which I sometimes explored to a distance of five or six feet.⁴

I had no idea what the valley was like behind the brewery. Ernest H. Stromwell, a St. Paul resident who played in the area at the turn of the century, described it for me: "The water which formed the creek came from Lake Phalen which wound around swampland near Ames Creek, not

"Shacks and Snow," by artist Dewey Albinson, shows the Hollow in the 1920s.



far from Hazel Park. It went through tunnels under the Omaha tracks, tunneled in and out in several places, finally through some tunnels past Hauser's field where animals were kept and by Hamm's brewery into Swede Hollow." The total length of the creek from Lake Phalen to the Mississippi River was about three miles.⁵

Mr. Stromwell went on to say that "Theodore Hamm aged his beer in caves on the hillside and peddled it from place to place in a pushcart. Later the Hamm's truck, pulled by a four-horse hitch of huge Percherons left the brewery each morning around four or five o'clock. The clip-clop of the horses' hoofs on cedar blocks and cobblestones sounded like a big alarm clock. Mr. Hamm went on a trip to Europe and when he returned his father had built a 'lovely, large house at the edge of the creek.'"⁶ The pushcart probably served customers uptown. I never saw it. Neither did I see the Percherons or the Hamm man-

sion, since these came into being after we left the valley.

The Hollow was about one hundred fifty feet wide. On one side a rugged bluff devoid of greenery reached some seventy feet to a series of tenements at the city street level. Back porches of these tenements faced the Hollow. Housewives hung their washing on the porches, and it was not unusual for them to shake brooms and sweep refuse in our direction.

One day part of the bluff gave way in a

⁵ Ernest H. Stromwell to the author, January 31, 1969, in possession of the author.

⁶ Stromwell to the author, January 31, 1969. Theodore Hamm, who had received a small, nearly defunct brewery in St. Paul as collateral for a loan in 1865, had thirty horses to deliver his beer by 1886 and sixty Percherons by 1894. His father, William Hamm, Sr., moved into a palatial residence at 671 Cable Avenue (now Greenbrier) in 1905. The house was burned by vandals on April 21, 1954. Jeri Engh, *Hamm's: The Story of 100 Years in the Land of Sky Blue Waters*, 8, 11 (St. Paul, 1965); R. L. Polk & Co.'s *St. Paul City Directory*, 1905, p. 747.

The Hollow sheltered houses near the Sixth Street Bridge in the 1890s.





The Hamm mansion (at right) and the brewery overlooked the Hollow.

landslide which exposed broken lead pipes and brought a mass of unwanted discards to the edge of the creek. Older boys salvaged the pipes which had monetary value, while younger children like myself hopefully rummaged among the other debris. A policeman who had been placed on guard grabbed me. Mother, on hearing my howls, hurried up and in her broken English remonstrated with the officer until he released me with a strong hint of what would happen "if I ever see you again on this dangerous slide."

I found interest and excitement in other places. Despite an occasional dead cat, old shoe, or empty sardine can, I waded on the slippery rocks of the creek in hope of finding something of value, especially bottles that could serve for "sand bottles." The caves which Hamm used for his beer and

which later served for the production of mushrooms contained an endless supply of sand — white, gold, and yellow. Some children added other colors by using beet juice or bluing and stratified the lustrous sands in bottles which sold for a few pennies if you could find a buyer.⁷

The other side of the Hollow also offered opportunity for excitement. A series of terraces supported railroad cars which were continually shunting back and forth. I sometimes joined boys in dodging brakemen and hitching rides on the slow-moving cars, a dangerous game which Father ended as soon as he heard about it. The brakemen were popular with Swedish women who had a habit of calling to them "*Skalle ha litte kaffe?*" (Would you like a little coffee?) Because of this practice the railroad which ran from St. Paul to Duluth became known in the Hollow as the "Skalle Line."

Mr. Stromwell had no recollection of neighborhood saloons or stores, but a news-

⁷ These caves were later sealed. *St. Paul Dispatch*, April 27, 1962, p. 3.



*One of the caves
which dotted
the Hollow was
not yet sealed
in 1962.*

paper clipping in my possession mentions Pete Larson, a saloonkeeper, Erickson, a butcher, and Lindahl, a jeweler. These business places probably were located on one of the streets above the Hollow.⁸

The narrow sandy road which passed our house and the brewery furnished access to places "on top," but a long flight of wooden stairs (or was it a ladder?) over the railroad terraces proved the quickest way to get there. Father climbed the long stairway each morning to work a ten-hour day on the streetcar tracks for one dollar. I understand he had obtained the job by bribing the Irish crew boss. Since additional income was needed, Mother too climbed those steps several days each week to do washing for families who lived in the big houses.

I climbed the stairway by myself at times and went to a little shop where I could buy a foot-long licorice stick for one cent or a jew's-harp for ten cents. There were other desirable things available at

reasonable prices, including pocketknives, jacks, mouth organs, and fancy marbles in boxes lined with cotton. My favorite purchase when I had five or ten cents was one of the Hero books with a colored cover showing a valiant deed by a handsome boy. I would stand a long time before the intriguing display before deciding which book to buy. I could read English well enough to make out what the story was about and would spend sleepless nights reliving the dangers which the hero had overcome.

One evening I went up the stairway with my parents and accompanied them to a wonderful gaslit emporium, where they

⁸ The author is referring to a reminiscence which appeared in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 18, 1959, sec. 2, p. 21. In 1900 Peter E. Larson operated a saloon at 535 Collins Avenue. Peter N. Erickson opened a meat shop at 859 East Seventh Street in 1890, and Alexander Lindahl moved his jewelry store to 800 Payne Avenue the same year. *R. L. Polk & Co.'s St. Paul City Directory*, 1890-91, p. 493, 842; 1900, p. 294.

purchased a suit for me. It was one of the Lord Fauntleroy outfits then in vogue and must have been a great bargain, for no self-respecting American boy would buy or wear a suit with pink pants. This was made plain the first time I appeared in it.

Another time I accompanied my father when he went to call on a sick friend. On the way back he stopped in a saloon (could it have been the one owned by Pete Larson?) for a glass of beer. While he enjoyed his drink, I stood wide-eyed before a full-sized picture of the devil, blood red, with horns, cloven hoofs, a forked tail, and a long spear which was apparently used to push back embers or the wretched victims who were trying to wriggle away from a blazing inferno. That picture always came to mind later when I attended revival services in the Methodist church at Aitkin.

THERE MUST have been thirty or forty families in the Hollow when we lived there.

⁹In 1881 Bishop John Ireland of St. Paul moved twenty-four Irish peasant families from his colony at Graceville in Big Stone County to the capital. The band, from Connemara in County Galway, had failed on the Western prairie and had to turn to day labor. It settled in the Phalen Creek valley, which became known as the "Connemara Patch." James P. Shannon, "Bishop Ireland's Connemara Experiment," in *Minnesota History*, 35:205-213 (March, 1957).

Some were Irish, and their numbers grew steadily along with their chickens, ducks, pigs, goats, and other animals. Once the young men even brought in some wild western horses whose kicking and neighing disturbed our sleep for several nights. The combative Irish boys, whom Father called the "damnable Irish," threw stones at the drum during the Salvation Army services. They picked fights with the Swedes and harassed me at every opportunity. One boy showed me a revolver and said he would shoot me if he ever found me out after eight o'clock at night. A practice which I especially detested was their habit of calling me "Nels casta sten." The nickname was imposed on me by the Irish after hearing Mother admonish me about throwing stones."

With the continual population increase and the crowded living conditions, it is not surprising that the Hollow's street and alleys and the creek were fouled by garbage. Residents instituted cleanup days from time to time. On the date agreed upon, men reinforced the plank bridges and worked on a standpipe to improve the drinking water situation. Older girls led a horde of small children in picking up paper, broken glass, rags, and other debris on the hill-sides. Women and boys raked the garbage-

*The Hollow
as depicted by Eyvin
Ovrum, a Norwegian
writer-artist who worked
for the St. Paul Pioneer
Press in 1909.*



strewn alleys. Later, with women following along on the banks, the boys waded in the creek to keep the mass of refuse in the center until it disappeared into the tunnel. When the day was over, Swede Hollow was neater and cleaner than it had been in a long time.

Heavy rains occasionally helped clean the creek, as in 1900, a few years after we left the Hollow. The city health department received numerous complaints about the odors emanating from the refuse-filled stream that summer. Authorities suggested the construction of a sewer from Minnehaha Street to Fifth Street, but the estimated cost of the project was prohibitive. While they cast about for another solution, rain washed away the accumulated filth and sanitary conditions were temporarily improved. Unfortunately, Swede Hollow soon returned to its former ugly and cluttered state. The creek, which froze only at the edges in winter, continued to serve as a sewer until 1937, when it was diverted underground through a conduit. A deep spring provided water thereafter.¹⁰

Irish women were on hand along with Swedes when the vegetable wagon appeared. There were arguments in Swedish and English as frugal housewives carefully se-

lected a firm head of cabbage, bundles of red beets, or fresh, green onions. Children in expectant mood huddled around, hoping that mother might buy some of the yellow bananas which were priced at five cents a dozen.

Winter interfered with the arrival of the vegetable wagon because the one road was often closed by snowdrifts. Father would be called to help clear the tracks when heavy snow and freezing halted streetcar operation. Between jobs he cut wood and kept close to the stove where he liked to read the Swedish paper. Sometimes he sang folk tunes accompanied by his *dragspel* (accordion) which he kept under the bed. In the evenings friends often came to share the warmth, drink coffee, take snuff, or smoke their curved Swedish pipes.¹¹

Mother spun wool or knitted and listened to the talk from her place in a corner under a picture of King Oscar II of Sweden. Sister

¹⁰ The author questions the price of the sewer — \$60,600 — as given in *Svenska Amerikanska Posten*, September 4, 1900.

¹¹ The author's father undoubtedly read *Svenska Amerikanska Posten*, the Swedish-American newspaper published in Minneapolis from 1885 to 1940. For an account of the unprecedented success of this publication, see J. Oscar Backlund, *A Century of the Swedish American Press*, 61–64 (Chicago, 1952).

A northward view of the Hollow in the winter of 1925



was put to bed early. I liked to sit in her little rocking chair and watch the reflection from the wood fire while I listened to the news the visitors reported: a Swede found dead — probably from a heart attack, another beaten by drunken Irish, a Swedish couple hauled off in the paddy wagon after a fight. . . . The Irish were not the only residents involved in liquor or fights.

At times the conversation would be about Sweden or political news, as promulgated by the Swedish paper which favored the Republican party as did Father. The talks usually got around to questions about better places to live and work. Father was interested in a town named Aitkin, which after a visit he chose for our permanent home. I well remember my mother, sister, and I, with a pile of bags and bundles, leaving the Hollow to join him. Each of us had a tag giving name and destination. During the long journey in the day coach we had our first taste of store bread.

As more and more Swedes left the Hollow, the Irish were joined by other immigrants. Over the years, Italians, Poles, and Mexicans built their shanties among those already there. During the years each new group left, as did the Swedes, an imprint of its music, traditions, and mores on the Hollow. Each nationality also helped amplify the congestion and unsanitary conditions to a point which finally brought drastic action.

¹² Today Phalen Creek faces an uncertain future. The necessity of filling the ravine has prevented industrial development of the site. The state has first priority on the land and is considering routing Trunk Highway 212 over or through it. The St. Paul department of parks, which has a secondary hold on the property, would like to see a municipal park in Swede Hollow, *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 11, 1956, p. 21.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS on pages 362, 369, and 370 are from the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, August 3, 1958, and February 8, 1925. The painting on page 365 hangs in the Hamm Building in St. Paul; the reproduction is from the *St. Paul Dispatch* files. The photograph on page 368 appeared in the *Dispatch* on April 27, 1962. The author furnished the portrait on page 364, and Hamm's provided the photograph on page 367. The pictures on pages 366 and 371 are from the society's collection.



Today Swede Hollow stands deserted, with the Hamm brewery in the background.

On December 11, 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 sixteen families who lived there. When the last of the residents had gone, a company from the fire department moved in. Using gasoline, instead of dry grass, twigs, and birch bark as Edward Phelan probably did, they set fire to what remained of the weird settlement which for 117 years had been known as Phalen Creek or Swede Hollow.¹²



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