

At **HOME** in  
the **HEART** of  
the **CITY**

ANNETTE ATKINS



**F**or 75 years, from the 1840s to the 1920s, Minneapolis faced the Mississippi River and the falls that Father Louis Hennepin renamed St. Anthony. The city took its life and its livelihood largely from the water. The Mississippi hurtled millions of logs downriver from the pine forests up north. Its mills sliced those logs into lumber and crushed mountains of wheat into flour. It moved tons of goods in and shipped tons out. It was the boiler room, the engine room, the workroom of Minneapolis. It was the also the city's front door.

By 1870 Minneapolis's 13 flour mills ground about 20 million bushels of wheat. An 1873 map of the "Manufacturing Interests at the Falls of St. Anthony" gives an idea of the area's business intensity. The buildings include the Arctic, Union, Cataract, Empire, Minneapolis, Pillsbury, Zenith, Washburn, and the Eastman and Gibson flour mills. Then, there were the cooper shops,

box factory, carpenter shop, three grist mills, at least seven lumber mills, two planing mills, and the Minneapolis Iron Works.<sup>1</sup>

The roiling river brought to its banks and docks thousands of men, women, and children. The same forces that made Minneapolis a milling capital made it a magnet for people of all kinds. Some who flooded into Minneapolis in the nineteenth century left immediately to pursue hopes and ambitions somewhere else. Theirs is the story of the farms, small towns, and places beyond the city.

Thousands, though, stayed put and clustered in houses and rooms near the river. Bridge Square, where Nicollet and Hennepin Avenues met, was long the doorway into Minneapolis. The first bridge across the Mississippi, built right there in 1854, carried people from St. Anthony, St. Paul, and points east into Minneapolis and the West. The first city hall stood right there and so did the central market until 1891, when

congestion became too bad and the market moved to its current location about ten blocks west.

A milling town needed men (and their wives and children) to found and run and manage the mills, and it needed even more men and women to work in the mills and shops that serviced them. The city needed coopers and blacksmiths. Some people did laundry, sewed, tended other people's houses and families. Some made food or hats; others offered sex. Teachers, bankers, builders, glaziers, printers, lawyers, ministers, entertainers, journalists, storekeepers, draymen, icemen, coal men, stable keepers, cabinetmakers, roofers, and on and on. All of them lived cheek by jowl in a small, compact, walking city near the mighty river that jumbled together houses, shops, apartments, businesses, warehouses, families, factories, managers, misfits, laborers, servants,

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*The elegant villa at Marquette Avenue and Fourth Street, where the Gale family lived until the late 1880s*

prostitutes, animals. To get to work some people walked from upstairs to downstairs or from the back of the building to the front, or from next door, or for a few blocks, maybe even long blocks. People lived and worked in the same neighborhood. This was true of mill hands and mill owners and people such as Samuel C. Gale.

Gale, a Harvard-educated easterner, had made his way to Minneapolis in 1857 to practice law and deal in real estate. In 1861 he married Susan Damon, and they settled in the heart of Minneapolis. By 1870 their household included three children—ages eight, five, and two—two Bohemian servants, and a nanny. They all lived in a grand French villa-style

house at Marquette (then called Minnetonka) Avenue and Fourth Street. Other extraordinary mansions built about the same time stood nearby—at Sixth Street and Nicollet Avenue, at Eighth Street and Hennepin Avenue, and at Sixth Street and Seventh Avenue, for example—but the Gale house was not nestled in a quiet neighborhood of elegant and extravagant homes. The Gales lived, worked, and slept surrounded by city life. They had only a short walk to buy groceries and dry goods, visit the post office, conduct business at city hall, enjoy an opera, attend Plymouth Church, buy a piano, do their banking, catch the horse-drawn streetcar that ran alongside their house after 1879.

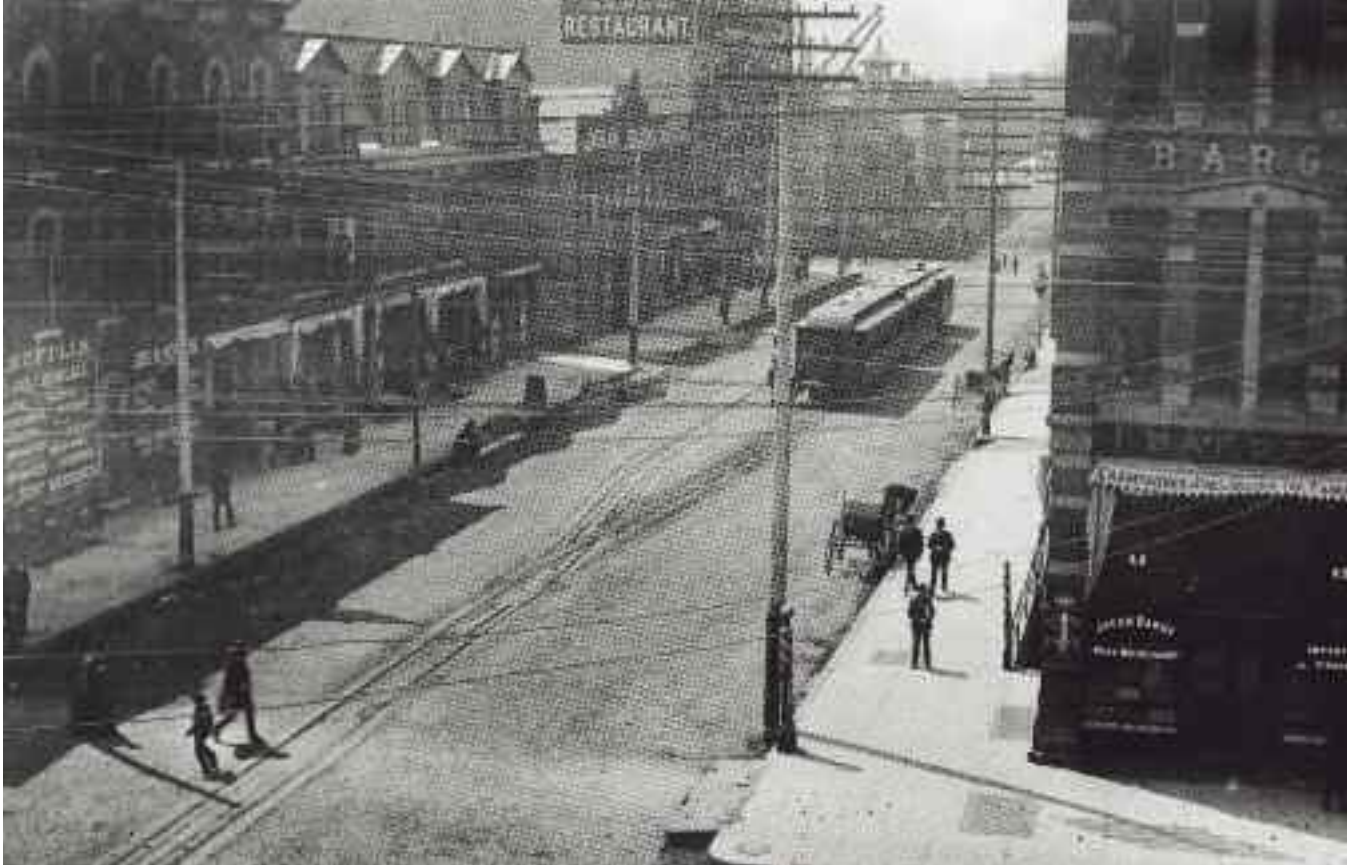
Mr. Gale could walk to his law and real estate office about four blocks away at 229 Nicollet Avenue.<sup>2</sup>

Their neighbors on one side included his brother's family and the family of his widowed sister-in-law. On the other side lived Isaac Penny, a blacksmith from Maine, with his wife and two children. Mrs. Anna Demmon lived next door to them; a miller and a confectioner boarded with her. Other neighbors included a cooper, retail grocer, dry-goods merchant, two millers. Working-class and well-to-do, families and single people, residential, commercial, civic, and social spheres all merged to form late-nineteenth-century Minneapolis life.

City life, though, must have gotten to be too much for the Gales. When they built a second house two decades later, they left the center of things. They only moved a dozen blocks south and west, to Fifteenth Street and Harmon Place, but in the 1880s this was nearly the countryside, on the edge of Loring Park among elegant houses like their own. With this move they joined the exodus of upper-middle-class people from the urban core to peace and quiet. George Pillsbury, a man of real ambition, moved all the way to Fiftieth Street, and others left the river city to live on lakes; Minnetonka was especially nice. When the Gales built a house for their son some years later, they located him another six blocks away at Twenty-First Street and Stevens Avenue.<sup>3</sup> Who knows what pollution, noise, congestion, ambition, or vision of the good life drove or lured the Gales and others out? It was the path that prosperity laid down, one that until the last 25 years has characterized urban life. As the upper classes receded, the working and

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PREVIOUS PAGE: *The well-traveled Hennepin Avenue Bridge in the bustling heart of Minneapolis, about 1891. Painted ads for Washburn-Crosby's "Royal" product and for Flour City wholesale bakers (partially visible behind bridge tower) remind passersby of the mills below the bridge.*



*Shops and restaurants line Marquette Avenue, served in the 1880s by the narrow-gauge steam trains of the Minneapolis, Lyndale, and Minnetonka Railway. A turret of the Gale house peeks over the background buildings.*

underclasses became more visible in the neighborhoods around the Falls of St. Anthony. They stayed amid the activity, the jumbled life, the buzz of city business. The city's riverside birthplace was changing.

**B**y 1900 the Gales' old house at Fourth and Marquette had been turned into advertising space. The single-family homes surrounding it had also been abandoned or converted to different uses or razed. But lots of people still worked and slept in the changing neighborhood.

Some stayed in boardinghouses. The one run by Mrs. Alice Ballard at 126 Fourth Street lodged a bootblack, a saloonkeeper, a bartender, and a young Irish cook, his wife, and their five-month-old son. Another boardinghouse on the block catered mostly to single women—a nurse, a grocery “saleslady,” and a dressmaker. Mrs. Clara Johnson around the corner ran yet another boardinghouse.

Herself African American, she housed an exclusively black clientele of two railroad porters, three hotel waiters, two married women—no husbands present—and a five-year-old boy—no parent present. She seems to have run a sometime haven, orphanage, sanctuary.<sup>4</sup>

In 1903 that old Gale house on Marquette was torn down to make way for Northwestern National Bank. Within ten years Mrs. Johnson's boardinghouse was gone and Mrs. Ballard's had been replaced by a commercial building that housed shops on the street level and the

*The Gale villa, about 1900, draped with advertising and soon to house a painter-paper hanger. In another three years, the building would be demolished.*





*All seven Hershmans posed outside their newly opened grocery at 705 Washington Avenue South in 1903. Young Maggie later labeled the people in this tattered family photograph.*

25-room Belmar Hotel on the second, third, and fourth floors.<sup>5</sup> The yards and lawns that had surrounded these houses disappeared. The new buildings stretched to the edges of the property and shot straight up from the sidewalk. They signaled a significant change in Minneapolis life from the mix of the early days to an increasingly commercial city center with residents less affluent and less likely to follow the path of prosperity trodden by the Gales.

People such as the Hershmans. Nathan and Anna and their children Maggie, Minnie, Abigail, Rosie, and

Frankie Hershman opened a grocery store in 1903 at 705 Washington Avenue. They all lived upstairs. Eager to improve themselves, they moved after a year—the store and the family—two blocks to a bigger and grander store with a grander name: South Side Grocery Company. Over the next three decades they moved several more times, but never very far from their first location. Sometimes they lived above, sometimes next door, sometimes down the street, but always near the shop.

Their neighbors included a mix of people from Europe, Wisconsin,

South Dakota, New York, Illinois, and North Dakota, among them a 40-year-old Norwegian day worker and his 19-year-old daughter; a Russian-born jeweler, his wife, and their five children; and Joseph and Clara Dorfman, who in 1900 had blended his six children and her two into a new family and lived above their second-hand furniture store at 721 Washington Avenue.<sup>6</sup>

The Dorfmans' store stayed there for decades, though the family moved around. In 25 years they had at least five different addresses, but never very far away and not in any

discernible upward march. By 1915 the Dorfman children had jobs of their own but were still living at home. Beatrice was a stenographer; Meyer a clerk; Ruby a sales clerk at the fashionable Young and Quinlan, just five blocks from home. Did the Dorfmans and the Hershmans stay in central Minneapolis because that's what they could afford or, perhaps, because they were Jewish and would not have been welcome elsewhere?<sup>7</sup>

Just three blocks from the river, the Hershmans and the Dorfmans lived and worked in the vicinity of train depots and railroad yards, mills and cafes, the Great Northern Implement and the Case Threshing Machine Companies, nine other grocery stores, a cluster of small shops, saloons, theaters, pool halls, hotels, and boarding and lodging houses up and down Washington Avenue and its cross streets.<sup>8</sup>

The neighborhood was home to men such as the warehouse worker who had arrived from Norway in 1902 when he was 21 years old and lived in a Minneapolis boardinghouse until 1963, when the city relocated him. He never married or had children, as far as we know; he never "settled down" in a conventional American way. He neither moved up nor moved out. Another man, Otto Zastrow, came to Minneapolis in 1904. In the next six years he lived at three different addresses and worked as a teamster and then as a stevedore. He eventually settled in an upstairs apartment at 925 Washington Avenue, two blocks from the Dorfmans' store. He married and worked as a clerk with the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad for nearly two decades until he lost his job in 1930. Then he and his wife moved three times in

the next four years before they both disappeared from city records.<sup>9</sup>

**M**inneapolis was a permanent home to thousands of people like these. A surprisingly large number of them worked at jobs that were seasonal or temporary. In 1900, U.S. census takers asked people how many months they had been unemployed during the previous year. (The question itself suggests that less than full-year employment was common.) In several boardinghouses along Hennepin Avenue close to the river, various day laborers reported sporadic unemployment. Two carpenters had been out of work for three months and five months; three porters, a waiter, and a shoemaker each worked ten months; an upholsterer worked only eight. A bartender, baker, and waitress reported working all twelve months. Even those

people who wanted full-time, year-round, year-in-and-year-out work often had a hard time securing and keeping it. One analyst in the late 1920s observed that in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth, nearly one-half of businesses, employing nearly two-thirds of the workers, had irregular employment patterns. Seasons, economic cycles, changes in fashion, and bad luck all contributed to putting people out of work from time to time. Unemployment was a fact of life for workers.<sup>10</sup>

Including many women. Thousands of them, too, cobbled together one thing and another. Clerking and sales jobs, dressmaking and seamstressing rose and fell with the seasons and economic cycles. One study of the millinery trade described its "whimsical irregularities." Then there were the long-term trends that left skilled and unskilled workers out of jobs. In 1880 there were 19 milli-

*Munsingwear factory workers, 1920, who needed inexpensive housing close to work*



nery businesses in the city center; by 1900 there were none. Other economic shifts made for new jobs. In those same 20 years, the number of clothing stores went from 14 to 58 and restaurants from 14 to 32 (to 81 by 1930).<sup>11</sup>

Otto Zastrow's sister, Verna, was one of these women who needed what central Minneapolis offered best—a place close to work where she could live cheaply. Women's wages were less than those of most men living in the center city; women had fewer places to stay and weren't welcome at the religious missions. For nearly 50 years Verna worked at the Swedish Hospital in Minneapolis—as a maid, laundress, cook. She lived with her brother and sister-in-law from time to time and on her own at half a dozen different addresses. In 1950—she must have been close to 70 years old—she still

worked at the Swedish Hospital, still lived in the center of the city at 626 Ninth Avenue.<sup>12</sup>

Permanent residents like Verna Zastrow, the Hershmans, and the Dorfman lived amidst thousands of laborers who came and went. Their jobs were cyclical and seasonal, so they lived in Minneapolis cyclically or seasonally. Some worked for part of the year out of town and then part in town. For decades Minneapolis was their landing spot, transfer point, temporary home.<sup>13</sup> These laborers made up the armies of men who cut trees or harvested crops or mined ore or built roads or railroads or bridges. Their employers didn't hire the same number of people for the same jobs from season to season. Workers got hired when they were needed.

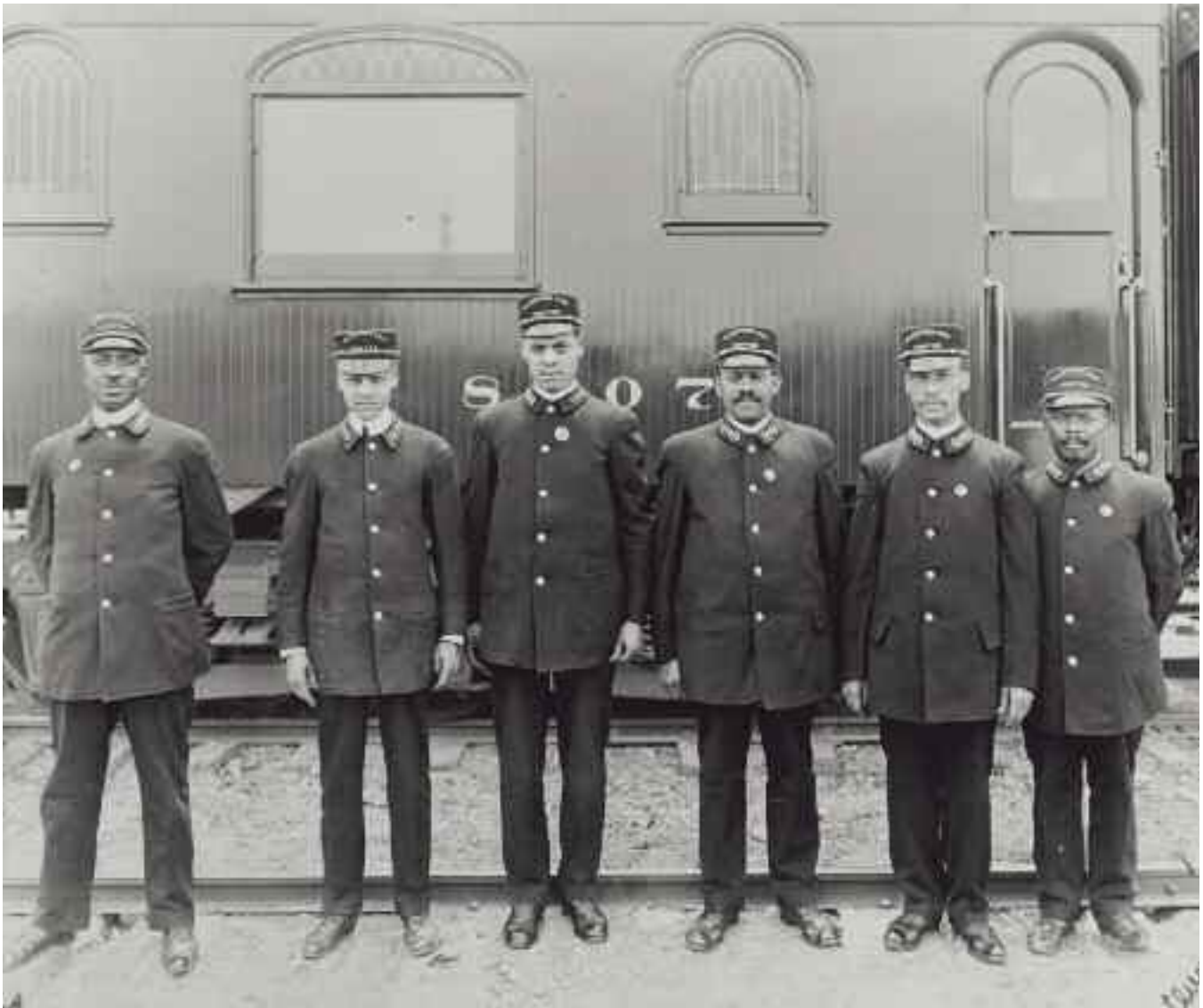
An ambitious and disciplined laborer might keep himself occupied,

most years, year around, but most laborers weren't ambitious or disciplined in this way. On average, they worked eight out of twelve months, a schedule that, according to one study, many found to their liking.<sup>14</sup> Whether those four nonworking months came all at once or, more likely, a month here and a month there, the workmen often headed to town when free. The woods may have been closer to the mines than either was to Minneapolis, but it was easier to get from one to the other via the city. Besides, many of those men must have wanted a dose of city life between jobs.

People such as 47-year-old Case #178, who turned up in a 1932 study of "casual laborers." Mr. 178 had been born in Minneapolis and had an eighth-grade education plus some engineering and bookkeeping classes, an unusual accomplishment. But, like the others, he was what the researchers called "occupationally unstable," and he preferred to be "on the move from place to place." From 1900 to 1932 (aged 15 to 47), he worked as a cowboy in South Dakota, in a Minneapolis warehouse, on his father's Minnesota farm, in California at various odd jobs. He traveled coast-to-coast several times and to Mexico, working as a carpenter and machinist. He ran a movie house in Oregon. In between times he made his way back to Minneapolis where he took a machinist job and, no doubt, lived in one of the boarding or lodging houses around Washington Avenue. Another more typical man, #77, who was about 67, had often worked for the railroad in the summer but had never been employed for longer than seven months at any one job. He worked in lumber camps and harvest fields and went three times to Liverpool with boat-

*Seasonal workers like these field hands binding wheat in the Red River Valley, about 1900, came to cities such as Minneapolis between jobs.*





*African American sleeping car porters, 1910, could rent rooms in center-city boardinghouses.*

loads of cattle. He nonetheless identified himself as having worked steadily all of his life.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of a job, these laboring men roared into Minneapolis with pockets full of money and big appetites for the city's pleasures. By one estimate, 250,000 men showed up in the city annually around the turn of the century. Some men banked part of their money, others sent a portion home. Many spent until it ran out, then found another job at one of the hiring halls, of which there were 40 in 1913. They might also return to a

familiar lodging house, familiar eateries, even friends.<sup>16</sup>

The city's old core adjusted to accommodate these men. Businesses grew up that thrived on their patronage. Among the most numerous were boarding, lodging, or flop houses. The railroad porter who boarded with Mrs. Johnson came and went with his train but might well have kept his room while he was gone. Seasonal workers rented by the week or by the day.

Boardinghouses usually included meals; lodging houses were cheaper and provided less, and their num-

bers grew rapidly. Flophouses offered overnight guests a spot on the floor or perhaps a bunk, for which they paid nearly nothing and got next to nothing. In some buildings, large rooms were partitioned into smaller cells or cages. Walls, however flimsy, provided some privacy. Wire-mesh ceilings kept a person's belongings relatively safe from an intruder coming over the top and allowed for some ventilation in these windowless rooms. Whether a lodging or boarding or flophouse, all had shared bathrooms (as did most hotels at the time). Given the labor





*Laborers passing the time outside a Bridge Square employment bureau that advertised jobs from Minneapolis to Montana, 1908*

conditions for many of the men, these accommodations may even have been a step up.

Many rooms, like those at the Belmar Hotel, were located above street-level commercial operations, often saloons (the same couple who ran the boardinghouse doing double duty as barkeepers). For 40 years saloons flourished in central Minneapolis, largely because an 1884 city ordinance confined them to that neighborhood. A person walking from Hennepin Avenue to the Hershman's store in 1903 would pass four dozen saloons. It wasn't because the clients of the rooming houses required so many taverns—they didn't

and couldn't have supported that many—but because boardinghouse and saloon life didn't conflict.<sup>17</sup>

**I**n 1908 *Minneapolis Journal* photographer George Luxton snapped a picture of three men standing around outside one of the hiring halls (probably at 200 Nicollet Avenue), just a block from Bridge Square, still the gateway into Minneapolis. By the early twentieth century, men like these were troubling features on the Minneapolis landscape, and so were the saloons that lined Bridge Square. When respectable and hard-working citizens of Minneapolis were outside, they were

going somewhere—walking briskly and purposefully to and from work, shopping, perhaps carrying a message or making a delivery. Like these three men in their work boots and dirty work clothes, many of the seasonal laborers stood around in public places, parks, on street corners and curbs, watching the world go by.

And, they might have asked, why not? Most of them did outdoor work, so even when they weren't working they spent lots of time outdoors. Moreover, they were on vacation. This was their time to catch up on the news, to gossip, to tell stories, to get tips about jobs.

To people walking purposefully,

however, these men looked like unproductive members of society. They weren't busy, the preferred middle-class American posture. They appeared to be idle loungers or, worse, idle drunken loungers.

Certainly a lot of these men (and women) patronized the nearby saloons, and some certainly drank to excess. Some were, no doubt, chronically rather than seasonally unemployed. Fears and anxiety about these idle men haunted many good Minneapolitans and seemed to signal the decline of the center city. These worries also blurred middle-class vision about who actually populated the neighborhood. For the next 75 years, the fear of alcohol—coupled with the fear of lounging men—impaired the perception and the

judgment of critics who developed the habit of identifying the residents as alcoholics. In fact, many of the residents—temporary and permanent—didn't drink at all.<sup>18</sup>

The Bridge Square neighborhood had been disturbing to many in Minneapolis at least since the late 1880s when the Gales moved out. Minneapolis was—and still is—a success story of a town. It blossomed and prospered in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries. When the timber industry died and then milling was seriously curtailed, other businesses such as wholesaling, insurance, and finance took root and grew. The Great Depression dampened development everywhere, but World War II and the twin postwar booms in computers and technology-

related industries catapulted Minneapolis into resurgent growth and pride. Throughout the twentieth century, many saw the old neighborhood as a rebuke to that ongoing success story. Its people, it seemed, refused to take advantage of Minneapolis's opportunities to better themselves. Their presence seemed provocative and challenging both.<sup>19</sup>

**T**here were multiple attempts to clean up the neighborhood. The two most passionate and committed came in the Progressive Era, about 1900 to 1916, and then again in the era of urban renewal, the late 1950s and 1960s.

When Progressive reformers—some of the very people who had moved out of central Minneapolis—

*Brand-new Gateway pavilion and park at Hennepin and Nicollet, created to rejuvenate the declining neighborhood, about 1915*



looked at the city, they didn't see a body of workers essential to Minnesota's economy; they didn't see a functioning community that met the residents' needs or outsiders' wants. Instead, they saw the ills of industrialization: congregations of unskilled and sometimes unemployed laborers; degenerate men who lived in degraded circumstances; women who engaged in prostitution or lived indiscriminately among men. The reformers took offense at the alcohol, gambling, dance halls, pool halls, movie houses. They were scandalized by the corruption in the city government that allowed such vices and conditions to thrive.<sup>20</sup>

Like Progressives in cities throughout the United States, the reformers took it as their duty and moral obligation to solve these problems. They wanted parks and cleaned-up streets; they wanted clean government and safer neighborhoods. They wanted people better integrated into a healthful, growing, improving city. Most of all, it seemed, they wanted to get rid of alcohol, which they passionately believed was the taproot of the neighborhood's problems.

By 1915 or so, the Bridge Square area was home to at least five distinct cultures: the steady urban laborers—a few married, most not—who lived near where they worked; the seasonal laborers who came and went; the people who catered to these laborers; the outsiders who dropped in for a drink or something else and then went home; and the chronic down-and-outs who had nowhere else to go. These people shared the same space. The Progressives, like others before and since, presumed they shared the same habits. Through nearly all of the twentieth century, then, reformers set out to solve a

problem that they had misdiagnosed.

Progressives had a clear idea of the good life. It included family, church, community, and work. It required that people be committed to improving themselves, their lot in life, their communities, their future. People who were not participating in this good life might be dangerous to themselves as well as to the fabric of America. The Progressives reasoned that better conditions could improve the lives of the residents and improve Minneapolis at the same time. Everyone would be better off.<sup>21</sup>

The neighborhood around Washington, Hennepin, and Nicollet Avenues, where the city met the river, attracted a good share of attention. Reformers focused initially on Bridge Square. Their chief complaints were the "low groggeries that attract the street loafer and the expectorating transient." So, in the mid-1910s they tore down City Hall, cleared out about four square blocks of the "low groggeries," residences, and businesses, including the hiring hall where the three workmen once lounged, and reinvented the neighborhood as the Gateway. Persuaded by the City Beautiful movement and its classical impulses, the Progressives created Gateway Park with its splendid pavilion at the heart of this troubled neighborhood. Dedicated in 1915, the park pushed the edges of the boardinghouse neighborhood back a bit but didn't result in the hoped-for rejuvenation. In fact, the park provided a lovely public space in which people could pass their days and talk to their friends—the opposite of what the Progressives had in mind.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps because so many of the Progressives were women, they paid special attention to women's conditions. Women's welfare concerned

the reformers, as did the fact that the Gateway's females were on their own and flouting society's moral order. The Progressives' first efforts focused on separating the women from the men and getting women into their own boardinghouses, supervised by good middle-class matrons. A reformer-initiated provision in a 1917 ordinance prohibited lodging houses from taking in female guests.<sup>23</sup>

As an alternative, the reformers established a variety of accommodations for women only. The Woman's Hotel stood at 122 Hennepin Avenue, right near the Hennepin Avenue Bridge and across the street from Gateway Park. In 1920, in addition to the matron and her assistant, it

*Woman's Hotel above a mission "life-saving station" in the heart of the Gateway, about 1916*





*Matron greeting guests, about 1918, in the Woman's Hotel lobby, a genteel contrast to the building's exterior and surroundings*

housed Sallie Larson, one of Verna Zastrow's colleagues at the Swedish Hospital; nurse Evelyn Kluck, 23, and her 16-year-old sister, a servant in a private home; Hula Dahl, a 27-year-old Norwegian hotel housekeeper; and 78-year-old Helen Buck, who did not report any employment. Other women's housing, though, stood beyond the city's core in order to pull women out of the Gateway. The Lutheran Hospice and Home for Young Women, founded in 1906 at 828 Sixth Street, provided accommodation for working and homeless women; it organized an employment bureau and even an orphanage. There was also the Woman's Board-

ing Home on Tenth Street and the Transient Home for Girls at Seventeenth Street and Stevens Avenue. By 1930 the Woman's Hotel had moved out to Tenth and Marquette.<sup>24</sup>

Part of the Progressives' concern was to get rid of prostitution. Local historian David Rosheim estimated that there were 30 brothels and 300 prostitutes around Washington Avenue in 1900. The Progressives' efforts, especially from 1908 to 1910, did succeed in getting many prostitutes off the street and driving their trade underground.<sup>25</sup>

If living conditions in the Gateway concerned the reformers, so too did the possibility of men and

women being radicalized. In those highly charged days before World War I, middle-class Minnesotans feared that organizations such as the Industrial Workers of the World were gaining a foothold, especially among the unskilled laborers of the upper Midwest. All the more reason, the reformers argued, to improve the Gateway residents' lot and connect them more securely to the good life that America had to offer, so that they would not be attracted to alien ideas.<sup>26</sup>

The working people of Minneapolis were never won over by the IWW in large numbers. Nor did they much improve themselves,



*Unemployed men in Gateway park, July 1937*

either. They lived on, and they got older. In 1900 a federal census taker found six unmarried day laborers and a musician living at 211 Nicollet Avenue. Two were from Sweden, one (the musician) from Ireland, the rest born in the United States. The oldest was 34 and the youngest 28. Twenty years later, 16 people lived at 211. Two were German born, the rest American. They included mostly laborers, plus a janitor, teamster, desk clerk, painter, cook, and one woman, the housekeeper. Two, including the housekeeper, were widowed, the rest single. One resident was 28. Four were in their 30s, five in their 40s, three in their 50s. Two

60-year-olds and one 70-year-old, the owner, lived there, too.<sup>27</sup>

**F**rom 1920 to 1960 the Gateway area distilled into a denser and denser concentration of white, working-class men on their own with an increasingly distinctive way of life. After 1919, when the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution prohibited the sale and manufacture of liquor, saloons formally went out of business, as elsewhere, but some found ways to persist. The greater change in the 1920s was the dwindling of the timber trade and the imminent eclipse of the Minneapolis flour mills by those of Buffalo,

New York. In 1910 about 21,000 men had been employed in lumbering; by 1927 that number had dropped to 7,000. The 1920s spelled depression for many people living on the margins in Minneapolis.<sup>28</sup>

When hard times hit, they hit hard in the Gateway. Economic swings had a greater impact on life there than had the Progressives or labor organizers. Economic failure pushed laborers out of seasonal and casual work but not necessarily out of the neighborhood. In fact, it more often and more effectively locked them in.

Poverty intensified in the 1930s as the depression settled in. For

those in the Gateway who had never signed on to the American dream (or had already signed off), living on the margins was familiar. But one tragedy of the depression was that people who had signed on—or tried to—were also pushed to the margins. More and more of them found their way to the Gateway, some for the cheap lodgings, some for the hiring halls, some to nap in the parks and public squares.

A Civil Works Administration building-by-building survey of Minneapolis in 1932 and 1933 offers a snapshot of life in the midst of the depression. The bank at the site of Mr. Gale's old house at Fourth and Marquette now numbered among its neighbors a mix of small businesses, cafes, pawnshops, movie theaters, and vacant or half-full hotels above the stores. Buildings were deteriorating from age and lack of care. Most by the 1930s housed tenants; owners lived elsewhere. But the mix of rooms and businesses suggests that a way of life persisted in the neighborhood. It wasn't the life that Minneapolis city fathers (or mothers) wanted people to be living, for the good of the people or for the good of the city. But in the 1930s and 1940s little could be done. So, cafes, pawnshops, second-hand stores, and other businesses survived or perished. After 1933 the bars returned, still limited by law to the Gateway neighborhood, and the area's entertainments continued to lure outsiders: servicemen—not unlike the seasonal workers—who roared into town looking for a cheap place to stay and a good time; college students out on a lark; travelers in between trains or buses. A few people continued to live in those rooms above the stores, in the cages and boardinghouses.<sup>29</sup>

The Union Gospel Mission and other evangelical organizations became increasingly visible Gateway institutions. In exchange for an exhortation or sermon, a man could secure a meal and a bed for the night, even a reading room or resting place during the day. For some, the life might not have been much harder than what they already knew.

The missions picked up as much of the relief work as they could, and then the city and state and the New Deal government assumed a more active role. During the 1930s most public efforts were directed at helping people hold on and survive, offering some relief to a growing, aging population of men in declining health in a declining job market.

The Gateway neighborhood, the original Minneapolis, gradually had

become only one neighborhood in a larger city, and an increasingly male and disreputable one at that. As the city's shadow, it housed much that Minneapolis wanted to ignore—drugs, prostitution, homosexuality, and gambling. It had once been the city's heart; then, one layer at a time, one class at a time, people had moved out. They turned their backs on the city (except when they wanted to breach society's conventions and rules). Inner Minneapolis along the river became an embarrassment, a run-down, last-resort hole up, a better back room than a front porch.

**I**n the 1950s—war over, federal funds available, and modern reforms in the air—the city's attention turned again to solving what was seen as the perennial Gateway problem.

*Aging single men inside Hennepin Avenue's Union City Mission, 1925; hard times hit the Gateway before the Great Depression.*



Study groups, city boards, Chamber of Commerce committees, the Downtown Council, the Minneapolis Retailers, the Minneapolis Downtown Business Association, even the Minneapolis Building and Construction Trades Council and the Teamsters union all concluded that the time for reform had passed. The Gateway had to go. What civic boosters now desired was to replace the “cancerous Lower Loop” with “an imaginative, exciting and dynamic development,” a “beautiful entrance to a beautiful city.” That became the dream.<sup>30</sup>

Various plans circulated and were dropped, including moving all the down-and-out residents to Nicol-

let Island in the Mississippi River and making the Gateway into a center for government services. Plans for hotels, for economic development, for a new city center danced in reformers’ heads. A first step included tearing down the Gateway pavilion and fencing the park, designating it for “eye enjoyment only,” as a *Minneapolis Star* reporter wrote. There had been lots of talk before, but this time something was going to happen. By the late 1950s plans were coming together.<sup>31</sup>

The plans involved the city purchasing—with a combination of state and federal funds—some 175 to 225 properties in an area bounded by Third and Hennepin Avenues, Third

Street, and the river. These properties would be razed and replaced by something new and exciting. What that would be was not clear, but parking lots were desperately needed and would do in the meantime.<sup>32</sup>

Not unmindful of the residents, the city in 1958 hired Theodore Caplow, a University of Minnesota sociologist, to study the Gateway neighborhood in anticipation of the clearance. He documented a way of life that maybe didn’t make sense to the city or to many outsiders but did make sense and fit the needs of the 2,783 men and 122 women he found there. Three-quarters of the men were over 50 and nearly half were no longer in the labor market. Infirmary, age, or the difficulty of getting unskilled-labor jobs after age 60 meant that their work years were over. The women, including Verna Zastrow, I suspect, spanned nearly the same range as the men, but most were at its younger end and more were still employed.<sup>33</sup>

The population was 95 percent white, 75 percent native born, and only 5 percent currently married. Their residential stability surprised even Caplow, who reported that 1 in 6 “has lived *at the same address for ten years or more*” and another 6 percent for more than 20 years. Seven men had lived at the same address for more than 30 years, and three had been in the same lodging house for more than 40. Even so, Caplow, like most observers throughout the twentieth century, labeled these people as homeless, a term that reveals more about the prejudices of people using it than about the people to whom it was applied. As early as 1911, a bleak portrait of lodging-house life had described Minneapolis’s “colonies” of mostly lumber-camp and agricultural laborers as homeless.

*Demolition of the Gateway pavilion, October 1953*



Even though a 1936 report showed that nearly 80 percent of Gateway relief recipients had lived there for at least five years, the agency responsible for them was called the Homeless Men's Bureau until "homeless" was dropped because the men objected so strongly.<sup>34</sup>

As Caplow himself later wrote, homeless people were not attached to society through any of the "six major types of affiliative bonds: family, school, work, religion, politics, and recreation." It was this absence of bonds that reformers had long found so distressing and challenging—even threatening. The Gateway was a neighborhood of people who rejected conventional society and a haven for those who rejected its norms for an evening or a weekend. This is what urban renewal had to remove—blight and this visible rejection of conventional American life. It could not be that people wanted to live like this. Calling these people homeless, citing the health dangers of the lodging houses, and focusing on the filth in the neighborhood allowed reformers to claim urban renewal as the only option.<sup>35</sup>

Caplow and his team of graduate students asked about 275 residents why they lived on skid row and found their answers remarkably consistent with the findings of a larger Chicago survey. In that study, the draw of the residents' way of life becomes most evident—even compelling. There were practical reasons—cost, convenience, and, buried in the answers, familiarity. In Chicago, an old pensioner received about \$77 per month in assistance (\$71 in Minneapolis) and could pay for food and shelter for about \$70 per month. For the more desperate, the Gateway was the place of last resort. Where else could they go? Caplow observed that Skid Row



*Photographer Jerome Liebling documented "the struggle that so many faced in their attempts to hold on and make their way" as the blighted Gateway succumbed to urban renewal; House of Charity, Minneapolis, 1959.*

was "essentially this community's rest home for its low-income residents."<sup>36</sup>

More important, as the Chicago study reported, the neighborhood provided "companionship and relief from a lonely old age" for people who had spent their lives among other laboring men. In this neighborhood the residents found a sense of place, human companionship, like-mindedness, and acceptance, too. They could dress in shabby clothing, hang out, drink a little or a lot, and fit in. They lived around others who were partially or wholly unemployed, among people without family ties. The older men tended to live in rooms or apartments—rather than in the dormitories or cubicles—

so they also had a bit of privacy. They had friends and people who could tide them over during the thin times at the end of a month. They frequented the same eateries (often breakfast in one, dinner in another) where the waitresses "know most of their customers and their preferences," said Caplow. Most residents spent much of their time in their hotels, either in their rooms or in the lobbies, which they treated as their living rooms. They patronized local businesses including the second-hand stores, the barber college, the library. Almost 40 percent reported that they wouldn't seek any improvements in their accommodations if they moved.<sup>37</sup>



Contrary to popular belief, most of these men did not spend their days in the bars. They couldn't have afforded it, even if they'd wanted to. And, almost a third of them simply did not drink. But this association of residents with alcohol, forged in the public mind decades earlier, continued to shape popular perceptions of both the problems and their solutions. A typical *Minneapolis Tribune* story in 1956 reported, for example, that "forty-eight percent of the residential buildings are within one block's walking distance of 6 or more bars and liquor stores," with the implication that the residents were the ones frequenting those estab-

lishments. Caplow and others argued that this inference was wrong, but to no avail.<sup>38</sup>

**S**tarting in 1959, the City of Minneapolis began to buy up property in the Gateway and relocate businesses and residents. Over the next two years, nearly 850 people were moved, half of them into private rental housing, virtually all of them outside the downtown. Within four years, 34 families, 1,724 "unattached" males, and 40 "unattached" females (mostly maids and kitchen workers who lived where they worked) had been relocated. No doubt many of their new lodgings

were cleaner—fewer bugs, better toilets, walls that went to the ceiling, more privacy, safer. But Judith Martin and David Lanegran, who studied the effects of urban renewal on the Gateway, argued that the process ultimately made hundreds of people homeless. What the reformers had most objected to, they finally accomplished.<sup>39</sup>

Among those relocated was Case Study #1, a man identified as not atypical. He had lived in the neighborhood since 1902 when he had emigrated from Norway at the age of 21. He could not get around much by himself and was largely confined to his room. People brought him food; they probably cashed his social security checks, paid his bills, maybe even brought him a drink or two and news from the streets. In 1962 he was moved into a foster home outside of the neighborhood. Although he probably got better and more regular food, one wonders if he might not have preferred to stay where he was.<sup>40</sup>

Another resident, an 82-year-old "healthy, pleasant, neat old gentleman," who had lived in a cage hotel for ten years, seemed pleased to move. His caseworker reported, however, that after several months he reappeared at the relocation office and asked to move back. He had not been able to find "roast pork and applesauce like he could get on the avenue." A third man of "advanced senility" was sent first to the public hospital. When released he went back to the Gateway. After a time he was sent to a private hospital, then to a nursing home. One summer day, he escaped and walked back to the Gateway, to a different hotel and "to his old habits."

By 1963 most of the properties that the city bought had been torn

*Room in a vanished "cage" hotel, included in a 1963 Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority progress report on clearing the city's "notorious bowery area"*





*Summer visitors enjoy West River Parkway, which fronts the old mill district and continues under the latest Hennepin Avenue Bridge.*

down and replaced with parking lots. As *Minneapolis Star* reporter Frank Murray wrote earlier, “Ever since Minneapolis discarded its lumberjack shirt and slipped into a dinner jacket, it has tried to shake off the unwelcome attentions of its first love—the Gateway District.” The reformers had finally succeeded.<sup>41</sup>

With the era of urban renewal, Minneapolis gained some of the clean-up that it wanted, though not as much as many had hoped. The city could no longer be said to have a skid row, as the neighborhood had come to be called. Minneapolis could boast of uniting major interest groups to eliminate much of the blight that had corroded the historic core near the river. Some of the city’s

goals—to increase the number of legitimate businesses, to revitalize the neighborhood—took time to be realized. Now, some 40 years later, the process is underway. In September 2003 the Minnesota Historical Society will open Mill City Museum in the midst of Mill Ruins Park. The Guthrie Theater is planning to move to a new riverside setting. Hundreds of elegant condominiums for well-off young, middle-aged, and older people have risen near the river that the city once more faces. No longer an industrial river, no longer the bringer and taker of goods and supplies, no longer the powerhouse of the city, no longer its workroom. Once again aiming to be the front door—though not to a boardinghouse.

Not long ago a poet gave a reading at the Minnesota Center for the Book Arts, just a block south of where the Hershman’s first grocery store once stood. He remembered that when he was young and day-dreaming in a writerly sort of way, his mother warned that if he weren’t careful he’d end up on Washington Avenue—the fate of those who lived at the margins of society. So, he joked, he wished that his mother were alive to see that coming to Washington Avenue now meant that he’d made it. ❖

## Notes

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1. Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 340. The map is in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul.

2. Here and below, Charles W. Nelson, “Minneapolis Architecture for the Elite: A View of the Gilded Age of the 1880s,” *Hennepin History* 52 (Winter 1993): 8–9; United States Manuscript Census, 1870, Hennepin Co., microfilm, roll 5, Ward 3, p. 36–37, MHS; *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1880–81. Neighborhood layout determined from maps and photographs. Minneapolis’s street and avenue names usually include directional terms. Those named in this article are “South.”

3. Nelson, “Minneapolis Architecture,” 13. When Gale moved his office a few years later, he didn’t move far (and not toward his house), but to 126 Fifth Street; *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1890, vol. 1, p. 486; 1895–96, p. 386; 1915, vol. 1, p. 730.

4. U.S. Manuscript Census, 1900, Population, Hennepin Co., roll 767, enumeration district 51, p. 248B, 249A. See also Thomas E. Reinhart, “The Minneapolis Black Community, 1863–1926,” typescript, 16–17, 23, MHS.

5. *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1905; Civil Works Administration, Building and Housing Survey, City Planning Commis-

sion, Minneapolis, 1933, manuscript, Minneapolis City Archives, City Hall.

6. U.S. Manuscript Census, 1900, roll 767, enumeration district 54, p. 283A.

7. *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1905, 1910, 1915, 1920, 1925, 1930.

8. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Minneapolis, 1912, microfilm roll 8, vol. 3, sheet 250 and contiguous, MHS.

9. Dorothy O. Holtz et al., "Report on the Relocation of Residents, Businesses, and Institutions from the Gateway Center Project Area" (Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority [HRA], Nov. 1963), 19–20; *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1904–06, 1910, 1915, 1920, 1925, 1930–35.

10. U.S. Manuscript Census, 1900, Population, Hennepin Co., roll 766, enumeration district 33, p. 276B, 277A, 277B; Tillman M. Sogge, *Seasonal Irregularity of Employment in Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth*, University of Minnesota, Additional Publications of the Employment Stabilization Research Institute, Nov. 1931, p. 5.

11. Mary Van Kleeck, *A Seasonal Industry: A Study of the Millinery Trade in New York* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1917), 25; HRA, *A General Report on the Problem of Relocating the Population of the Lower Loop Redevelopment Area* (1958), 17.

12. *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1905–55; Tasslyn Frame, "Women Workers at St. Anthony Falls," *Hennepin History* 53 (Spring 1994): 5, 7; Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 60.

13. Faue, *Community of Suffering*, 23.

14. Alvin H. Hansen, Marion R. Trabue, and Harold S. Diehl, *Duluth Casual Labor Group*, University of Minnesota, Bulletin of the Employment Stabilization Research Institution, vol. 1, no. 3 (Mar. 1932), 42–45.

15. Hansen, *Duluth Casual Labor Group*, 42–46.

16. David L. Rosheim, *The Other Minneapolis: Or, The Rise and Fall of The Gateway* (Maquoketa, IA: Andromeda Press, 1978), 81; *Minneapolis Star*, Sept. 28, 1953, p. 8.

17. Rosheim, *Other Minneapolis*, 40; *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1903.

18. HRA, *General Report*, 150, which

found that nearly 30 percent of the residents did not drink and 34 percent were "moderate" drinkers (did not imbibe routinely). The 38 percent who routinely drank at least once per week were labeled "heavy" drinkers.

19. Howard J. Karger, *The Sentinels of Order: A Study of Social Control and the Minneapolis Settlement House Movement, 1915–1950* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 53–60.

20. Alice W. Solenberger, *One Thousand Homeless Men: A Study of Original Records* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1911), 330–34; Karger, *Sentinels of Order*, 53–70.

21. Karger, *Sentinels of Order*, 137–38.

22. *Minneapolis Journal*, Mar. 28, 1908, p. 4; Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961; reprint, London: Pelican, 1972), 35.

23. Frame, "Women Workers," 10.

24. Lynn Weiner, "Our Sister's Keepers": The Minneapolis Woman's Christian Association and Housing for Working Women," *Minnesota History* 46 (Spring 1979): 189–200; Frame, "Women Workers," 10–11; U.S. Manuscript Census, 1920, Hennepin Co., Population, roll 833, enumeration district 65, p. 28; *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1930.

25. Rosheim, *Other Minneapolis*; Frame, "Women Workers," 15.

26. The truckers' strikes in the 1930s did take place partially in the Gateway, as much because of the warehouses just north of Hennepin Avenue as the presence of radical laborers.

27. U.S. Manuscript Census, 1900, roll 767, enumeration district 49, p. 227A, and 1920, Hennepin Co., Population, roll 834, enumeration district 89, p. 6A.

28. Hansen, *Duluth Casual Labor*, 11; Rosheim, *Other Minneapolis*, 57.

29. Civil Works Administration, Building and Housing Survey, City Planning Commission, Minneapolis, 1932, manuscript, Minneapolis City Archives.

30. "A Plan for the Redevelopment of the Lower Loop Area," City Planning Commission, Feb. 1952, Minneapolis City Archives; HRA, *Gateway Center Progress Report No. 1* (Sept. 1961), n. p., in Minneapolis Published Records and Reports of Minneapolis City Agencies, Hennepin Co.,

Minnesota State Archives, MHS; Curtis B. Akenson, "Selected Facets of Community Influence on Political Power in the Redevelopment of the Minneapolis Lower Loop" (Ph. D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1962), 60–70; *Minneapolis Star*, Feb. 19, 1952, p. 17.

31. *Minneapolis Star*, Sept. 30, 1953, p. 35, July 9, 1954, p. 15.

32. For the range of properties to be purchased, see, for example, Akenson, "Selected Facets of Community Influence," 65–66; HRA, *Gateway Center Progress Report*, n. p.

33. HRA, *General Report*, 36.

34. HRA, *General Report*, 23, 73, 79, 80, 82; Solenberger, *One Thousand Homeless*, 330–34; Paul M. Segner, *Minneapolis Unemployed: A Description and Analysis of the Resident Relief Population of the City of Minneapolis from 1900 to 1936* (Minneapolis: Board of Public Welfare, Division of Relief, 1937); "Manual of the Men's Bureau of the Division of Public Relief, Department of Public Welfare," Minneapolis, Jan. 15, 1935, p. 1, MHS.

35. Howard M. Bahr and Theodore Caplow, *Old Men Drunk and Sober* (New York: New York University Press, 1973), 3–7, 39, 229.

36. Caplow, quoted in *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 14, 1959, p. 6. See also, HRA, *General Report*, 61, 83–86.

37. HRA, *General Report*, 84, 117, 126, 127.

38. HRA, *General Report*, 148–51; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 8, 1956, p. 7B.

39. Holtz, "Report on Relocation of Residents," 13–14; Judith A. Martin and David A. Lanegran, *Where We Live: The Residential Districts of Minneapolis and St. Paul* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 50; Martin Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer: A Critical Analysis of Urban Renewal, 1949–1962* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964), 218–21. Writing while the urban renewal of the 1960s was still underway, Anderson (p. 219) was bitterly critical of its efforts, arguing that they were generally carried out "for the benefit of people who do not live in run-down areas."

40. Here and below, Holtz, "Report on Relocation of Residents," 19–22.

41. *Minneapolis Star*, Sept. 22, 1953, p. 1.

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*The photo on p. 303 is courtesy the Greater Minneapolis Convention and Visitors Association; all others are from the MHS collections. The images on p. 291 and 293 are by Charles J. Hibbard; p. 294 by George Luxton for the Minneapolis Journal; p. 295 by Charles Gibson; p. 297 by Lee Brothers; p. 298 and 300 by Minneapolis Star-Journal-Tribune; and p. 299 by Norton and Peel. Page 301 is a Jerome Liebling fine art photo; the quote is from Jerome Liebling:*

*The Minnesota Photos (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1997), 68.*



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