

The Ones We Left Behind

Pursuing history is a way to cope with loss—to reconnect with loved ones who have left us, with places to which we can't go home again. As soon as the New Orleans floodwaters began to recede this fall, people went back in boats and reached into murky waters not for their livelihoods but for their memories—photo albums, letters, family bibles. Their lives in ruins, they tried to salvage their links to the past.

History also girds us for losses yet to come, whose presence we already sense—daughters growing up before our eyes, parents aging, the corner store whose shelves look emptier each week. Change happens but memory lives on, history assures us. You won't be forgotten.

That was the premise behind the *Open House* exhibit: choose a single, ordinary house and tell the stories of everyone who lived within its walls. The exhibit is not about architecture. The house frames a set of stories about people, the sorts of people who often remain hidden in history or lumped into aggregates: “the immigrants,” “the working class.” We didn't know at the outset if anyone interesting had lived in this house. We didn't know if we would find enough information to add up to anything. But that was the point: *Every* house tells a story. *Every* story counts. We would pull out from the historical record people who seemed lost to time—partly to retrieve their stories and partly to prove that we could.

More than 50 families have lived

BENJAMIN FILENE



470 Hopkins Street, a three-story Victorian house built in 1888, as it looked in 1925 when it was a duplex

at 470/472 Hopkins Street from 1888 to the present, the number swelling as the single-family house became a duplex in 1907 and a triplex in 1946. The house, like the Railroad Island neighborhood it lies within, has for much of the last century been a place where people have come to get their first foothold in a new city or, at times, where people on the way down have held on for dear life. Scores of renters passed through, in some cases staying for decades, in others for a few months. We found an astonishing number of them. We have names of residents for each of the house's 118 years. We have documented their lives through death certificates, birth certificates, wedding certificates, census records, probate records, police records, and commitments to the mental hospital. We have hundreds of photographs of residents, dating back to the 1880s. We

interviewed 18 people who lived in the house and another dozen descendants of deceased residents. When we reached out, people reached back, a testament to human generosity and, perhaps, the innate need to remember. They shared family photo albums, home movies, and above all, their stories, some well burnished over the years, others jagged and raw, revealed for the first time.

Open House tells these stories, and it's a responsibility the exhibit team shouldered with pride. They deserve to be told. But not everyone we reached for came through. Some we left behind, and it pains me.

In some cases, we just couldn't bridge the distance of time. The gaps were unpredictable. Filomeno and Rose Cocciarella moved into the house 80 years ago, yet we have their photographs, census records, immigration certificates, and, thanks to their niece Michelina Frascione, gripping stories about them. John Orlando may well have had a gripping life story, too. He is listed in the city directory as having lived in the house from 1936 to 1940 and as the owner of “La Magica Excelsior Wash-

Benjamin Filene is senior exhibit developer at the Minnesota Historical Society. Open House, the exhibit he has chronicled in a series of Minnesota History essays, opens January 14 at the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul.

ing Fluid & Bleach Co.” But that is all we know about John Orlando. We found no photographs of him, and we couldn’t locate him in the 1930 census. Michelina, who lived in the duplex in the late 1930s, doesn’t remember him. Orlando’s absence from *Open House* only piques my curiosity. Did Italianizing the name of his company bring Orlando more business from the first- and second-generation immigrants in the neighborhood? And what made that washing fluid magical?

Other gaps suggest not quirky footnotes but key silences in our story. We managed to learn quite a bit about the Schumachers, the German immigrants who built the house in 1888. They received lengthy obituaries in the newspapers, owned stock that shows up in probate records, garnered tributes in the annual reports of German fraternal organizations, and gave speeches that appear in the minute books of professional pharmacy associations. But when the Schumachers moved out

in 1907 and turned the house into a duplex, they began renting to people decidedly more working class than themselves, people who tended not to penetrate the historical record. Six families passed through the house between 1907 and 1920. The heads of the households were Charles Bourne, a Hamms Brewery worker, and his wife, Margaret; Harry Levey, a postal clerk, and his wife, Eva; Doris Dahlstrom, a widowed hatmaker; James Doyle, a depot foreman, and his wife, Augusta; George De Silva, a railroad clerk, his wife, Daisy, and his mother, Margaret, a seamstress; and Frank Appleton, a watchman, and his wife, again Margaret. These people were highly transient, making it difficult to trace a trail to living descendants. We’re left with fragments from censuses and city directories—mainly job titles, ages, and countries of origin. These include some suggestive details. Charles Bourne’s death certificate lists “age and hard work” as contributing causes of death. “Mother tongue: Jewish,” says the 1920 census entry for Harry and Eva Levey, perhaps the only Jewish residents 470/472 Hopkins Street has ever had. How much of his life did Charles Bourne give to Hamms Brewery? What was it like to be Jewish in the predominantly German and Scandinavian East Side of St. Paul?

Daisy and George De Silva’s lives suggest a more haunting kind of silence. In searching for their death certificates, we found an unexpected De Silva. On March 4, 1916, June De Silva died of bronchial pneumonia and whooping cough. A newspaper obituary confirmed: “De Silva, Saturday, March 4, 1916, at the family residence, 470 Hopkins St. June Eloise, age 2 years 9 months, only child of Mr. and Mrs. George De Silva.” The sketchy evidence suggests lives dis-

Open House

A new exhibit at the Minnesota History Center

“If these walls could talk. . . .” They will in *Open House*, a major new exhibit opening at the Minnesota History Center on January 14.

Open House uses a single existing house in the Railroad Island neighborhood on St. Paul’s East Side as a window into the daily lives of people of the past. The exhibit tells the stories of the working-class families who lived in 470 Hopkins Street, from the first German immigrants through the Italians, African Americans, and now Hmong who succeeded them. This seemingly ordinary house opens up to reveal a host of human stories, bringing to light lives that once seemed lost to history.

Open House uncovers history at a personal level—the day-to-day rituals, joys, and tragedies that made up the lives of the people at 470 Hopkins Street.

- In the **parlor**, visitors run a magic lantern show, play with Victorian toys, and see why Martha’s piano lesson went awry.
- In the **kitchen**, visitors learn about 75 chickens, the war, and Michelina’s wedding day. (What’s that clucking?!)
- In the **living room**, visitors see the view out the window dissolve into scenes of Laos and the Thai refugee camps, visions from the journey Pang Toua’s family took to America.

Throughout, the stories are historically specific and real, but their reach is broad and timeless—stories of parents and children, neighbors and relatives, making a living and making a home, occupying a place and making it one’s own.

Open House visitors explore rooms representing 470 Hopkins in different eras. Visitors become detectives, piecing together the lives of the families who lived in the house. At once a familiar setting and surprising at every turn, the exhibit makes dramatic use of media. Sitting down at the dining room table triggers photos that appear in the dinner plates and a recording of Grace Tinucci’s memories of meeting her future in-laws at a big family dinner. Touching a silver-dollar jar launches home movies and the Krismers’ story of saving coins for their family vacations across Minnesota. *Open House* engages visitors in what can—and, sometimes, can’t—be recovered from the past.

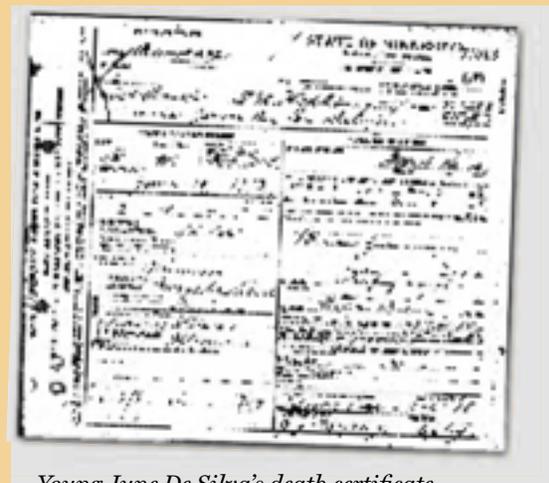
solving after this jolt. The De Silvas moved out by 1917, city directories show. In 1926 Daisy for the first time appears in the directory in her own right, listed as a music teacher. Women were not usually listed unless they were widowed. In 1927, though, both George and Daisy are listed, but at different addresses. Were they separated or, highly unusual, divorced? In 1928 George is listed as having moved to Chicago, Daisy as “relief organist” at the Venus motion-picture theater. George dies in 1931, at age 43. Daisy dies in 1975, at age 90, survived only by two nieces.

There was yet one more melancholy discovery. June De Silva’s grandmother Margaret died 30 years after her granddaughter. In the city’s records of wills and probate, we found Margaret’s probate record. A lifelong seamstress, she died at 81 with very few possessions. One was a cedar chest that held a box of cards and pictures, four aprons, one spring coat, two rayon slips, one cup and tray, several simple clothing items (“3 house dresses”), one bouquet of paper flowers, two hair nets, one crucifix, and a few items that take

one into the realm of memory: “child storybook,” “one small pillow,” “one quilt (toy).” Mementos from her own childhood? Or from a granddaughter’s that was cut short? Thirty years is a long time, but not too long to remember a girl who never saw her third June birthday.

Sometimes fragmentary evidence is further obscured by secrecy and confusion. One of “our” 470 Hopkins residents in 1920, age 10 at the time, shows up in that year’s probate court records: “Anthony A.—, Feeble-Minded.”¹ The document outlines why Anthony’s foster father, Eugene, who had “adopted him at 2½ years of age” was committing him to the Faribault State School and Hospital: “Cannot learn, talks indistinctly,” the handwritten form states. “Poor memory.” “Has to be watched.” The “defectiveness” had become apparent at “about 5 years of age.” “Was quality of school work below average?” the form asks. “Very Poor”; “still goes, 1st Grade.” “Institutional care imperative,” the document concludes.

Anthony was committed to the state institution. But the school’s records show that he was officially



Young June De Silva’s death certificate, with a transposed street address

“dropped” from the school in February 1921, the cause given as “Father took him on vacation, Dec. 8, 1920.” In the 1930 census, Anthony, now 20, is listed as living with Eugene and his wife, working as a car painter. Eugene died in 1951. His will states, “I make no provisions in this Last Will and Testament for my adopted son, Anthony.” Then there is a puzzling document from 1960, a “petition for discharge” regarding “Guardianship of Anthony A., Mentally Deficient.” This document, only two pages, states that “such person [is] not now requiring a guardian.”

At some point Anthony married and fathered two sons. He died at 88, his death certificate listing him as a freight handler. We reached one son on the phone who was friendly but not eager to meet. Eventually we tracked down Anthony’s nephews, the children of his stepsister. They had only vague recollections of a man who “was never around much” and “was kind of slow. . . . He was a nice guy, what little I remember of him.”²

An exhibit cannot handle this sort of story. To the exhibit team, Antho-

Music teacher and organist Daisy De Silva, date unknown. This is the only photo that surfaced of the De Silvas, residents from 1910 to 1916.



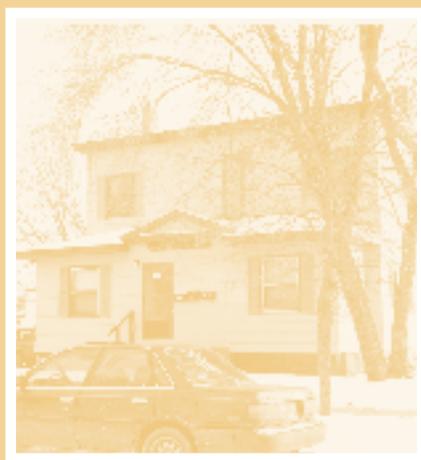
ny's story at first seemed an opportunity to explore changing notions of learning disabilities and adoption practices and how these issues played out in family dynamics. But the evidence was too sketchy and contradictory, the full story too obscured. Just as some stories don't belong on stage, some don't fit the scale of an exhibit. They need more sustained and intimate consideration.

One of the surprising difficulties in this historical detective business is that not all of the silences are from the distant past. City directories continue to be compiled today, but less thoroughly and without identifying occupations. Individual records from the federal census remain closed for 72 years after they are compiled. 470 Hopkins in the 1980s and '90s turns out to be more impenetrable than in the 1880s and '90s. We have names: Penny Meringdol (1979), V. Rodriguez (1982), Willie Newell (1984), Isaac M. and La Rue Willson (1987), W. M. Priestly (1987), K. Black (1987), Phillip C. Peltier (1988–90), George Perron (1988–91), Kathy Dyvedahl (1988–91), Anneilia Willis (1999–2000), La Xiong (1999), Thor Xiong (1999–2001), Ai Yang (2000), Richard Moua (2001), Lao Lor (2001). Likely this list includes the house's first Latino, African American, and Hmong residents. These people are probably still living, probably still in town, but we cannot reach them. Cold calls yield recorded messages about disconnected phones. Letters to forwarding addresses come back unopened, stamped in purple ink: "Undeliverable as addressed," "Attempted, Not Known."

A couple of times I came close. While I was manning a "memory

map" booth at the Farmer's Market on the East Side, someone approached me whom I didn't even know I was looking for: a former resident from the late 1980s. The girlfriend of resident Phillip Peltier, she herself did not appear in the city directories. She gave me her phone number and seemed excited to talk. But she never returned my calls. Another time, I did succeed in interviewing an early African American resident of the house. He told me that his partner, an American Indian woman who had lived there with him, would be happy to talk, too. On the phone she and I arranged to meet. After two canceled meetings, more than a dozen unreturned phone calls, and teasing accusations from my co-workers that I was stalking this poor woman, I had to accept that her voice, too, would not show up in this exhibit.

Sometimes timing is the thing. Eddie and Rosie Ackerman lived at 470 Hopkins for the entire 1970s, then both died in 1997 without leaving any descendants or, seemingly, any trace of their existence. June (Cramer) Mayer, a contemporary of



470 Hopkins, now a triplex covered with pink siding, 2002

the Ackermans and one of the most wonderful people we met, had lived in 470 Hopkins for more than 20 years. June moved to California, but we interviewed her when she was in town to visit her daughter, Diane Hegner. As we looked at Diane's photo albums, June told us she was preparing to move back to Minnesota and promised to return with photographs from her Hopkins Street days. Nearly a year later June told us that in packing she had indeed set aside a big envelope of photos to show us, but the envelope had been lost in the move.

At times a near miss reveals more than you want to know. Ferdinand Cheesebro lived in the house from 1972 to 1978. After a lot of digging around, exhibit developer Ayesha Shariff found a telephone listing for him on a computer database. She called and spoke to Cheesebro's wife, who said that he had been sick but we could come over. On a hot June day we drove to their house, across from the 3M plant in St. Paul's Dayton's Bluff neighborhood. It was unclear at first how to enter. Eventually we went around back and found a door wide open, next to a metal sign, "Beware of Dog," to which an "s" had been added by hand. The door led straight to the second floor, where we found no dogs but Ferdinand Cheesebro, sitting at a Formica kitchen countertop in a stained sleeveless white undershirt. There was a large, infected hole in his throat. He pressed a machine against it to talk, faintly, in a monotone. The effort was plainly exhausting.

Hoping to bring help, I went to the other end of the apartment to speak with his wife. She was three inches from the television, hunched in a chair, with her walker nearby. We had talked that morning, but she had no idea who I was or why I

was there. I went back to Ferdinand and Ayesha. We were eager to leave. What right did we have to intrude on this man's life to get stories for an exhibit? But he wanted to help us, struggling to answer questions amidst gurgling and wheezing between words. We couldn't use the recording equipment we had brought, but we took notes and tried to piece together the sentence fragments he was laboring to share: Was Irish and English, but second wife "full-blooded Italian." Had been a truck driver all his life, at Gopher Stamp & Die, then at Noble Industries.

Remembered the Fosters and the Ackermans. Fished with them at a Wisconsin cabin. Ackermans had no children but had a dog. 470 Hopkins was a nice place, but the woman who owned it couldn't keep it up. Toward the end of his time, new people were coming in but they didn't stay long. He had moved out to marry his first wife—"a big mistake." Marriage ended after six weeks. He was going to go to the doctor to try to fix up his throat. We thanked him profusely and said goodbye.

At that moment, as we left Ferdinand Cheesebro hunched over the table, struggling to breathe in his walkup apartment, his wife in front of the TV in the other room, the humanity of history seemed almost unbearable. Cheesebro was alive, in front of us, full of memories, but only bits and pieces of his story could be told. Here, the link to the past—between memory and audience, event and anecdote—had been broken. We would never know his full story.

Despite our best efforts, then, *Open House* does not tell the stories of all 50 families who made 470/472 Hopkins Street their home.



Eddie and Rosie Ackerman, 1970, smiling as if to say, "See, we were here all along."

What about the ones we left behind? Did we fail them? There are perhaps a few glimmers of hope to offer. For starters, history is a work in progress. Maybe other historians will one day fill the gaps we could not. No doubt we left some stones unturned. Just a few weeks ago, Diane Hegner gave me a photograph of a smiling Eddie and Rosie Ackerman, alive and well in 1970. "See, we were here all along," their faces seemed to say. Every 10 years, the government releases another set of U.S. census records, a precision tool that needs 72 years of clearance to operate. Information on V. Rodriguez and W. M. Priestly will be easier to come by in 2060 than now. Will anyone look?

There are, of course, other realms of memory than the historical. Photographs or no photographs, Diane Hegner and her mother tell fond stories of drinking, fighting, and partying with the Ackermans. John Orlando may live on in family lore, safely beyond the historical record, with inside jokes about La Magica Excelsior Washing Fluid.

But perhaps the message isn't as much for the people slipping away into the past as for those of us slip-

ping along into the future. *Open House* shows that you *can* reach back, but there are limits. For every Michelina Frascone whose memories bring to life a world that seemed lost, there is an Anthony A. whose story dissolves into dust. The past is neither a foreign country nor just around the bend. The backwards glance is powerful but fleeting and, necessarily, incomplete. Coping with loss means hanging on fiercely to the memory of what is disappearing, claiming it, sheltering it, memorializing it—and letting go. □

Notes

1. I am using fictitious names in telling the story of "Anthony."
2. Interview with the author, Nov. 12, 2002.

The photo on p. 337 is courtesy Betty Nadeau; p. 339, courtesy Diane Hegner. All others, including p. 338 by Eric Mortenson/MHS, are in MHS collections.



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