

Creating a Crossroads: At the Intersections of Labor and Immigration History

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For hundreds of years, Dakota people lived in the area that would become St. Paul. They migrated with the seasons, but they considered several sites to be spiritual centers, and they buried their ancestors on the cliffs overlooking the Mississippi River. As Euro-American settlement grew in St. Paul and throughout the region, Dakota people became the victims of ethnic cleansing, leading to the US-Dakota War of 1862 in southern Minnesota. In its aftermath, the East Side became an immigrant working-class community. And it continues to play this role today.

Beginning in the 1850s, Swedish immigrants to St. Paul built a DIY community (“Swede Hollow”), which was home to more than one thousand people by 1880. Over the second half of the nineteenth century, as the city and the East Side developed, second- and third-generation Swedish Americans learned skilled trades, organized into unions, founded churches, and moved out of the hollow and up (geographically and socially) into other parts of this neighborhood. They were replaced in the late nineteenth century by Italians, who were in turn replaced by Mexicans in the early twentieth century. In the 1950s, the city government—which had turned a blind eye to this site of initial settlement for a century—declared it to be a “slum,” ordered everyone out, and burned all the buildings to the ground. Now an urban park, “Swede Hollow” continues to function as a signifier of the neighborhood’s immigrant roots.

Others—Irish, Germans, Poles, and Serbs—created pockets of extended families, with churches and cultural and labor organizations in other parts of the East Side. Entrepreneurs recognized the resources of the labor force and located major manufacturing operations—Hamm’s Brewery, Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing (“3M”), Seeger Refrigerator (later Whirlpool), American Hoist and Derrick—along Arcade Street. At their peak, they employed more than fifteen thousand blue-collar workers, who organized into unions, raised their wages and benefits, and became homeowners and the social and political core of the neighborhood.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, these employers closed and moved, creating an economic and social crisis for the neighborhood's white ethnics, many of whom moved away. Their homes, halls, and churches became available for newcomers, the thousands and thousands of southeast Asians (Hmong, Cambodian, Lao, Karen), east Africans (Eritrean, Amhara, Oromo, Somali), and Central Americans (Mexicans, Salvadorans) who were immigrating to St. Paul, seeking safety, homes, jobs, and an education for their children. They have found employment in hospitals, nursing homes, janitorial services, and the personal care industry. Like their predecessors, they struggle to figure out how to succeed, how to build a foundation for their children, and how to navigate the relationships between their cultures and those of the people and the city around them.

In 2013, Beth Cleary and I, Macalester College professors who have lived on the East Side for twenty years, founded the East Side Freedom Library (ESFL), housed in the historic Carnegie Library building which had served the neighborhood as a public library since 1917. We set out to collect resources (books, visual art, music, film, material objects) and curate programs (mentoring students, organizing concerts, plays, book discussions, films, oral history projects, community discussions) which would (1) provide neighborhood residents with a context within which they could situate their own experiences; (2) structure and facilitate conversations that would build bridges across generations and between siloed communities; and (3) encourage community members to value their own and each other's histories, cultures, and challenges. Our mission is to inspire solidarity, advocate for justice, and work toward equity for all.

Entirely through donations, ESFL has built a focused collection of resources—eighteen thousand books, plus visual art, music, and material objects—that tell the stories of immigrants, workers, people of color, and movements for social justice. ESFL is also in partnership with the Hmong Archives, the most extensive collection of Hmong documentary materials in the world. ESFL staff and collaborators use these resources to mentor more than one hundred sixth- to twelfth-grade students in History Day projects each year. These resources also serve as touchstones for our programs. ESFL hosts more than one hundred events and programs annually. From poetry to photography, music to ceramics, theater to dance, and memoir to science fiction, our audiences have engaged a wide range of stories and storytellers from their own and each other's communities. More than twelve thousand people have attended our events. These programs have a strong discussion component, and we have been delighted by the willingness of diverse participants to engage in substantial, even difficult, conversations with each other. ■

PETER RACHLEFF taught labor and immigration history at Macalester College from 1982 to 2014. He served on LAWCHA's Executive Board in the early 2000s and was president of the Working Class Studies Association in 2006–7. For further information on the library, please contact info@eastsidefreedomlibrary.org.