

May 9, 1898 St. Croix Avenue and Lake Avenue fire
Submitted by Karen Alpert Entous
August 2, 2019.

Abbe Akir Coran Family and the St. Croix Neighborhood Fire in 1898

My maternal great grandfather Abbe Akir Coran, a tailor and Hebrew teacher arrived in Duluth, Minnesota in the month of June 1898 from Lithuania. He stayed with his sister Jennie Coran Kenner and her husband's family Gustav Kenner (Yenta Zelda Coran Kenner and Elyakim Getsel Kenner) until the rest of his family arrived in 1899 and 1900. Gustav had arrived seven years earlier and became a fish dealer in the canal district. He lived near the aerial bridge and light house at 422 St. Croix Avenue in 1900.

There was always a supply of Lake Superior white fish for dinner and a garden full of fresh vegetables at the Kenner household. Along with their growing busy family, Elijah, Benjamin, Abe, Harry, Sarah, Rose, and Israel, were observant Orthodox Litvak Jews. Their son Elijah was considered a scholar and loved learning and reading Hebrew books. He had a collection of books, including a set of Jewish Encyclopedias when he was married.

The Kenner family along with many others, helped newcomers settle into Duluth. The family was just recovering from a massive fire that had destroyed much of their neighborhood in 1898. At least 50 other Jewish families were affected by the fire.

Fire Warden Laws had only been in place since 1894 and the appointed city Fire Warden was expected to enforce them. Managing forest fires that were started by camp fires, hunters, clearing brush, protecting the logging and railroad industry was one thing, but fighting fires in a city was another matter. They were limited by the weather conditions, getting to the scene quickly, the rate that the fire burned, three fire engines, and the pressure of the water.

After the fire there was concern and discussions about rebuilding certain areas on the east side of St. Croix Avenue. Insurance rates would be high on wooden buildings. Bricks were an option, but northeast storms would not support the weight of the cribs. A breakwater would have to be built first at great expense. However, on the west side of St. Croix Avenue, Brick buildings would be ideal and more profitable.

Here is a report from a remarkable journalist who wrote about the May 9, 1898 St. Croix and Lake Avenues fire that displaced 2,000 people. Unfortunately I do not know the name, if I did, I would give this person credit for describing the fire scene and chaos that pursued.

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1898-5-9 About Fifty Ramshackle Buildings Burned and Many Poor Families Destitute.

The fire fiend got in its work on Lake Avenue yesterday afternoon and before the flames were gotten under control it is estimated that about \$100,000 damage was done. The fire was the largest that Duluth has experienced in years. A row of wooden buildings on the east side of Lake Avenue on the lower side of the viaduct were destroyed. From No. 321 to No. 378, inclusive, the fire burned its way and for a time bid fair to take most of the south side of the street in its embrace. In addition to the damage on Lake Avenue, a large number of small shacks in the rear of the burned store buildings and on St. Croix Avenue

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were burned. Detective Troyer, who is well acquainted with that part of the city estimates that as a result of the fire, 1,000 to 1,500 or 2,000 people were homeless last night. In some instances two and three families were crowded in one shack and beside the shacks, the upstairs parts of the saloons, stores and of several tenement houses on St. Croix Avenue were occupied by one or two families each.

There were many pathetic scenes everywhere. Some people-and most of those that lived in the burned district are of the poorer working class-had lost their all, scarcely saving what they had on. The men were usually occupied in helping one another or cursing their luck, while the women gave vent to their grief in floods of tears. Mothers were seen making sure that all their little ones were safe and after assuring themselves of this they seemed to get some comfort. One woman, Mrs. Samuel Jones, whose husband is in Minneapolis, was found in a very weak condition with her 8-days-old baby in her arms. Detective Troyer, who found her sitting on a vacant lot across from the fire, had an ambulance called and the sick woman was taken to St. Mary's hospital. Mrs. Jones had been living with Mrs. O'Connor over Thomas Trevillon's store.

Mrs. John Gustafson, who had given birth to a child 21 hours before the fire, sprang from her bed when she realized the danger that threatened and ran out with her baby to take refuge in the house of a neighbor. She was in a fainting condition when the ambulance was called. She was taken to St. Luke's hospital.

It is claimed by some that the fire originated from a lighted cigar stub thrown carelessly down a crack in the sidewalk. Others say that some small boys had a playhouse under the sidewalk and the fire was started by lighted matches. However, eye witnesses say it started under the sidewalk in front of Capt. Savage's place. One man that claimed to have seen the fire start said that a little smoke was noticed coming u through the cracks in the sidewalk but nobody paid much attention to it. "I walked past," continued the man, "never thinking of fire but had proceeded scarcely 25 yards when I heard a cry and looking around found that the flames were leaping up the front of the buildings and the three or four neighboring stores seemed to be all on fire at once. It was the quickest starting fire that I ever saw. From that on, the flames spread along the roofs and the buildings burned like tinder. When the fire department arrived three or four buildings had already been consumed."

The day was a perfect one for the progress of a fire. The air was dry and a stiff wind blew from the southwest making the flames spread north and east. With this wind prevailing and the flimsy structures on fire, the firemen had a hard time of it to make any impression with the water. The men working on St. Croix Avenue worked with the dense smoke and the flames blowing directly in their faces and those at work on Lake Avenue could make but little progress at first. When the fire reached 326 Lake Avenue, the work of the firemen for the first time began to tell and this building was kept from completely burning down. The building next to it, The Riding Sun hotel was only scorched but while the flames were approaching it some very exciting scenes occurred. As usual bed clothes were carried down stairs and mirrors thrown out of the window.

Meanwhile, the fire was stretching out its arms in the other direction, although on account of the direction of the wind. It did not spread so fast. Ex-Alderman Jimmy Dingwall's saloon and lodging house was soon wiped out but the stock if liquors was saved. Alderman Tom Trevilion's store followed soon after Mr. Dingwall's place but Mr. Trevilion having had a little warning managed to save considerable of

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his stock. He lost \$2,000 worth, however, and has only \$700 insurance on it. In this direction the fire was stopped at 378 Lake Avenue.

All this time the fire was making great headway toward the lake and on St. Croix Avenue a barn belonging to the Leidel estate burned as well as two tenement houses that were on the edge of the lake.

It was reported that one woman in dire haste to get out of one of these tenements jumped from her back window in the lake which the house overhung. She miscalculated the depth, it is said, and came near drowning, but was gotten out and resuscitated. Inquiry failed to develop who the woman was and it is believed that the report was a mere fire story.

Lake Avenue, most of St. Croix Avenue and the large vacant space across from the fire on Lake Avenue slip were packed with people and it is estimated that from 10,000 to 20,000 saw the fire. The remarks that passed between the members of this crowd were very amusing. Everybody suggested to everybody else that "This is a bad fire" or sometimes in place of this came the query, "Bad-ain't it?" Groups gathered in every direction and discussed Chief Black's methods of fighting the fire pointing out what should have been done at such and such a time. When a homeless family passed, expressions of pity and sympathy were heard from the crowd and then the attention of the crowd would be turned to the fire again.

It was generally wondered at that in such a quick fire no loss of life should be reported. There were one or two cases where people searched widely about in search of their children. One mother had given two of her children up for lost when one of them appeared with his fist dug in his eyes. The way that mother snatched her boy to her showed a relief as earnest as its demonstration was humorous. In a few minutes the other missing child was found and another scene ensued. No case of any person missing had been reported to the police.

Some of the dwellers in the burned section kept a horse or cow and a number of these animals were destroyed. A Hebrew teacher is reported to have had destroyed a valuable library. It contained many books in the Hebrew language that it is said cannot be replaced for a money consideration as the have been many years out of print.

Among the people that suffered heaviest were some 50 families of Jews. The Jews at the time of the fire were holding a joint meeting of their congregations in Turner hall praying for victory for the American arms in the war with Spain. As their buildings were deserted nothing was saved either from their stores or dwellings.

Many acts of heroism were performed by the firemen. No lives were lost so far as known but several persons, two of them children, were reported missing early.

Assistant Chief Boynton of the fire department was injured as a result of his carriage overturning as he neared the fire. This accident was due to his trying to avoid running over some people that got in the way. His head was bleeding freely as the result of a severe scalp wound but he stuck to his post during the fire.

The southerly end of the tenderloin district was destroyed and man of the inmates of these houses had narrow escapes with their lives. One of the scenes in the alley between Lake and St. Croix Avenues was

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that a woman smoking a cigarette and playing on piano that had been moved in the street. She had to be removed from danger by force. When the fire broke over toward St. Croix Avenue the people on the thoroughfare began moving about their effects toward the lake shore, and many houses were emptied to what was supposed to be a place of safety. In spite of their efforts the goods were destroyed by blazing embers that fell so fast and so thick that men could not stand the work of further removal.

A Jew named Jake Mattson lost \$800 in gold by the fire. Most of the inhabitants of the district hoarded their money in the house and their losses are complete.

Hundreds of homeless people huddled about the blazing squares without a rag of clothing other than what they had on.

The work of relief began at once. All the charitable organizations in the city were engaged. Last night in caring for the homeless. Hacks, the patrol wagons and other vehicles are carrying away the women and children. Food and clothing are distributing at the Bethel. Sick people were carried to the hospitals.

The fire gained headway in a manner that was almost miraculous. The alarm was turned in a few minutes before 2 o'clock, and by the time the first of the fire apparatus reached the scene the flames had spread from the sidewalk to the saloon occupied by Smith & Savage, and from there to the adjoining structures on each side and in the rear. Second and third alarms were quickly turned in. Quite a little difficulty was experienced in getting water and before the work of stopping the flames had fairly started they had spread for fully 50 feet each way from the starting point.

It was seen that it would be an impossibility to save the burning buildings in the center of the block, and the firemen directed their efforts toward stopping the course of the flames. At the north end of the block the men made a stand at the Rising Sun hotel and all the available streams of water were poured over the building occupied by Charles Kannara, adjoining it on the south.

In spite of all efforts, it seemed that the flames could not be controlled, and they had reached the roof of the hotel when assistance came in the form of an additional stream of water from the tug Lyon, which had anchored in the slip across Lake Avenue and run out a line of hose. A few minute later the flames at that corner of the district were under control.

At the south end of the block the men under Second Assistant Chief Boynton were not so successful in efforts to subdue the flames. Their first stand was made to the north of the building occupied by James Dingwall, but the fire proved too fierce for them, and they were driven back repeatedly until they reached the Empire hotel at 378 Lake avenue south. There a small building and a vacant space gave them a chance to fight the flames from the front and side, and they succeeded in stopping the fire fiend.

On St. Croix Avenue the flames were subdued on lines that were almost parallel with the final stands that had been made by the firemen on Lake Avenue. While the buildings on St. Croix Avenue were not so large as those on Lake Avenue, they were more numerous and as dry as tinder, and burned like powder, and it was here that the people suffered most, for the flames spread so rapidly that but few of them had time to save even their small personal effects.

At the north end of the block to one story building occupied by H. Hill's grocery store formed a fort for the firemen and the flames were stopped there, but not until the building had suffered considerable

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damage. At the south end of the block the fire was gotten under control after it had partly destroyed a tenement house, 362 St. Croix Avenue, owned by Mayor Truelsen. The fire burned fiercely for more than two hours, and it was not until after 5 o'clock that it was fully under control, and even after that the firemen remained and poured water on the burning ruins.

The loss will be a heavy one, for the reason that insurance rates were so high in that district that but little of the property was insured, and the spread of the fire was so rapid that but few of the people had time to save their property.

On Lake Avenue the buildings burned included seven saloons, several restaurants and stores and a few vacant houses. The saloons burned were owned by James Dingwall, Smith & Savage. William Poirier, Davidson & Mattson, Charles Hill, Mike Lati and August Signer. Aside from a few liquors saved, the loss at each of the saloons was total and as far as could be learned, a little or no insurance was carried. The candy store of Maggie Davidson was destroyed with its contents, and no insurance.

James Dingwall, at 361 and 366 Lake Avenue, lost almost everything in his boarding house and saloon. He said last night that his loss would reach \$2,000, and that he had no insurance.

Thomas Trevillion carried but \$750 insurance on his \$6,000 stock of groceries, and he saved but a small part of his stock.

Among the other losses where there was no insurance were those of the Pacific restaurant, Stevenson's bakery, the Klondike restaurant, Stencil's barber shop, S. G. Christopher, jewelry store and boarding house; **Louis Goldberg, clothing**; Jennie Adams, restaurant; Mrs. Joseph Burns, residence and store building; Sing Wing, Chinese laundry; Henry Cheeser, meat market, and Charles Kannara, cigar store and factory.

In all the above instances the loss was total, excepting that some saved a few personal effects and small trinkets. Three or four vacant store buildings were destroyed. One of these was owned by Charles Banks, and was not insured. Two belonged to the Liedels, and were not insured. The building occupied by James Dingwall was also owned by the Lindels and on this they carried \$500 insurance in the Merchants of New Jersey. The building at 340 Lake Avenue was owned by Charles Ruella, and was insured for \$500 in the Queen and \$500 in the British America. The vacant building at 324 Lake Avenue, formerly occupied by M. Timlin and insured by him, carried \$1000 in the Norwich union.

The Rising Sun hotel owned by William Lawrence, was only slightly damaged, but the contents suffered from water to quite an extent. The loss there is fully covered, as Mr. Lawrence carried \$3,000 distributed as follows: \$500 in the Insurance Company of North America, \$500 in the Philadelphia Underwriters, \$1000 in the Queen, \$500 in the Niagara, and \$500 in the Merchants of New Jersey.

On St. Croix Avenue and St. Croix alley the loss falls heaviest on Mrs. Brown, Mayor Truelsen, Johnson Brothers, Capt. Joe Lloyd, L. McLain, Charles Banks, Morris Deneke and H. Hill. As far as could be learned none of them carried insurance. Mrs. Brown owned and occupied one of the best residences in the burned district, and lost everything. Three of the four buildings owned by Mayor Truelsen were destroyed, and the fourth was damaged to such an extent that it is almost a total loss. Johnson Brothers owned a grocery store on St. Croix, and saved but a small part of their stock. Capt. Lloyd L. McLain and Charles Banks lost several small buildings.

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In addition to the above, there were fully 20 small shacks along St. Croix Avenue and alley, occupied by Poles and Jews that were wiped out of existence. The ground on which they stood is almost all owned by the Western Land association, but has been leased out in small lots, and it was impossible to find the owners of the buildings that had been erected. In most instances they were mere shacks, but they served as homes for the people, who not only lost their homes, but in many cases all their belongings. It was rumored that one Jewish family had left a small boy locked up in its home and that the boy had been burned, but a diligent search among the people failed to confirm the report.

In many instances the flames spread so rapidly that people were compelled to abandon their belongings even after they had been taken out of the houses. In one case a lot of furniture had been piled on a wagon and as it was being hauled away it caught fire and had to be thrown off and was burned. Bed clothing caught fire as the owners were carrying it out of their homes and had to be thrown back in the flames.

Thieves were abroad during the fire and the police received several reports that good had been stolen. In the midst of the fire two men in row boats rowed to a pile of goods that had been piled up near the water's edge. The goods were quickly placed in the boats, the people on shore not interfering as they supposed the stuff belonged to the men and the men rowed away. A few moments later the owners appeared but the men were out of sight and no trace of them could be found.

Two or three of the firemen were slightly injured but none seriously. A Mrs. Christenson who lived on St. Croix Avenue, was removed to St. Luke's hospital suffering from hysteria. She had given birth to a baby but a day or two before. There were a number of narrow escapes from electric wires which burned through and fell to the ground but nobody was hurt and the danger was quickly removed by the linemen cutting the wires.

The scene of the fire last night was a desolate one. The electric light current had been destroyed and the only light came from the burning embers in the midst of the ruins. Between 8 and 9 o'clock a few drops of rain fell and it was believed for a time that the burning ruins would be quenched in that way but the hopes were not realized and until a late hour this morning the firemen were busy throwing streams of water on the ruins. Once or twice the flames broke out fiercely but were subdued. Thousands of people visited the ruins after the supper hour but there was little to see. The people that had saved their belongings were engaged in carting them away to a place of safety and others that had lost their all stood about in groups talking of the fire.

All possible efforts to help the people that had been burned out were made last night by the police department and charitably inclined citizens. A number were cared for at the Bethel and several carried their goods to Turner hall and passed the night there. Many had friends in the Jewish settlement on the hill near Fourth avenue east and spent the night there and others moved their belongings to vacant rooms in various parts of the city. Mayor Truelsen issued instructions to the police to provide a place for all that applied but there were only a few that asked help from the police.

The Bethel had assumed the work of providing for those that lost all their belongings and it is asked that everybody that had bedding or clothes of any description take them to the Bethel and they will be distributed among the people from there.

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A number of complaints were heard last night in connection with the fighting of the fire. Many people were heard to say that the fire should have been stopped at the south end of the block before it reached the Dingwall house. Ex-Alderman Trevillon in speaking of the matter said: "I am fully convinced that that fire should have been stopped before it reached the Dingwall house and had the men been properly directed it could have been done. There was a vacant lot just north of Dingwall's place and had the firemen gone in there and fought the fire from the side it could have been stopped. It was useless to fight it from the front for it was impossible to save anything in the middle of the block but the men persisted in remaining in the street and while they threw streams of water there the fire was eating its way along behind and before it was discovered had gained such a headway that it could not be controlled until it had burned at least our buildings that should have been saved."

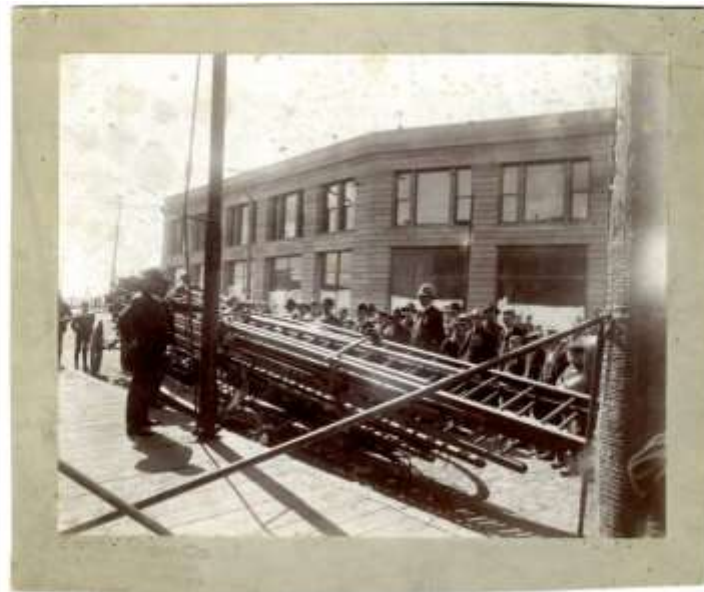
Chief Black did not take kindly to the remarks made by ex-Alderman Trevillon. When seen he said: "I think we made a very fair showing against this fire, although it is undoubtedly a bad one. I did not have hose and did not have men to fight such a blaze. I cannot understand how it obtained the headway that it did before we reached it. It hardly seems possible that an immediate alarm was turned in after the discovery for we made a quick run and when we reached the middle of the district that is now burned at least five of the fronts were blazing fiercely and the flames were spreading to the sides and to the rear at a rapid rate.

Practically speaking we had only the streams from the three engines to fight with for the pressure was poor and the other streams from the hydrants would have been absolutely useless without the engine streams. We fought the fire to the best of our ability."

The telephone wires were knocked down on Lake Avenue yesterday during the fire, and communication was cut off with the Singer tug office and other places in that part of town near the canal. The tug company established a temporary office on the Northwestern coal dock. It is expected that the wires will be working as usual today.

Mrs. P. H. Oswald (Clara), president of the Ladies Hebrew Aid society, was active yesterday afternoon in directing relief and arranging for further assistance in connection with the other relief societies.

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1898-09-07

Date Created:

Description:

At the intersection of Lake Avenue and Superior Street this fire equipment collided with a streetcar. One fireman, Archie Finlayson, was killed, and the streetcar driver was charged with failure to give right of way. The two-story building in the background is the Freimuth's store under construction.

Contributing Institution:

University of Minnesota Duluth, Kathryn A. Martin Library, Northeast Minnesota Historical Collections

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Mayor Henry Truelsen

Title:

Portrait of Henry Truelsen, Mayor 1896-1900, Duluth, Minnesota

Creator:

[Ericson, David](#)

Description:

Born on Oct. 20, 1844 in Schleswig, a Danish territory, Henry Truelsen worked in a variety of trades before entering political life. As president of the Duluth Board of Public Works, he led a battle for public ownership of the city's water supply at a reasonable price. This role contributed to his populist candidacy for Duluth mayor and was referenced in a plaque affixed to the portrait's frame which read "Henry Truelsen, mayor of Duluth, 1896-1900. Through whose untiring efforts Duluth obtained its water and gas plant. Presented to the city by Thomas A. Merritt. The portrait was painted by David Ericson (1869-1946), a renowned portrait and landscape artist who lived in Duluth. In 1910 Ericson was commissioned to travel to Zenith, North Dakota, Truelsen's new home, to paint the mayoral portrait. Truelsen died on Dec. 4, 1931, in Los Angeles, California.

Date Created:

1910

Source: Minnesota Reflections

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1897 The Kenner Family

<http://www.garon.us/asafe/gphoto1897.html>

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I have included these photos because I feel it is a good example of a wooden structure home that was built during this time period. I am not sure of the address.

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Jeannette Zelda Kenner (1905-1983)

This wooden structure is the same as the one above.

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1903 Coran family

<http://www.garon.us/asafe/Abraham%20Coran.html>

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Photo below:

Photo taken by Karen Alpert Entous in 2011.

St. Croix Station 351 Canal Park Dr, Duluth, MN 55802

St. Croix Station along Canal Park Drive was formerly the stable for Duluth's mounted police detachment.



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Contributing Organization:

[University of Minnesota Duluth, Kathryn A. Martin Library, Northeast Minnesota Historical Collections](#)

Title:

St. Croix Avenue, Duluth, Minnesota

Creator:

[Gilbert, Henry W.](#)

Contributor:

[Gilbert Studio \(Duluth, Minnesota\)](#)

Description:

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St. Croix Avenue was parallel to South Lake Avenue. St. Croix Avenue was changed to South First Avenue East in 1912. This area has evolved over the decades. It was a neighborhood to various ethnic enclaves including Finnish and Jewish communities. It served people in transit in its many boarding houses. In 1885 a group of Jews living in the vicinity of St. Croix Avenue organized an Orthodox congregation. They bought a small house on St. Croix, converted it into a synagogue, and held services there for a few years. The Cleveland school was at St. Croix and Buchanan Street. The area became a red light district followed by removal of housing in the 1940s and 1950s followed by light industrial businesses taking root.

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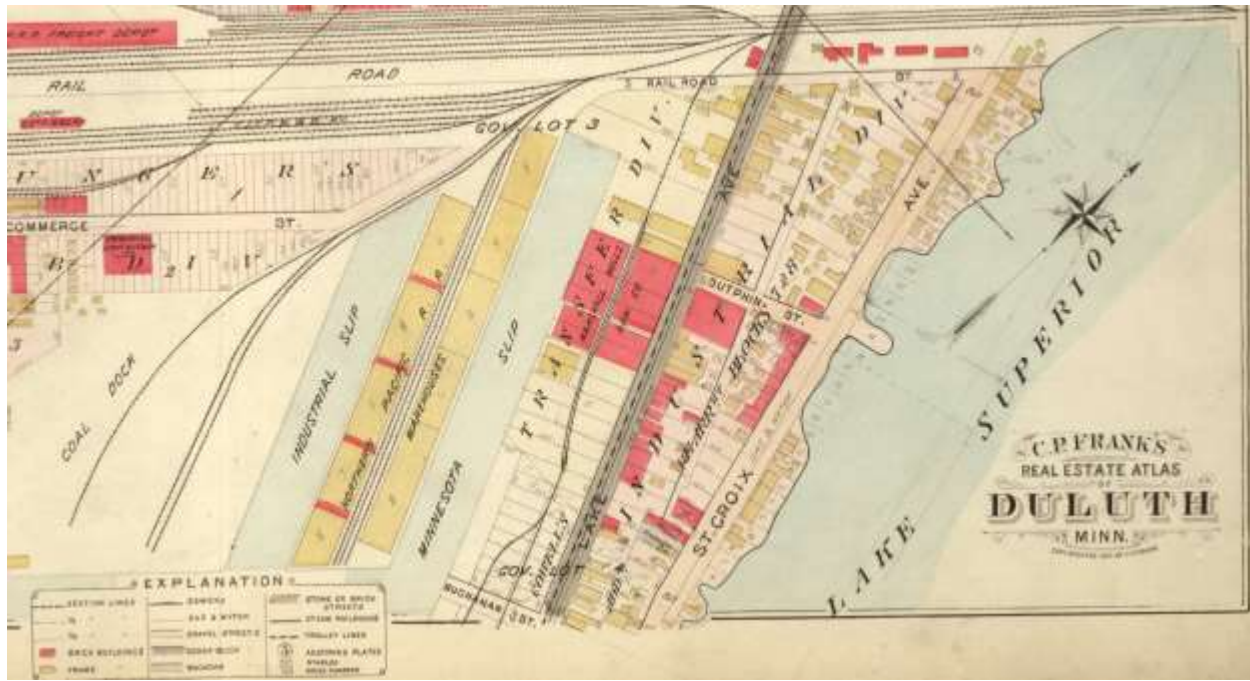
Photo below:

Photo taken by Karen Alpert Entous in 2011.

525 S. Lake Avenue Pauluci Building and beginning of Aerial Bridge.



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Source: Minnesota Reflections.

In 1897 Benjamin Kenner lived at 364 St. Croix Avenue

In 1897 Gustav Kenner lived at 328 Croix Avenue.

In 1900 Gustav Kenner lived at 422 St. Croix Avenue.