

Remembering Henry “Hank” Gehring

by Steve Trimble, Forum staff

Last month, when I wrote about Dayton's Bluff a century ago, there was an item about the death of a local baseball player named Henry Gehring. This month I wanted to find out more about the former neighborhood resident. He appears in on-line baseball lists and while they give a lot of statistics, there isn't much biographical information.

But then I discovered that Rex Hamann, a Minnesota baseball historian, had written an article on Gehring, describing him as “well known for steadiness on the hill, an even-tempered demeanor, and prowess with the stick” and “leaving a distinctive mark or two upon baseball history.” I have borrowed heavily from his work; however, I was able to ferret out some additional information.

Henry, who was born in St. Paul on January 24, 1881, was the eighth of nine children. His parents, John and Annie Meier Gehring, were both Swiss immigrants who arrived in the United States around 1879. His father was listed in one source as a shoemaker and in others as a laborer.

John died when Henry was around eight years old, since the 1890-91 city directory listed Annie Gehring as his widow living at 297 East Lawson. I went looking for the house, driving west from Payne, but before I reached the house I ran into the I-35 freeway barrier.

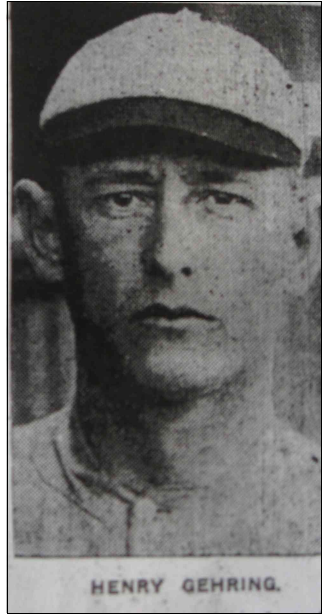


Photo courtesy of St. Paul Dispatch, April 18, 1912

I found a mention of Gehring from when he was 16 in the *St. Paul Globe* of April 30, 1897: “The Trout Brooks have organized for the season, and would like a game with any club whose members are under the age of 14 years... Send all challenges to Henry Gehring, 297 Lawson Street; will play only on Saturdays.”

Hank developed his skills on local amateur clubs. After playing for a St. Paul clothier's team, he joined the St. Paul Saints for five games at the end of the 1901 season. According to Hamann, the 20-year-old Gehring was known as a “junk-balling spitball pitcher” who was also a fine batter.

He moved around, and played for the Winnipeg Maroons in 1902, compiling a win-loss record of 10-8 and had a .296 batting average. Gehring next suited up as an outfielder and pitcher for the Duluth Cardinals in 1904 and ended up with a 13-2 record including a no-hitter.

Henry started showing up in the St. Paul City Directories and was listed as a ball player. On February 5, 1903 he married Bertha “Birdie” Horman.

According to the 1904 city directory they lived at the East Lawson home. A little over a year later the *St. Paul Globe* printed a notice of birth of a daughter, Florence, although the paper mistakenly said the couple had a son. Florence was born at home and attended by Mrs. B. Fehr, a midwife.

Henry continued to jump from club to club. In 1905 he was with Wichita and won at least 30 games, which was part of the reason he earned a spot on the Minor League Roll of Honor in 1952. The local boy returned to the Twin Cities in 1906, as part of the Minneapolis Millers where he was a pitcher and outfielder. His record was 12-11 with 20 complete games and three shutouts.

He and his wife also moved their residence a few times. By 1906 they were at 852 East 7th Street. The next year found them at 394 Eichenwald. In 1908 and for several years after, they dwelt at 739 Conway Street.

Gehring spent spring training with the Millers in 1907, but switched the Des Moines Champs. By mid-July he was called up by the struggling Washington Senators. He had a fine earned run average for the major league team but with little offensive support, ended up with three wins and seven losses. He had eight complete games and only gave up one home run. Washington brought him back again in 1908, but in only three appearances and five innings of work, ended up with no wins and one loss. His major-league career was over.

Henry returned home as a member of the St. Paul Saints in 1908 and won 12 battles, losing 14 for a team that had its worst record ever. He was still a threat at the plate, hitting .282. His performance slipped a bit the next year, winning 18 but losing 20. It was Gehring's last season for his hometown team as he went across the river to have a somewhat lackluster season in Minneapolis.

The Kansas City Blues picked up Gehring in 1912 and he was active in their spring camp but was not with the traveling squad for a late exhibition game. Then, in April, 1912, Gehring fell ill in a Kansas City hotel. A St. Paul *Pioneer Press* headline on April 17 read “Death Threatens Him.” A short notice said that he had experienced four convulsions and that his chance for recovery was “very slight.”

Gehring was suffering uremic poisoning caused by kidney problems. He lingered on for a day in critical condition as his wife Bertha rushed to Kansas City on a train, arriving in time to be with Henry when he passed away at the hospital at 1:30 am on April 18.

Hank's body was brought back to St. Paul where services were held at the German Reformed Church at Reaney and Forest. A few weeks later, the St. Paul Saints and the visiting Kansas City Blues agreed to the scheduled a “Henry Gehring Benefit Game” and dedicated the entire Lexington Park gate proceeds to his widow and daughter. Two thousand people – the largest gate that year – showed up, and raised \$1,500 (around \$30,000 today) for the family.

However, the Hanks story isn't over yet. His remains rest on a hillside in Forest Lawn Cemetery and the site has a flower pot marked Gehring. But there is no headstone with his name, dates or information. Writer Rex Hamann and I will be meeting at his grave on the 100th anniversary of Gehring's death, planting some flowers and chatting about a memorable East Sider.

We are also hoping to raise money to purchase a headstone for a man who the local sports writer described as “While never a flashy player, Hank Gehring had a fascinating career in professional baseball... he made a substantial mark on his profession, the sportsman's class he showed in 11 seasons as a professional ballplayer put him in a distinctive class of his own.”



Photo by Jessica Jones

From Laos to Dayton's Bluff: meet Phonephaly

by Lillian Ezenagu, Volunteer, Minnesota Literacy Council
Arlington Hills Learning Center

First in a series of stories about recent immigrants to Dayton's Bluff, written by teachers and volunteers at the Minnesota Literacy Council.

In February 2010, a petite Laotian woman named Phonephaly Soundala Khamvan set foot in St. Paul for the first time. She was a young bride – just married to Laotian immigrant-turned U.S. citizen, Matthew Khamvan, who had lived in St. Paul since 1985. Phonephaly knew little of American culture and very little of the English language.

Today, Phonephaly (pronounced Pohn-pah-lee) has nearly completed her Intermediate English class at the Minnesota Literacy Council's learning center in the Arlington Hills Lutheran Church on St. Paul's East Side, where adult students from around the world learn English skills that they need for jobs.

“Like so many new immigrants, Phonephaly takes learning English very seriously – and it shows,” says her teacher (and fellow Dayton's Bluff resident), Jessica Jones. “In just under two years, she has passed out of three levels of English classes. But she still has a ways to go. Everyone learns languages at their own pace but on average it takes about seven years to become proficient in a second language.”

In addition to progressing well in classes, Phonephaly has made lots of new friends at the school, many of whom are also immigrants or refugees from South Asian countries. Most attend classes Monday through Friday throughout the year.

“When I am not in school, I do like to visit with my many friends from many countries,” says Phonephaly.

“Phonephaly is one of those super friendly people that you just want to be around. She is always appreciative of the help she gets from her friends, neighbors, and teachers,” Jones says.

Phonephaly, age 40, admits to mixed feelings about her immigration experience. Although she settled in the very welcoming Dayton's Bluff neighborhood with her new husband, she had traveled across the ocean alone without the benefit of any of her brothers or sisters accompanying her for settlement in Minnesota.

And of course there's the weather. “Minnesota winter...cold weather...I do not like,” she says. But her two stepsons, ages 15 and 20, have become so at home in American culture that they're happy to engage in winter season sports such as snowboarding and basketball.

Another thing that Phonephaly found difficult to adjust to as part of her assimilation into metropolitan life were the street names and layouts – especially in Dayton's Bluff where different patterns of street grids overlap in confusing ways.

“When I go to market, I don't know street names,” she says.

As a result, Phonephaly often shops for groceries with her husband on the weekend when he has days off from his work as a machine operator in Minneapolis.

When she isn't at English class, caring for her home and tending to her family's needs, Phonephaly looks for an entry-level job. She says working outside the home is very important to her since she has sisters and brothers living in Laos who need financial support from her.

“My mother had 14 children. I have nine brothers and four sisters,” she says. “I have two brothers in America. One lives in Alaska, one lives in San Diego, California. ...After Father died, no jobs, no money.”

Asked to compare Laotian and American cultures, Phonephaly says she prefers the village life of her native country because of its easy access to people and places, but she also appreciates the safety and convenient lifestyle of living in St. Paul. As for clothing, she says she likes the long skirts typical of traditional Laotian dress as well as western dresses and blue jeans. She is often seen in the hallways of her English school sporting chic navy blue jeans and casual sweaters, exuding a businesslike manner that speaks volumes about her potential.

Food is another area of major cultural difference. “Many vegetables are different [here in America]. Many fish are big. Fruit is expensive in America,” Phonephaly says. Though she often cooks traditional Laotian meals at home, she also serves a few of her American favorites, including steak, cake, and pizza.

Without question, Phonephaly misses her house, friends and close-knit family back in Laos. She says she and her husband plan to continue to work together. She hopes that in the future she will be able to become a U.S. citizen, like her husband.

“My neighborhood is good. I like my neighbors. I like school. On weekend I go shopping with my husband, watch TV, and listen to music, and go to park to exercise,” she says.

To find out more about the Minnesota Literacy Council and how to volunteer or register for English classes, call 651-793-4423.