

Mansions of Memories

LINDEN HILL AND THE LONG SHADOW OF THE LUMBER INDUSTRY IN LITTLE FALLS, 1891–2010

Alexander Lawrence Ames

Welcome to Little Falls, a charming community nestled into the banks of the Mississippi, where the great river pauses. A town emblematic of Minnesota life yet distinctive among its neighbors, with its considerable historical charm. Sleepy, perhaps, yet graced with a picturesque patina from bygone days.

The busy thoroughfare of First Avenue leads travelers from US Highway 10 through Little Falls' charming city center, past a Franciscan convent, and through neighborhoods of historic homes before entering an old-fashioned downtown, offering glimpses of the Mississippi along

the way. Just a short drive from Minnesota's north woods and various well-known lake-vacation destinations, Little Falls' setting is idyllic. In its heyday, this central Minnesota town, approximately 100 miles northwest of Minneapolis, reaped the benefits of its location between the timberlands of the north and the metropole to the south. The

The Charles A. Weyerhaeuser and Richard D. Musser mansions, known together as the Linden Hill estate, in Little Falls, 2019. The Weyerhaeuser home is the green mansion on the left; the Musser family home is the white mansion.





Downtown Little Falls, seen from Le Bourget Park across the Mississippi River, 2019

Mississippi, which carried hundreds of millions of board feet of lumber to mills in Little Falls, was once the town's link to the outside world.¹

Often recognized today as the childhood home of Charles Lindbergh, the aviator whose 1927 solo flight across the Atlantic brought instant notoriety, in 2023 Little Falls is a community of small cafés, downtown shops, tree-lined streets, and hometown pride. Driving down First Avenue, one senses the spirit of a city that has striven, through recurring economic challenges, to carve a viable identity out of its civic heritage. "Welcome to Little Falls, Where the Mississippi River Pauses," reads a sign that greets visitors. If the Mississippi pauses in Little Falls, time seems to pause there as well.

Driving down First Avenue, the visitor passes a sylvan monument to Little Falls' lumber history. Barely past the Franciscan convent, blocks away from downtown shops, shrouded by towering pines and lindens near an oxbow in the river where the Mississippi truly does pause, sit two mansions. Though set at a distance from the automobile thoroughfare, the stately homes possess a commanding view of the riverine highway they overlook.

For locals, Linden Hill, as this aptly named tract of land is called, has stood at the center of Little Falls' economic and cultural life since the mansions' construction. The history of Linden Hill does not just exemplify the history of Little Falls; in some ways it is the history of Little Falls. The two lumbermen who built the mansions brought prosperity to the community in the 1890s, when they made it the headquarters of the Weyerhaeuser lumber syndicate's regional operations. Linden Hill represented the pinnacle of Little Falls' business and cultural life—a symbol of the town's association with a global industry. As money rolled into the coffers of Charles Weyerhaeuser and Richard Drew (R. D.) Musser, the lumber barons who resided in the homes, their wives dominated the social scene. Both economic and cultural life revolved around Linden Hill.

Yet underneath the glittery surface of Little Falls' success lurked a disappointing reality—one which, while foreseen by some during the plentiful years, sent shock waves through the city by 1920. Lumber was a valuable commodity, and river towns prospered from the wealth a lumber mill brought. But lumber also ran out—and quickly, at that. When the lumber supply was spent, so



The Little Falls dam on the Mississippi River, pictured from James Green Park, 2019

too were a town's fortunes if they had not successfully diversified their economy. By 1920, northern Minnesota's choicest lumber reserves were exhausted, the towering white pines toppled. That year, the lumber mill closed, and Charles Weyerhaeuser's family left the city. Though the Mussers stayed behind, they could not replenish a crop of timber that had taken centuries of undisturbed growth to supply—and a mere 30 years to consume.

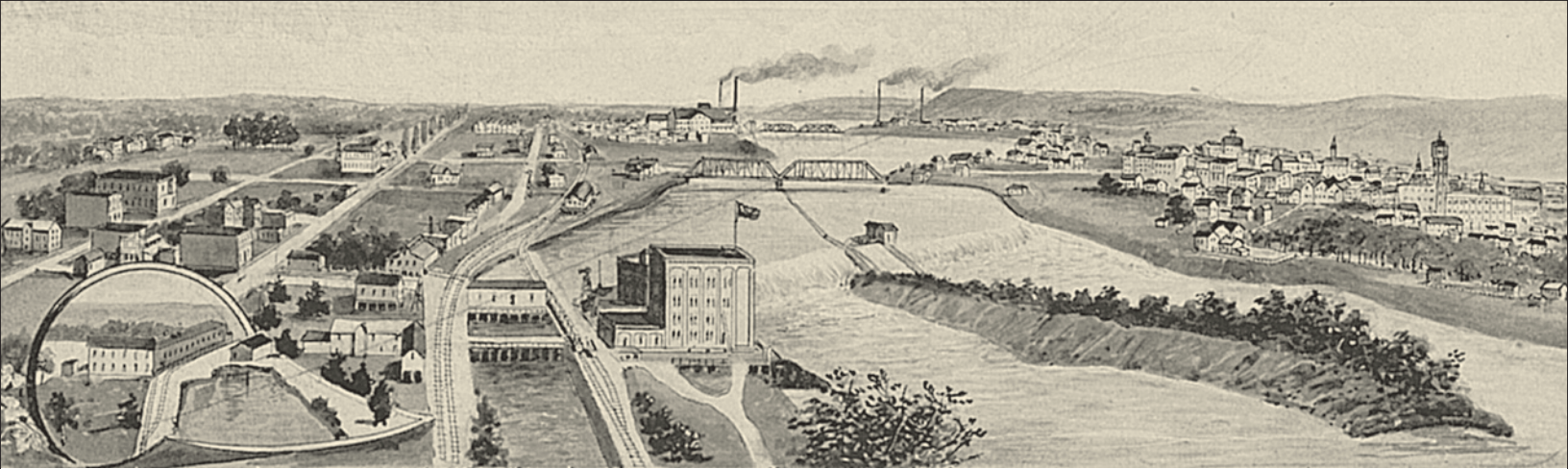
Little Falls struggled to nurture another industry that would provide economic success and a source of civic pride. What remained of Little Falls' faded lumber era was Linden Hill. The mansions and their beautiful grounds came to occupy a prominent place in the city's identity, largely through the lifework of the last family occupant to reside on the property.

This article offers a portrait of a Minnesota river town redolent with heritage, resonant with a sense of place, and intent on forging an identity in a changing world. The privileged status of Linden Hill in Little Falls' collective memory owes itself to the town's faltering economic and cultural-historical development—as well as to the life and work of a woman named Laura Jane Musser, who

endeared the mansions and grounds to the town's psyche, and who transformed the lumber barons' homes into mansions of memories.

THE PINE TREE BACHELORS

"LITTLE FALLS WINS," hailed a March 6, 1891, *Little Falls Daily Transcript* headline. "When, over a year ago, Frederick Weyerhauser [sic] of Rock Island [Illinois] . . . purchased the great tract of Northern Pacific pinelands, it was immediately recognised in business circles that where they made their headquarters for the manufacture of the lumber would be built up a prosperous city." The citizens of Little Falls rejoiced in the belief that their growing settlement was destined for a bright future powered by the lumber industry. Yet they were not caught off guard by the announcement. Town leaders had extended every effort to win the favor of Weyerhaeuser—efforts that had pitted the small, rough-and-tumble settlement against larger, older, established regional centers in Minnesota, including Minneapolis. And much to the glee of locals, Little Falls had won.²



"View of Little Falls and the Water Power," in C. S. Nichols, Nichols' Headlight: Souvenir of Little Falls and Morrison County, Minnesota

The famed Weyerhaeuser lumber syndicate offered Little Falls a chance to become a great city. Yet the town's Pine Tree mill had its legal roots not in Little Falls, but in Iowa, the Mussers' home state. Frederick Weyerhaeuser and his associates had incorporated the Pine Tree Lumber Company in Iowa on June 24, 1890, before sending trusted family members to begin operations in Minnesota. Peter Musser, father of R. D. Musser, was appointed president, with Weyerhaeusers, Mussers, and other associates as chief stakeholders. When the corporation's leaders began searching for a location on the Mississippi to establish a sawmill, Little Falls emerged as a contestant because of its geographic position and natural resources.³

In the spring of 1891, Weyerhaeuser and his associates purchased the old N. P. Clarke Mill on Little Falls' east side of the river; they also acquired 48 acres across the river on the western bank to construct an additional sawmill. The Pine Tree Lumber Company's first logs were sawed at the Clarke Mill. Charles A. Weyerhaeuser served as superintendent and R. D. Musser as secretary of the company. The population of the town more than doubled in the decade following the launch of the business's local operations, and the Pine Tree Lumber Company became the largest local employer. The Pine Tree mill's frenetic operations became a source of local pride.⁴

Thus established in their business life, the lumber barons were anxious to marry and begin families in homes befitting their status. They purchased a 20-acre tract of land on the banks of the river and commissioned Clarence Johnston to design residences. The choice of Johnston (1859–1936) reflected the men's affluence and social ambitions. This notable St. Paul architect established a reputation designing stately homes for the Twin Cities upper crust and soon would be appointed the state architect for Minnesota. If the Pine Tree bachelors wanted homes that made an impression, they certainly got them.

Johnston carefully designed the shingle-style residences to fit naturally into the wooded landscape, while their size and elegance echoed his other more opulent work in the Twin Cities and Duluth.⁵

With their residences established, the bachelors turned to romance. Weyerhaeuser family lore held that Charles first saw his future wife, Maud Moon, daughter of a regional lumber baron, while she was "sitting on top of a pile of lumber" in Virginia, Minnesota. The couple married in Duluth in December 1898. Nearly five years later, in June 1903, R. D. Musser married Sarah Walker. A member of a prominent East Coast family, she was the daughter of New York lumberman Thaddeus Walker. Years later, their



Richard Drew Musser, ca. 1890s, photographed by F. A. Nelson



Entry hall of the Musser mansion, 2022

daughter Laura Jane reflected on the match: “The Walkers were a well-known and long respected name in the East—going back to Pre-Revolutionary times and England—[which] made her a desirable ‘catch.’” At Linden Hill and through local artistic and social pursuits, the Mussers and the Weyerhaeusers maintained a genteel distance from the din of lumber-town life. Through local cultural organizations like the Musical Arts Club, the two families dominated civic affairs.⁶

Yet all was not as well in Little Falls as this early prosperity suggested. Indeed, the transitory nature of the lumber industry could not be avoided. The Weyerhaeuser syndicate had no sooner set up shop in Little Falls than it began looking for other timber reserves farther west. As the Weyerhaeusers established themselves in Idaho and Washington state, they quietly cashed in their chips in Minnesota, where supplies of high-quality lumber quickly ran dry. Three months after the syndicate’s purchase of Washington timberland in 1904, Little Falls residents learned that the Pine Tree Mill’s “highly respected” manager would leave Minnesota for the Pacific Northwest. Charles Weyerhaeuser, his wife, and children embarked on long, cross-country trips to Washington and Idaho. In

January 1910, the Pine Tree Lumber Company was sold, though Musser and Weyerhaeuser retained managerial positions.⁷

By 1920, the Pine Tree Lumber Company’s local operations had ground to a halt. The mill itself, a “landmark of [the] city,” was razed. Musser acquired the Weyerhaeuser house, becoming the sole possessor of Linden Hill. The Mussers—R. D., Sarah, and their children, Mary and Laura Jane—remained in Little Falls, carrying on the town’s fading lumber legacy. R. D. Musser remained active in the local lumber business and the operation of a bank, and his wife maintained her social leadership for the rest of her life. While the role of lumber in the everyday lives of Little Falls residents diminished after 1920, the role of Linden Hill did not.⁸

MANSIONS OF MEMORIES: THE LIFE OF LAURA JANE MUSSER

The history of Linden Hill as we know it today traces its roots to domestic life inside the Musser household, and more specifically to the birth and early life of R. D. and

Sarah Musser's daughter Laura Jane. Laura Jane Musser was born prematurely, weighing only three pounds, on June 4, 1916. Suffering from strabismus (a vision disorder) and nearly deaf in one ear, the child was also beset with a heart condition. Her health was a source of constant anxiety for her parents.⁹

A former household employee recalled that Laura Jane's physical disabilities were debilitating, and that she "was going to specialists all the time. One day [Laura Jane's] private tutor told Mrs. Musser how pleased she was that day when Laura Jane had taken a step upstairs one at a time," because the 10-year-old had such difficulties with coordination. Sarah Musser brought doctors from around the world to Little Falls to treat Laura Jane. (Mrs. Musser also invited other children for consultations with these experts, resulting in the founding of the local Child Interest Club.) Whatever her parents' intentions, in retrospect Laura Jane perceived their medical efforts as an attempt to squeeze the meek and awkward child into an acceptable social mold for genteel young ladies—a mold she could never fit.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the youngster's social standing provided her with remarkable opportunities to develop her artistic sensibilities, encouraged by her mother, who was an

accomplished pianist. "Before most children begin music lessons, I had already learned the rudiments of piano, and had special knowledge of the music of various composers such as Chopin, Beethoven, Mozart, Schumann, and Grieg," Laura Jane recalled. She continued her musical education under prominent teachers throughout her youth. Sarah Musser also hosted artists visiting Little Falls to perform for the Musical Arts Club, meaning Laura Jane enjoyed contact with musicians whom she "idolized."¹¹

Upon graduation from high school in Little Falls, Laura Jane attended Hartridge, an elite private boarding school in New Jersey, where she was lonely and found it difficult to interact with peers and staff. After graduation, she set out on a life-changing collegiate adventure. "Because my study of music had been rated highly, I decided to finish my college education at a music school, and selected Juilliard . . . in New York City," she noted. "My parents were not too happy about this, but since I was 21, they let me

LEFT: Sarah Walker Musser with Laura Jane, ca. 1916, photographer unknown. Musser was elated with her only surviving biological child. RIGHT: Laura Jane Musser (left) and her adopted sister, Mary Musser, in the parlor of the Musser house at Christmastime, ca. 1921, photographer unknown



have my way—with the result that a brand new exciting and challenging world was opened to me.” Musser’s experiences living in New York City were probably the happiest of her life. Interested in “books and ideas,” she thrived in the metropolis.¹²

Despite her fulfilling life in New York, Musser moved home permanently to serve as a caregiver and companion for her father in 1953, after the death of her mother. Following her father’s death in 1958, Laura Jane inherited all of Linden Hill. Interestingly, in her adult life Musser chose to live in the Weyerhaeuser house. She explained, “Because the family home was much too big and I had never been really happy there, I moved next door to the old Charles Weyerhaeuser home, remodeled it and furnished it the way I wanted, for I badly needed a home of my own.”¹³

R. D. Musser’s will did not establish Laura Jane as a direct beneficiary. She remained resentful of both her father and the executor of his estate (attorney and revered local state legislator Gordon Rosenmeier) for their seeming distrust of her ability to manage her finances.



RIGHT: *Laura Jane Musser on the steps of her family home, ca. 1930s, photographer unknown* BELOW: *The parlor of the Musser home, 2022*



Her combined inheritance from her mother and her father made her the beneficiary of a trust with net assets approaching \$4.5 million. The trust's value appreciated, reaching around \$12 million by the 1980s—a fortune that would be worth approximately \$30 million in 2023, accounting for inflation.¹⁴

Despite her frustrations with her family and difficult memories from her childhood, beginning in 1953 Laura Jane made Little Falls her primary residence for the rest of her adult life, and she established herself as a noted community presence in her hometown. Upon her return from New York, many expected the daughter of the city's wealthiest family to be the height of fashion. The sight that met them was a shock. In the early twenty-first century, some Little Falls residents attested that Musser deliberately eschewed stylish clothing. Her wardrobe consisted of mumus that some claimed the heiress wore because “she didn't want to show off that she had money.” Physical appearances, sadly, shaped Musser's public persona in Little Falls, as did the quirks of her personality. “If a person had a low threshold for embarrassment maybe it was uncomfortable,” one friend observed. “There are times she would speak very loud . . . and people would stare,” recalled an acquaintance.¹⁵

Indeed, Musser became such a local icon that even the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* took notice. “The heiress who lives alone in her eight-bathroom mansion is a dependable topic of conversation hereabouts, from the Edge-of-the-Ledge (Jim Madden's cocktailery at his Pine Edge hotel) to the offices of the *Little Falls Daily Transcript*,” noted journalist George Grim in a November 1959 article surveying Little Falls characters. “‘You go see Miss Musser and you'll have plenty to think about,’” Grim was told. “So I drove past the metal mesh fence,” onto an estate that by 1959 held an important place in the Little Falls psyche.¹⁶

Despite social interactions that some deemed peculiar and a quirky reputation rooted in her wealth, Musser established herself as a revered philanthropist. Not surprisingly, her most distinctive contribution to Little Falls civic life may have been sharing music with her fellow citizens. Not only did Musser spend significant amounts of money bringing celebrities to her hometown to perform, but the Juilliard-trained musician offered piano and dance lessons to Little Falls children, free of charge. The heiress remodeled the basement of the Weyerhaeuser mansion to accommodate her curriculum, hiring professional dance instructors to travel to Little Falls and teach at Linden Hill. Children also checked out books from Musser's library and explored the estate's greenhouse. “We had a lot of fun and she was very good to us and we enjoyed her,” recalled area resident Jackie Doty.¹⁷

Among Musser's most impactful philanthropic enterprises was her support of Native American rights. In addition to highlighting Musser's liberal views on human rights, her association with the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe underscores the heiress's critical perspective on her family heritage. A committed environmentalist, Musser asserted that the lumber industry had harmed America's landscape, and she was aware of the human price paid for the Weyerhaeuser lumber syndicate's success.¹⁸

Musser believed that much of her family's fortune was derived from profits reaped from the injustices inflicted upon Indigenous people during US westward expansion. Through her philanthropy, Musser sought to compensate for previous generations' shortcomings while fulfilling her own mission of intercultural enrichment. This led her to donate many thousands of dollars to Native American causes around Minnesota and the nation, sponsoring scholarships for Native American students and footing the bill for various scholarly events and studies of Indigenous issues. She was an active supporter of national organizations such as the Native American Rights Fund. Closer to home, Musser's support of regional Native American causes won her the friendly, multicultural relationships that she desired as a substitute for the warm family life she felt she had lacked.¹⁹

A vibrant Ojibwe community that Musser felt had been exploited by her father's lumber interests is centered at Mille Lacs, one of Minnesota's largest and most beautiful lakes, 55 miles northeast of Little Falls. Musser herself was intimately familiar with the area; indeed, her family frequently vacationed there. “My father . . . had the first lake cottage built on the ‘Boundary Line’ separating the reservation from the rest of the territory which the ‘white man’ had wrested from the Indians through a treaty which gave the ‘lions’ share’ of the property to the white man, leaving the Indians very little for their use,” she wrote. In later years, Musser made frequent trips to the Mille Lacs Ojibwe community.²⁰

Musser's greatest contribution to the Mille Lacs Ojibwe community fell into the category of cultural preservation and dialogue. Inspired by Hawaii's Polynesian Cultural Center, “which depicts the seven South Pacific Island cultures and their lifestyles,” Musser “hoped that the Minnesota Historical Society could encourage a Cultural Research Center development at Mille Lacs.” The Mille Lacs Indian Museum became a reality thanks to years of planning, conversations, negotiations, and fundraising, and included a sizable financial contribution from Musser. “To my great joy, a Cultural Research Center and Museum have been developed there, patterned after the Polynesian Cultural Center.”²¹

Musser was accorded a rare honor by the Ojibwe in gratitude for her activism. “On August 28, 1988, the Chipewas invited me to attend a ‘pow-wow’ of thanks given in my honor,” she wrote. “The ‘pow-wow’ displayed a very colorful pageant of Indian dancers, the chiefs of the tribe dressed in full regalia. Their dancing—displaying intricate steps—was fascinating to watch and, of course, I was deeply touched by this unusual honor.” As her contributions to Native American communities demonstrate, Laura Jane Musser’s reputation and legacy extended far beyond Little Falls itself, in ways that resonate as forward-thinking even decades after her death. Musser’s philanthropic vision and social awareness both influenced how she was remembered in her hometown.²²

It would be easy to caricature Laura Jane Musser as a social outlier based on her personal idiosyncrasies and conflicted relationships with her family legacy and hometown. To do so would deny the insight, wisdom, and deep emotional empathy that put Musser years ahead of her time in thinking about—and working toward—a multicultural society. Laura Jane Musser was a regional leader of whom Minnesotans can be proud. That Musser felt marginalized—“othered”—within her nuclear family and wider social

Laura Jane Musser (first row, third from left) at a Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe powwow in her honor, August 28, 1988, photographer unknown

sphere equipped her with a sensitivity to social inequity that inspired meaningful philanthropy and activism.

Musser’s national significance as a philanthropist combined with her distinctive personal presence in Little Falls made her a compelling local character—and someone difficult for fellow citizens to understand. When Laura Jane Musser died in 1989, memorials were marked by gratitude and admiration, but they also were tinged with pity for a local icon who endeavored to find lasting personal happiness amid unusual life circumstances, with limited success. “Many people did not understand some of the causes she supported. . . . Nonetheless, she was there for you in your time of need,” wrote a contributor to the *Morrison County Record*, Little Falls’ local newspaper. In 1989, the end had come for Laura Jane Musser and her philanthropy. For Linden Hill and its historic mansions, Musser’s death was just the beginning.²³

FIGHTING FOR THE JEWEL OF LITTLE FALLS

Initially, Linden Hill saw little action after Musser’s death, as Musser and her financial managers had not crystallized specific plans for use of the estate prior to her passing. In 1994, under the leadership of Mayor Ron Hinnenkamp, the city of Little Falls began earnest negotiations with



the executor of the Musser Fund, as the fortune became known, regarding the future of Linden Hill. “We heard that [the trust] was looking to divest” of the properties, Hinnenkamp recalled, “and feelers came out to the City. . . . Would we be interested in the properties? And the first answer is obviously yes.”²⁴

Acutely aware of the financial implications ownership of Linden Hill would entail, the city entered talks with the Musser Fund cautiously. After long discussions, the Musser Fund offered \$1 million over five years to the city if it accepted the homes, plus a one-time gift of \$359,000 to undertake extensive repairs on the properties. Meanwhile, the city had begun assessing potential uses for the recently vacated homes, in the likelihood that the municipality would soon face the challenge of determining how best to utilize the facilities. Even before the city’s acquisition of the properties, community members had thoughts of developing the homes as event spaces, which seemed a potentially profitable use of the estate.²⁵

On July 3, 1995, the city of Little Falls officially accepted the Musser Fund’s donation of the Linden Hill estate. But operation of the estate-turned-event-center soon faced problems. The expense to operate the site was high, and an independent architectural firm estimated that costs to bring Linden Hill “into a state of general utility” would run about \$630,000—per house. The city spent approximately \$500,000 on maintenance costs between 1996 and 2002. An estate valued at between \$680,000 and \$2.1 million—plus the several hundred thousand dollars in the city’s Musser Trust—was an inordinately large portfolio of assets for the City of Little Falls to tie up in a business venture that seemed doomed to failure.²⁶

On February 7, 2005, the Little Falls City Council voted unanimously to close Linden Hill—a decision that took Linden Hill board members and staff, along with the people of Little Falls, by surprise. The council had grown bitter about Linden Hill’s finances: “We never should have taken those houses in the first place,” a frustrated councilmember complained.²⁷

The vote to close the estate immediately caused contention in Little Falls. Among some residents, the council’s abrupt, closed-door decision-making process provoked consternation quite independent of the Linden Hill issue. The sale of Linden Hill “is of major interest to a lot of people in the area, and those people should have been given the opportunity to hear the discussion and the reasons for the closure,” the *Morrison County Record* concluded in an editorial. A proposed sale of the property to a private developer only deepened the public outcry. “This week,” less than 11 days after the city decided to close Linden Hill, “the City Council announced that an unnamed

wealthy Central Minnesota man is interested in buying the Musser and Weyerhaeuser mansions,” the paper pointed out to readers, referencing a proposal the city had received from Randy Kirt of Kirt Properties. “What timing!”²⁸

Emails, letters, local paper editorials, and responses to a survey undertaken by the city all underscored the ire with which many citizens met the actions of local government in closing the properties. “An ancestor of our city ‘gave’ this property to our ‘keeping’!” one furious resident wrote, representative of the local sentiment. “May the Mussers rest in peace with their gift staying where it was given—THE PEOPLE AND CITY OF LITTLE FALLS.”²⁹

The protest culminated in a February 8, 2006, community meeting regarding the future of the estate. The executive director of the Little Falls Convention and Visitors Bureau, Cathy VanRisseghem (a former Musser estate gardener and future mayor), organized the meeting, which was held at the Initiative Foundation, a local philanthropic organization. Turnout was impressive: “We had probably 210 people there,” VanRisseghem noted. “It was standing room only.” Public opinion was evident: “Out of the 210 people that came, 209 were very much in favor of keeping the homes” under public ownership. The issue became so hot that even the Minnesota State Legislature became involved, albeit indirectly, passing controversial legislation designed to restrict the city decision-making about the properties in hopes of preserving the estate under public ownership.³⁰

On January 24, 2006, the Musser/Weyerhaeuser board, which had been responsible for Linden Hill’s management up to the estate’s closing, presented its own proposal to the city council, suggesting that the estate operate as a nonprofit organization, though ownership of the estate would be maintained by the city. This proved to be a palatable option for the public and also one that allowed for greater flexibility in estate operations. On October 29, 2007, the city of Little Falls signed over management of the estate to the Friends of Linden Hill, a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) public charity that had been organized by activists a month earlier. The nonprofit remains in control of the property today.³¹

CONCLUSION: REMEMBERING LAURA JANE

The memory of Laura Jane Musser guided the proceedings regarding Linden Hill’s fate from 1989 through the early 2000s, ultimately leading to a happy resolution. In 2010, 21 years after the heiress’s death, more than half (53.4 percent) of Linden Hill’s volunteers reported that they personally had known Laura Jane Musser. Perhaps even more significantly, 87.9 percent of volunteers reported that they had known of Laura Jane before beginning to volunteer at



The music room of the Musser mansion, which was a later, colonial revival addition to the Clarence Johnston–designed house, 2022

the estate, whether they were personally acquainted with her or not. Musser's renown was one of the chief means by which locals had achieved familiarity with Linden Hill. Furthermore, 31 percent of modern Linden Hill volunteers considered themselves direct beneficiaries of Musser's philanthropy. These numbers suggest that, for many volunteers, Musser made an impression that spurred them to engagement with the property.³²

Through her philanthropy, Musser exposed Linden Hill to the socioeconomically diverse residents of Little Falls, many of whom were children when they became acquainted with the heiress and her mysterious, stately homes. For them, the estate was not only an emblem of the lumber industry but also the residence of the city's most generous woman. For some, their relationship with Musser was enough reason to return to Linden Hill as volunteers. For others, the beauty and history they had seen on the estate drew them back to this site of memory. Laura Jane's unconventionally brilliant yet emotionally challenging life mirrored Little Falls' image of the town's winding path away from its impressive and promising early prosperity. Musser's laudable generosity (combined with her social quirks and personal foibles) humanized the estate's Gilded Age history, making it part of residents' own personal stories as well.

Lumber history took on new life through Laura Jane, allowing ordinary people to feel like part of a nationally significant business and social heritage. The recollections

of one Linden Hill volunteer about her motivations for donating time to estate operations paint a portrait of how Musser shaped the relationship Little Falls residents developed with the heiress's home. "My sisters and I took piano lessons from Laura Jane for many years," the volunteer explained, continuing:

Our school bus always dropped us off at Laura Jane's home around 3:30 but lessons were around 4:30 or 5:00 so we had to wait. When we first started lessons, they were held in the white house. In the winter, we would occasionally sit with the maids in the living room and watch the TV. . . . The first time I [saw] the music room, I was convinced that it was a room just like where Cinderella had the ball.

Lots of times after lessons, she would have her chauffeur take us home as we lived about three miles south of her home. Sometimes she rode with us in the back seat, propped up with big pillows. . . . Another time, after lessons, Laura Jane and I walked to supper at the Pine Edge Inn. The Pine Edge was a very classy place in town where I'd never been before. Actually, we *never* ate out when we were little. The sidewalk along First Street hadn't been shoveled and it was very bumpy with ice. She hung onto me for support. I felt so proud and special! We had our supper and then she called her chauffeur to come and get us and he took me home. I was so excited.

I feel that by helping at Linden Hill, I can pay back some of the gifts and kindnesses that were shown to me, my family, and the community by Laura Jane.³³

The heartfelt spirit reflected in this volunteer's memories also drove the intense but productive community dialogue that led Little Falls to develop a sustainable preservation solution for Linden Hill. Today, the estate functions as a site of civic identity, a place that redounds with local history rooted in scenic beauty and sense of place.

Linden Hill—an idyllic haven off the busy thoroughfare of First Avenue, in a town where the Mississippi River truly does pause—looks much like it did when lumber barons resided in these mansions of memories more than one hundred years ago.

Just as Laura Jane Musser would have wanted. □

The Linden Hill estate is open for tours and events.
Visit <https://linden-hill.org/> to learn more.

Notes

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Readers will notice many oral history interviews cited in the notes, some conducted by the author and others conducted by Little Falls heritage preservation activists. Interviewees were individuals who knew Laura Jane Musser and/or participated in the preservation of her estate as a site of local history. Their insights lend valuable personal perspective to this study. The author thanks all those who participated in oral history interviews as well as written surveys in support of this project.

1. First Avenue was formerly part of the arterial route known as Minnesota Highway 371, which splits off Highway 10 and leads drivers north to the lakes region near Brainerd.

2. "Little Falls Wins: The Weyerhaeuser Syndicate Will Build Its Mills Here," *Little Falls Transcript*, Mar. 6, 1891.

3. "'100 Years Ago': Pine Tree Lumber Company Historical Outline," Pine Tree Lumber Company subject file, Morrison County Historical Society, Little Falls, 1.

4. "Little Falls Wins"; "Saw Mill Started," *Little Falls Transcript*, May 22, 1891; Morrison County Historical Society, "Morrison County Statistical Data," <http://www.morrisoncountyhistory.org/mcstatistics.pdf>; "Our Lumber Cut: More Lumber Cut at Little Falls During 1892

Than at Any Other Place North of Minneapolis," *Little Falls Daily Transcript*, Jan. 23, 1893.

5. "Musser/Weyerhaeuser Important Dates," Musser subject file, Charles Weyerhaeuser Memorial Museum, Little Falls. For a useful overview of the life, work, and legacy of Clarence Johnston, see Paul Nelson, "Johnston, Clarence H. (1859-1936)," MNopedia, MNHS.

6. Sarah-Maud Weyerhaeuser Sivertsen, interview by Leilee W. Reiter, May 18-19, 1986, 3, in Carl A. Weyerhaeuser, et al., *Oral History Interviews of the Weyerhaeuser Family Oral History Project, 1986-1987* (OH 26), MNHS; "Married at Duluth," *Little Falls Daily Transcript*, Dec. 15, 1898; Laura Jane Musser, autobiography written for Mu Phi Epsilon sorority, 2-3, 8, in Laura Jane Musser Papers (box 1), Laura Jane Musser and Family Papers, MNHS; "Mrs. T. H. Walker, 79," *Little Falls Daily Transcript*, Apr. 6, 1929; "The Proposed Constitution and By-Laws for the Little Falls Musical Art Club," *Little Falls Daily Transcript*, Sept. 2, 1915.

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10. Marie Randall, interview by Marilyn Brown, Apr. 10, 1997, p. 7; Marjorie Hayden, interview by Marilyn Brown, May 22, 2005, p. 9-10; Richard Johnson, interview by Marilyn Brown, Mar. 22, 1997, p. 5—all LFHPC interviews.

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12. Laura Jane Musser to Sarah Musser, Dec. 14, 1934, in Laura Jane Musser and Family Papers, MNHS; Doris Simonett, interview by Marilyn Brown, May 2, 1997, p. 3, LFHPC interviews.

13. "R. D. Musser Dies at 93"; Musser, autobiography, 16.

14. "Estate Tax Return in the Matter of the Estate of R. Drew Musser" and "R. D. Musser," Morrison County Probate, File #8872, Morrison County Historical Society, Little Falls; "Last Will and Testament of R. Drew Musser," Morrison County Probate, File #8872; Peter Vogel, interview by author, Little Falls, Apr. 8, 2010; Laura Jane Musser, recollections on Gordon Rosenmeier, in Laura Jane Musser Papers; Phil Force, interview by author, Little Falls, Feb. 17, 2009; "Probate Court Record File No. 8046: In the Matter of the Estate of Sarah Walker Musser, Deceased," S. W. Musser, Morrison County Probate, File #8046, Morrison County Historical Society. The exact amount of Musser's estate (as valued for taxation) was \$7,551,455.00. For an inflation calculator, see "CPI Inflation Calculator," Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.

15. Johnson interview, p. 5; Agnes Wallberg, interview by Marilyn Brown, p. 10; Thor Lindquist, interview by Marilyn Brown, Mar. 25, 1997, p. 2; Doris Simonett interview, p. 6—all LFHPC interviews.

16. George Grim, "Meet the People of our Town: Little Falls, Minn.," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Nov. 1, 1959.

17. Kapsner interview, p. 22; Musser, *It Happened to Me!*, 95; Charlene Starin, interview by Marilyn Brown, Mar. 22, 1997, p. 2, LFHPC interviews; Kathy Bzdok, personal correspondence with author, Apr. 17, 2010; Jackie Doty, interview by Marilyn Brown, Dec. 15, 2003, p. 14, LFHPC interviews; National Park Service, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form: Charles A. Weyerhaeuser and Richard Drew Musser Homes," Aug./Sept. 1985, US Dept. of the Interior, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/90a71034-0767-4b94-8410-2885662849f0>. Despite choosing to remodel the Weyerhaeuser

home, Musser valued the historical nature of her estate; the property was placed on the National Register of Historic Places during her lifetime, in 1985.

18. Cathy VanRisseghem, interview by author, Little Falls, Feb. 4, 2009.

19. Laura Jane Musser, "Mille Lacs Lake and Some Family History," *Morrison County Record*, June 10, 1985; Earl Bowman to Laura Jane Musser, Dec. 7, 1971; James A. Weeks to Laura Jane Musser, June 28, 1974; John Clark to Laura Jane Musser, Jan. 7, 1977; Evelyn Cottle to Laura Jane Musser, Mar. 13, 1972; Laura Jane Musser to Donald Bibeau, Feb. 5, 1976; John Echohawk to Laura Jane Musser, Mar. 2, 1984; Arthur Gahbow to Laura Jane Musser, Aug. 1, 1987—all Laura Jane Musser Papers.

20. Musser, "Mille Lacs Lake and Some Family History"; Roger Head (staff assistant to Gov. Rudy Perpich) to Laura Jane Musser, May 17, 1978, and Aug. 4, 1977; Laura Jane Musser to Chief Arthur Gahbow, Aug. 12, 1987—all Laura Jane Musser Papers.

21. Laura Jane Musser, "An Afternoon at the Mille Lacs Chippewa Reservation Attending a 'Pow Wow' in My Honor," *Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Morrison County Newsletter*, Nov. 1988, Laura Jane Musser Papers.

22. Musser, "An Afternoon at the Mille Lacs Chippewa Reservation." Musser's philanthropic work continues today; her fortune forms the basis of the Laura Jane Musser Fund of Minneapolis, <https://musserfund.org>.

23. Cal Bengtson, "Laura Jane Musser," *Morrison County Record*, Nov. 20, 1989.

24. Ronald Hinnenkamp, interview by author, Little Falls, Aug. 16, 2010.

25. Walter Rosenberry III to Ron Hinnen-

kamp, Jan. 14, 1995, 1; Thomas Vesely Associates, Architects, "Justification and Description of Repair and Renovation Items for the Musser and Weyerhaeuser Homes," Mar. 31, 1995—both Musser/Weyerhaeuser Properties Collection, City of Little Falls; Hinnenkamp interview.

26. "Agreement . . . between the Musser Fund, through its Board of Trustees, and the City of Little Falls, a municipal corporation, through its City Council," July 3, 1995; Robert C. Mack, to Michael Matts, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Jan. 3, 1994; "Linden Hill Improvements," in "2007 Linden Hill Repair Costs Survey"; Thomas G. Ruhland, "Certificate of Appraisal," Oct. 4, 2006—all Musser/Weyerhaeuser Properties Collection.

27. Joyce Moran, "Questions Continue to Plague Linden Hill Bill," *Morrison County Record*, June 15, 2006.

28. Editorial, "We Had a Legal Right to Hear," *Morrison County Record*, Feb. 18, 2005.

29. Anonymous comment made on the City of Little Falls' "Linden Hill Survey," City of Little Falls, 2006, p. 33. Full caps in the original text. Note that this survey is distinct from the survey of Linden Hill volunteers conducted by the author as part of this research.

30. Cathy VanRisseghem, email to Little Falls area residents and businesses, Feb. 1, 2006, Musser/Weyerhaeuser Properties Collection; Cathy VanRisseghem, interview by author, Aug. 12, 2009; Joyce Moran, "Council to Decide Whether to Challenge State's Linden Hill Bill," *Morrison County Record*, July 14, 2006. The "Linden Hill Bill" was actually Section 1 [15.995], "Historic Publicly Owned Buildings," Article 1, Chapter 236—S.F.No. 2851 of the Minnesota Legislature's 2006 regular session, which, while

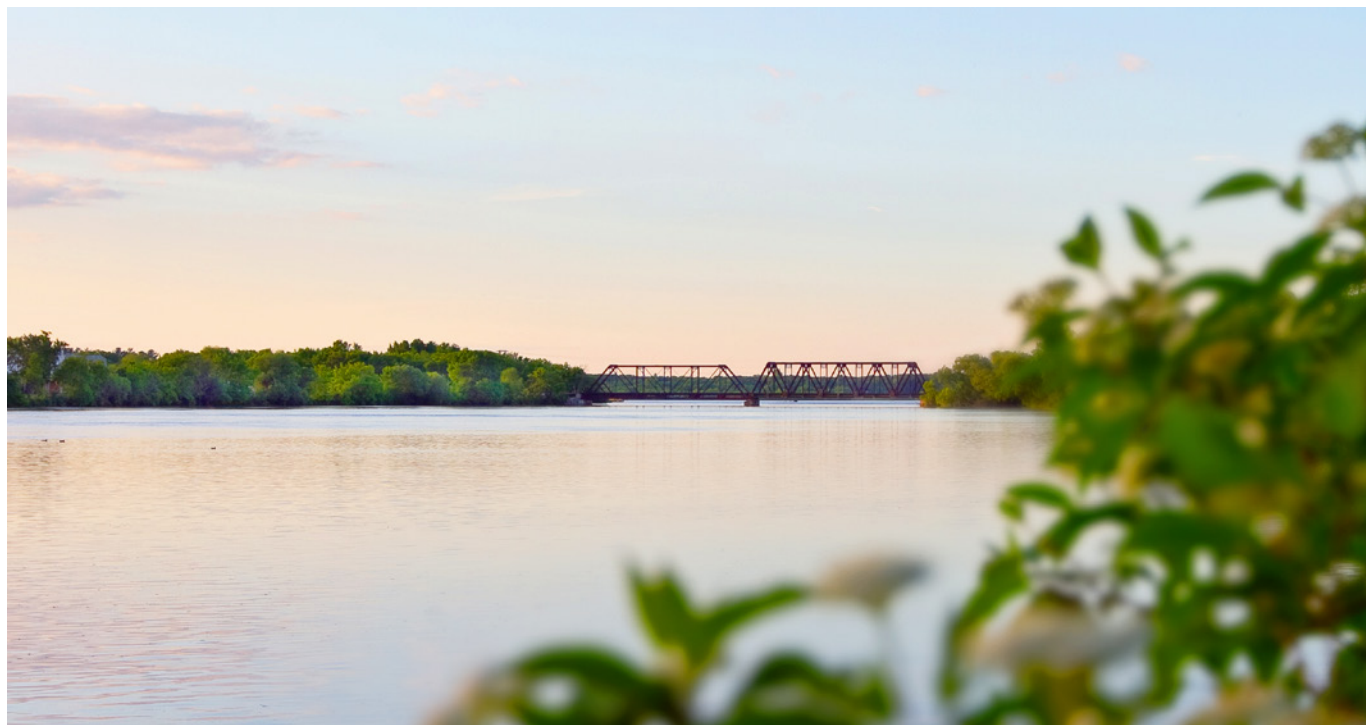
not explicitly naming Little Falls and Linden Hill, put restrictions on the sale of historic properties that would have snarled any potential sale of the Musser estate in legal challenges. To read the legislation, see Minnesota Legislature, "Minnesota Session Laws—2006, Regular Session," Office of the Revisor of Statutes, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/2006/0/236>.

31. Joyce Moran, "Another Option for Linden Hill—A Non-Profit Corporation," *Morrison County Record*, Jan. 27, 2006; Linden Hill (Musser/Weyerhaeuser) Board, "Linden Hill Conference and Retreat Center Business Plan," Jan. 24, 2006, Musser/Weyerhaeuser Properties Collection, 3; "Meeting's Crowd Calls for a Ban on Selling Linden Hill," *Morrison County Record*, Feb. 10, 2006; Joyce Moran, "Plans Move Ahead as Non-profit Status Granted Friends of Linden Hill," *Morrison County Record*, Oct. 2, 2007.

32. Linden Hill Volunteer Survey, Mar.–Apr. 2010. This survey was conducted as part of Alexander L. Ames, "Mansions of Memories: Preservation, Destruction, and the Construction of Place in Central Minnesota" (master's thesis, St. Cloud State University, 2012). Statistical reports of the survey are available in the thesis. Survey participants were promised anonymity as part of their contribution to the project.

33. Linden Hill Volunteer Survey participant.

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