

Homecroft City

The “Duluth Idea” in the Progressive Conservation Movement

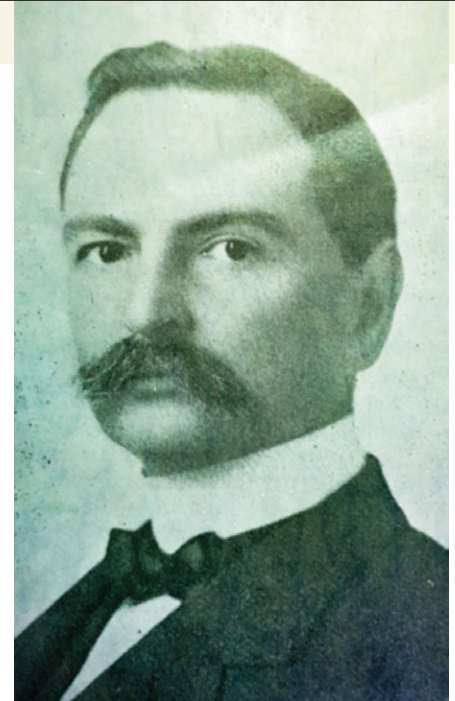
Eric Boime

Amid the prizewinning potatoes, alfalfa, and clover on display at the St. Louis County building at the 1912 Minnesota State Fair was an exhibit for the American Homecroft Society. This national organization based in Duluth promoted urban and suburban households equipped with vegetable gardens and small poultry yards. Banners at the fair bearing the headline “The Duluth Idea” trumpeted the movement’s mission statement:

Every Child In A Garden
Every Mother In A Homecroft
Industrial Independence
For Every Worker In A Home
Of His Own On The Land.

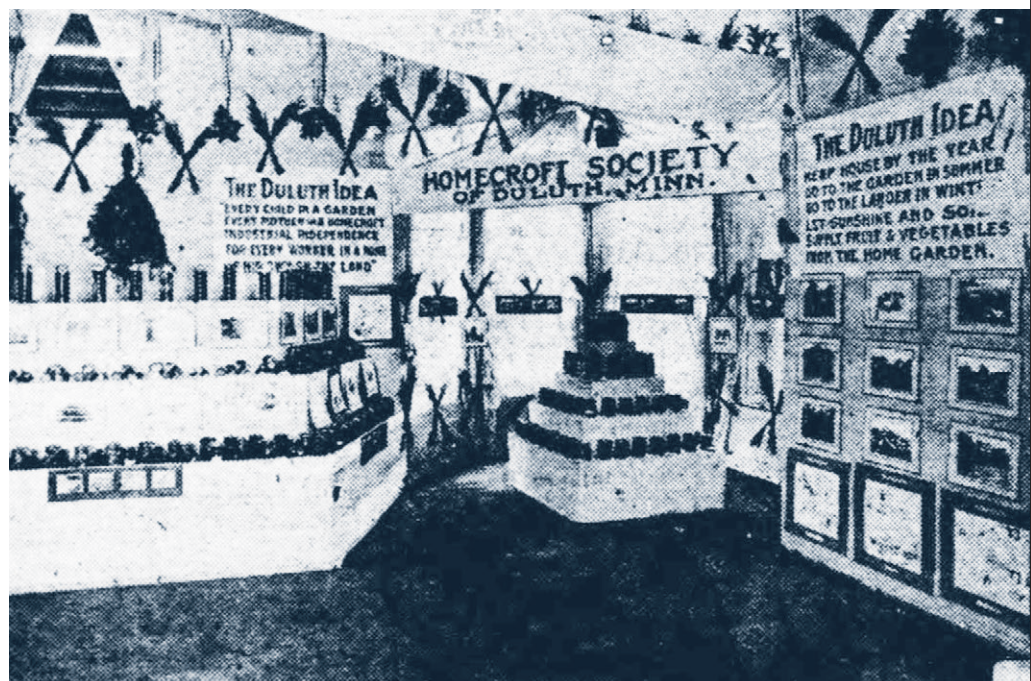
This claim of food self-sufficiency as the Duluth Idea was no hyperbole. Throughout the 1910s, the city at the head of Lake Superior was a national demonstration ground for the homecrofing movement, which sought “to put a miniature farm plot in every homeowner’s backyard.” George Hebard Maxwell, the founder of the American Homecroft Society, was so impressed he moved its national headquarters from Chicago to Duluth the year before the fair.¹

The homecroft movement is notable for its association with Maxwell (1860–1946), arguably the most consequential lobbyist in the history of the American West. Just five years before he founded the American Homecroft Society in 1907, he helped draft and champion the National Reclamation Act, landmark legislation not only for American conservation but also for modern statecraft. The act set in motion the dramatic transformation of the American West through federally funded irrigation projects. The Reclamation Act gave Congress unprecedented authority to manage and appropriate funding to build vast networks of dams, reser-



voirs, and aqueducts designed to, in Maxwell’s words, utilize the “wasted” waters that ran “uselessly” to the sea and to “reclaim” the region’s arid spaces for habitation and farming. Maxwell’s reclamation goals fit with the Progressive Era agenda to reform nature and people based on advances in science and technology.

Duluth was a good distance from the climate and geography of the Great American Desert, where Maxwell



ABOVE: George H. Maxwell in 1912.

RIGHT: 1912 Minnesota State Fair booth.

had made his name. Yet we must first look at his role in promoting arid land reclamation in the American West in order to understand his ostensibly puzzling investment in the development of Duluth.

Eradicating social problems through irrigation

The National Reclamation Act that Maxwell wrote ceded unprecedented power to the federal government. Maxwell's particular genius was his ability to make government-funded irrigation be about homes and families. He sold the bill to Congress as social welfare policy—the essence of Progressivism. He promised that dams and aqueducts would create an expansive paradise of family farms. These new communities would not only attract the nation's surplus populations (unemployed factory workers, veterans, and landless farmers); they would expand markets for eastern industrialists, bankers, and railroads. The reclamation bill made promises to many constituencies, but the diverse coalition that ultimately supported federal reclamation embraced the Progressive ideal of “a harmony of interests.” Irrigation's promise to create wealth and abundance, they believed, would elevate the prospects of all.²

Maxwell dexterously cultivated the conservation–social welfare connection that galvanized non-western, non-arid, non-agricultural regions around the Reclamation Act. According to contemporaries, he had “carried on the propaganda with a vigor and success unprecedented in the history of the reclamation movement.” In 1899 he had founded the National Irrigation Association, whose motto—“Save the forests, store the floods, make homes on the land”—underscored the message that homemaking was as integral to rec-

lamation reform as dams, levees, and reservoirs. He had promoted liaisons with newspaper publishers, businessmen, and Congress; coordinated numerous conventions and speaking tours; and published multiple periodicals. These promotional efforts proved smashingly successful, as the National Reclamation Act sailed through Congress and was signed into law by President Theodore Roosevelt. It would be his crowning achievement as a political lobbyist.³

Only a few years after the bill's 1902 passage, however, Maxwell became a staunch critic of its Bureau of Reclamation, which, much to his chagrin, rapidly devolved from a “welfare agency” to a “construction agency,” for which building dams, rather than reaping social benefits, became the ultimate goal. Agribusinessmen, land developers, and municipal leaders who had little interest in or stomach for Edenic visions of family-farm communities

The American Homecroft Society aimed to reclaim small vacant lots and back alleys rather than millions of acres of arid lands.

increasingly manipulated the region's water resources. Maxwell became obsessed with the thought that these hydraulic projects deprioritized the needs of the urban poor. Under his leadership, the National Irrigation Association now questioned the plausibility of prodding poor families to go West or “back to the land,” which had been staple propaganda in the lead-up to the congressional debates over federal reclamation.⁴

Maxwell retreated from the corridors of power to embark upon the least-known, least-scrutinized, but ultimately most personally gratifying phase of his professional life. He

would spend two decades cultivating a grassroots conservation movement. A strong central government might be necessary for great hydraulic works, Maxwell conceded, but it could not, by itself, influence social values. He sought to influence such values not by relocating alienated factory workers to the deserts and swamps, but by redefining the urban and suburban home.⁵

The American Homecroft Society aimed to reclaim small vacant lots and back alleys rather than millions of acres of arid lands. It encouraged wageworkers to become competent backyard gardeners rather than yeoman farmers. Yet homecrofts also entailed organization and instruction, demanding at the micro level the kind of large-scale resource management that was transforming the American landscape. To Maxwell and other Progressive Era social reformers, gardening was as much political as it was pleasurable.

Maxwell proffered homecrofts as the antidote to major crises confronting urban America. In addition to mending industrial workers' severed relationship with nature, homes that incorporated spaces for production, to Maxwell's mind, granted working-class families autonomy and supplemental income in a volatile market. They stymied a mass market bent on transforming suburban homes into shallow spaces of conspicuous consumption. When Maxwell anointed Duluth as the model homecroft city, he intended it as a blueprint for how average Americans should live their lives.⁶

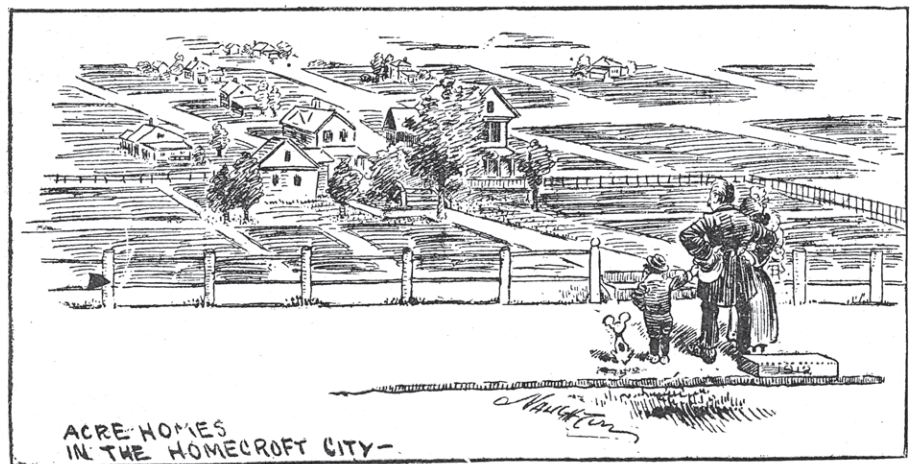
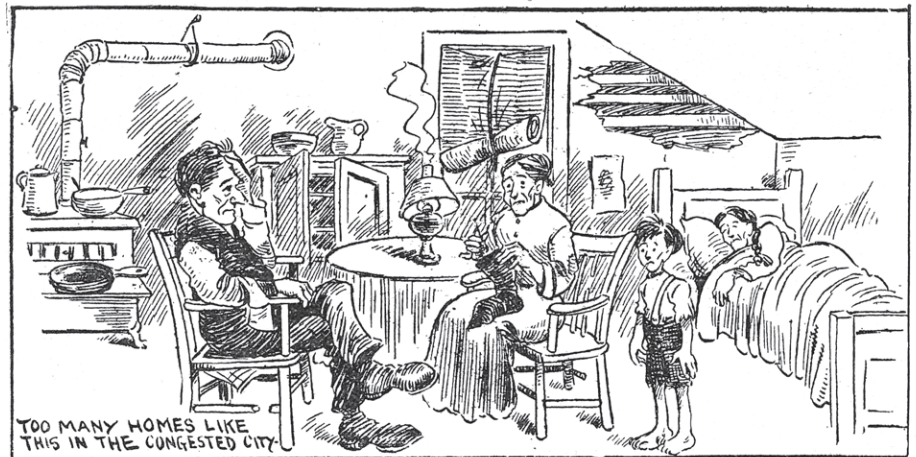
Further, Maxwell's vision for Duluth offers insight not only into his vision for the American West, but also into early twentieth-century conservation policy, one of the more significant legacies of the Progressive Era. Homecrofting "embraced scientific modernity," the intellectual core of the era's resource policies. The act of gardening was meant to help people cope with the monotonous, spirit-crushing impositions of industrialization. Urban and suburban gardens, like family farms in the middle of the desert, represented a hybrid of rational technology (planning, expertise, and innovation) and romanticized nature (abundant and compliant).⁷

Duluth: city in embryo primed for experimentation

Clearly, Minnesotans did not need an outsider to teach them the pleasures of gardening. In fact, Duluth's unprecedented enthusiasm for homecrofting predated Maxwell's discovery of the city. Intensive home gardening presented a viable solution to several of Duluth's most pressing concerns—in particular its high cost of living, due in part to its anemic agricultural base. The city's booming real estate remained largely contained within the ribbons of land along Lake Superior. Duluth proper, meanwhile, stayed undeveloped and unpopulated. The expenses associated with importing food consequently shrank the paycheck of the typical laborer, impeded his capacity to buy a home, and contributed to his overall dissatisfaction. "Food," concluded a 1910 report of the public affairs committee of the Commercial Club, "has counted heavily against Duluth."⁸

The Commercial Club of Duluth boasted a thousand members in 1913, including many of Duluth's millionaires. The club had a large

DULUTHIANS HAVE ORGANIZED A HOMECROFT SOCIETY.



Cartoon from the Duluth Herald reprinted in Maxwell's *Talisman*, his homecrofting magazine.

treasury and a commanding pull on public opinion sufficient to create a local bureau of agriculture in 1911 and recruit A. B. Hostetter, a career farmer and agricultural expert from Illinois, to serve as its superintendent. (Maxwell's homecrofting magazine, *Maxwell's Talisman*, and other national publications would showcase Hostetter's accomplishments.) In the previous decade, the Commercial Club's wealthier members had founded the city's first experimental farm, the Jean Duluth Stock Farm, in 1900. The 4,000-acre farm was located along the Lester River. The Commercial Club also facilitated a market association among existing farmers, organized a farmers market

in the city's armory, and started a poor farm for paupers and juvenile offenders, where vegetables and root crops were tested and grown for exhibition purposes. Thus the Duluth club had already been searching for ways to bolster food production when its members founded a local chapter of the Homecroft Society. While such chapters had sprung up in towns across the country, nowhere else had local leaders so dramatically touted homecrofting as the answer to their city's vexations.⁹

Duluth captured Maxwell's imagination, as it did other cutting-edge urban visionaries, including City Beautiful advocate Daniel H. Burnham. As shipping and steel were

transforming the nation, Duluth's ascendancy as a major center of processing and distribution seemed certain, given its proximity to the Iron Range and its location at the navigable head of the Great Lakes. In 1907, after contentious debate, the Minnesota legislature used tax credits and other incentives to successfully entice US Steel, then the largest corporation in the world, to build a manufacturing operation just outside the city. (The plant was completed in 1915.) Some boosters assumed that Duluth's population of 75,000 in 1907 would double in just three years and climb to 300,000 by 1920; the need for new housing and food supplies loomed large. Duluth was, in effect, a city in embryo, largely unencumbered by past patterns of settlement, architecture, and infrastructure. Unlike eastern cities, it was not yet blighted by dilapidated tenement rows or afflicted by chronic strikes and shut-downs. The city did not have to adapt to the titanic changes wrought by the age of corporate capitalism; it was a

Jean Duluth Stock Farm near Duluth, about 1905.

Duluth was, in effect, a city in embryo, largely unencumbered by past patterns of settlement, architecture, and infrastructure.

product of that age and primed for experimentation.¹⁰

Duluth's reputation as a Progressive city was underscored by its adoption of elements of the City Beautiful movement, which argued that a community organized around the principles of beauty would promote social order and, further, deter urban crime, vice, and poverty associated with high-density housing, a paucity of parks and playgrounds, and inadequate planning. The most spectacular example of the City Beautiful movement in Duluth was the 1909 St. Louis County Courthouse, designed in the Classical Revival style by Burnham, City Beautiful's leading proponent. Home gardening chic was another aspect of this movement, whose reformers deemed gardens to be "democratic and pragmatic" and gardening itself to be a pathway to Americanization. Gardens were felt to

foster dignified, constructive, wholesome work among all class levels.¹¹

Real estate firms saw the opportunity to grow Duluth's suburbs along homecroft lines. The new garden suburbs, perhaps the City Beautiful movement's greatest tangible manifestation, featured spacious "acre-home" subdivisions. Real estate company ads coaxed first-time homebuyers with the opportunities for a boosted income (derived from selling surplus products) and a life of "fresh air and freedom" while still maintaining access to the city. A "real home" had a backyard big enough for growing a large share of the family's food and for providing enough safe play space to keep children busy. "You have to be a homecrofter to know the real joy of living," proclaimed the typical ad.¹²

Duluth's most prominent developer, W. M. Prindle & Company,





Daniel Burnham's St. Louis County Courthouse (1909) helped demonstrate Duluth's reputation as a Progressive city.

established Homecroft Park on Cavalry Road in 1909 as ground zero for the acre-home subdivision. (Homecroft Park is still a Duluth neighborhood.) The firm subdivided single-acre plots priced at \$200 to \$275 apiece, promising “rich black loam, no stones, and well drained” tracts with copious room “for yard, flowers, berries, vegetable garden and chickens,” and, naturally, “more income, health, and happiness.” The terms to buy—\$1.00 down, \$1.50 to \$2.00 per week, and no payments when sick—were generous enough that Homecroft Park’s population boasted 70 families within two years, enough to support a new school, also called Homecroft, which opened in early 1910.¹³

Other Duluth garden suburbs soon proliferated: Heights Garden Tracts, Woodland Avenue Gardens, Lakeside Gardens, Norton’s Garden Tracts, Lincoln Park Gardens, and Exeter Farms. The “be a homecrofter”

campaign of Exeter Farms, the county’s biggest acre-home subdivision (founded in 1912), demonstrated how real estate dealers could monetize the movement’s message and, in their words, the movement’s “psychological moment.” Prospective buyers were encouraged to take the Lakeside streetcar to the end of the line (which didn’t yet reach the farm), where they would be greeted by drivers for

free auto tours. Marketers touted examples of individuals who traded “money formerly used for renting” for a self-sufficient home. “Has the high cost of living got you guessing?” they asked those unsure of their financial resources. They assured that investments were “absolutely safe,” as deficits could be made up by the sale of chickens and vegetables. “Homecrofters never had a better fortune chance.”¹⁴

Such developments absolutely delighted Maxwell, who had struggled over the years to keep various homecroft projects afloat in Boston, Phoenix, Indianapolis, and New Orleans. To this end, he solicited yearly donations from chambers of commerce and large and small businessmen across the nation, as well as in support of his lobbying efforts for a National Homecroft Bill. (The bill, which advocated a postal saving bank for homecrofters, never made it out of committee.) It was Duluth, however, that revitalized the movement. What made the city singularly special, Maxwell recounted decades later, was that its enthusiasm “started with the people” and that they reached out “to me.” It was true. The city wasn’t even on his radar in 1911, when local



Growing peas on Jean Duluth field, 1908.

“Acre-culture rather than agriculture” would make Duluth one of the most desirable places to live in North America.

booster Charles Craig, a board member of Duluth's Commercial Club, met with Maxwell in Chicago and invited him to visit.¹⁵

Great fanfare greeted Maxwell's arrival in March, when he delivered a weeklong series of eight lectures to

large audiences at various schools, factories, churches, and civic clubs. The press dutifully highlighted Maxwell's abundant praise for the Zenith City. The intense connection between Maxwell and Duluthians was evident; so much so that after



Charles Craig

this visit he moved the national headquarters of the American Homecroft Society from Chicago and ceded the organization's presidency to Craig. Homecrofiting had officially become the Duluth Idea.

Maxwell was no “music man” huckster (he was a passionate believer), but he hit all the right notes on his tour, pandering to the city's hopes and fears. “You will never build up a manufacturing center on the food that is raised on farms 500 miles away,” he told the Commercial Club on March 25, 1911. He cautioned: “What town is safe when men live in tenements with only the Saturday pay envelope between them and starvation?” He advocated placing “10,000 working men on acre farms,” arguing that “acre-culture rather than agriculture” would make Duluth one of the most desirable places to live in North America. With only modest government expenditures for education and public relations, Maxwell explained,

Advertisement in the Duluth Herald for the grand opening sale of Exeter Farms

TOMORROW IS THE GRAND OPENING SALE OF

EXETER FARMS

SECOND DIVISION

It is the variety of life—the change—that will win you to

EXETER FARMS

If the city's noise and turmoil has overpowered your spirits, you need the fresh, invigorating air of Exeter Farms, scented with the fragrance of growing gardens. It is only 10 minutes from end of Lakeside car line to Exeter Farms—the Rich Garden District of Duluth.

BE A HOMECROFTER

You have to be a homecrofter to know the real joy of living. At Exeter Farms you have your own home, which is self sustaining. You can enjoy fresh air and freedom, raise chickens, pigs, have your own cow, and best of all, you have a good market where you can sell your surplus products at the highest market prices.

FREE!

Tomorrow we are going to give away an acre of land at Exeter Farms, Second Division.

Every one calling at our office on the ground before 3:45 p. m. tomorrow will be given one ticket absolutely free and without obligation to purchase.

COME TO

EXETER FARMS

TOMORROW!

Come Early and Spend the Entire Day.

See--and--Think

- the rich growing gardens
- the cozy homes
- the excellent transportation facilities
- the many other things which make Exeter Farms the ideal homecroft section

- that this remarkable growth covers a period of but two years.

Then you will know that Exeter Farms—Second Division—is one of the big bargains of the year.

PICNIC

TOMORROW AT

EXETER FARMS

Hundreds of people will come to Exeter Farms tomorrow to enjoy the rural charm. Be one of them. Pack your baskets and invite your friends—make tomorrow the biggest and best picnic you ever had. FREE COFFEE will be served all day.

The Third Regiment Band Will Furnish Music

FROM 3 TO 5 P. M.

You are sure to enjoy every minute of the time at Exeter Farms tomorrow. Then, too, you may get an acre of land absolutely free.

How to Get to Exeter Farms

Take Lakeside car to end of line. Transfer to Exeter Farms bus. Ten minutes' ride along the scenic Snively Boulevard and you are at Exeter Farms—the Garden District of Duluth. Fare 5 cents.

The Maloy Motor Service Company will operate several large auto buses from 8 a. m. to 8 p. m. tomorrow.

3 THINGS YOU SHOULD REMEMBER

DATE OF SALE TOMORROW!

You should come early and select just the tract you want before the crowd comes.

LOCATION!

Exeter Farms, located in the beautiful Lester River Valley, three-quarters of a mile from the State Demonstration Farm—easily and quickly reached from any part of the city. Auto bus runs to Lakeside car line.

TERMS!

You make your own terms on your own home at Exeter Farms. A small payment down—a small payment each week or month buys your home.

Buy An Acre and Live On It

ALLIANCE REAL ESTATE COMPANY

LONGDALE BUILDING, DULUTH, MINN.

Come to Exeter Farms and Live

homecrofting addressed the problem of food, increased standards of living, and boosted tourism. It also projected an urban vision that validated the Commercial Club's self-image as a modern, innovative, and Progressive vanguard.¹⁶

Maxwell was decidedly impressed with actions already taken by the club to procure a local food supply. He beamed at the city's public-relations campaign promoting homecroft ideals, noting that the Commercial Club made the city "different from the average American City." Real estate developers from Chicago, Indianapolis, and Springfield, Massachusetts, took note of the publicity and personal profits earned from Duluth's sale of one-acre lots made accessible by new streetcars and trolleys. The message of urban decentralization was similarly advertised by suburban developments across the nation and throughout the twentieth century, but the garden suburbs' emphasis on food production made it the Duluth Idea.¹⁷

Education a key component

The Commercial Club also lobbied state legislators to leverage the University of Minnesota's expertise to establish a demonstration farm. The university's Northeast Demonstration Farm and Experimental Station was built in 1913, a year after the board of regents purchased 235 acres from the Greysolon Farm Company to promote dairy, poultry, fruit, and truck farming. In the original plans, some 50 acres were to be divided into homecroft tracts and leased at nominal rates to families "so long as [their] services are satisfactory." The proximity of the university's demonstration farm became another selling point for Duluth's garden suburbs. Years after the American Homecroft Society faded from memory, observed University of Minnesota Duluth

historian-geographer Randel Hanson, the university's demonstration farm contributed "to the 'golden years' of research and extension services in the region."¹⁸

Education was a key component of the Duluth Idea. This was coordinated by the Commercial Club's agricultural superintendent, Hostetter, who launched a number of community projects designed, first, to teach and interest individuals in gardening and, second, to facilitate scientific study of the county's agricultural possibilities. At a time when there were no urban ordinances requiring open areas, he urged residents to plant vegetables along railroad tracks and in backyards, alleys, and empty lots; convinced real estate agents to grow vegetables instead of weeds on their vacant properties; distributed free seeds to students; and hosted city-wide gardening competitions with

cash prizes. Hostetter collaborated with the YMCA to train gardening specialists for all 20 public schools and to offer adult education courses designed to "hitch" the kitchen and garden. He also worked with local railroad companies to launch an annual "potato special," where a carload of "experts" traveled to the Iron Range to teach residents the art of growing bumper crops. The *Herald* later credited the Homecroft Society with making "manual training and domestic science accepted as a regular part of the school work."¹⁹

"Gardening for the year around," Duluth's own homecroft motto, might have been calculated to downplay

the severity of northern Minnesota's winter season, but it also embodied the way ordinary Americans, not just self-styled experts in government and industry, could apply the "gospel of efficiency," one of the mantras of the era, whose precepts were championed by reformers of both government agencies and individuals. At the 1912 state fair, it was expressed as:

Keep house by the year
Go to the garden in summer
Go to the larder by winter
Let sunshine and soil
Grow fruits and vegetables
From the home garden

Canning, jarring, and drying promised to preserve supplies for the off-season, and mothers were urged to take fastidious inventory of household food consumption throughout the year in order to plan accordingly.

Maxwell's ideal of the home certainly had conservative implications for women and children, whose unpaid labor was key to the workingman's "independence."

Instructors insisted, "There is scarcely a vegetable or fruit which cannot be stored in form for winter use." In 1914, preparation of produce for winter consumption was considered the primary goal for the Commercial Club's Homecroft Committee, which published and distributed across the county 10,000 "Garden Primer" booklets, half of which went to the city's schools.²⁰

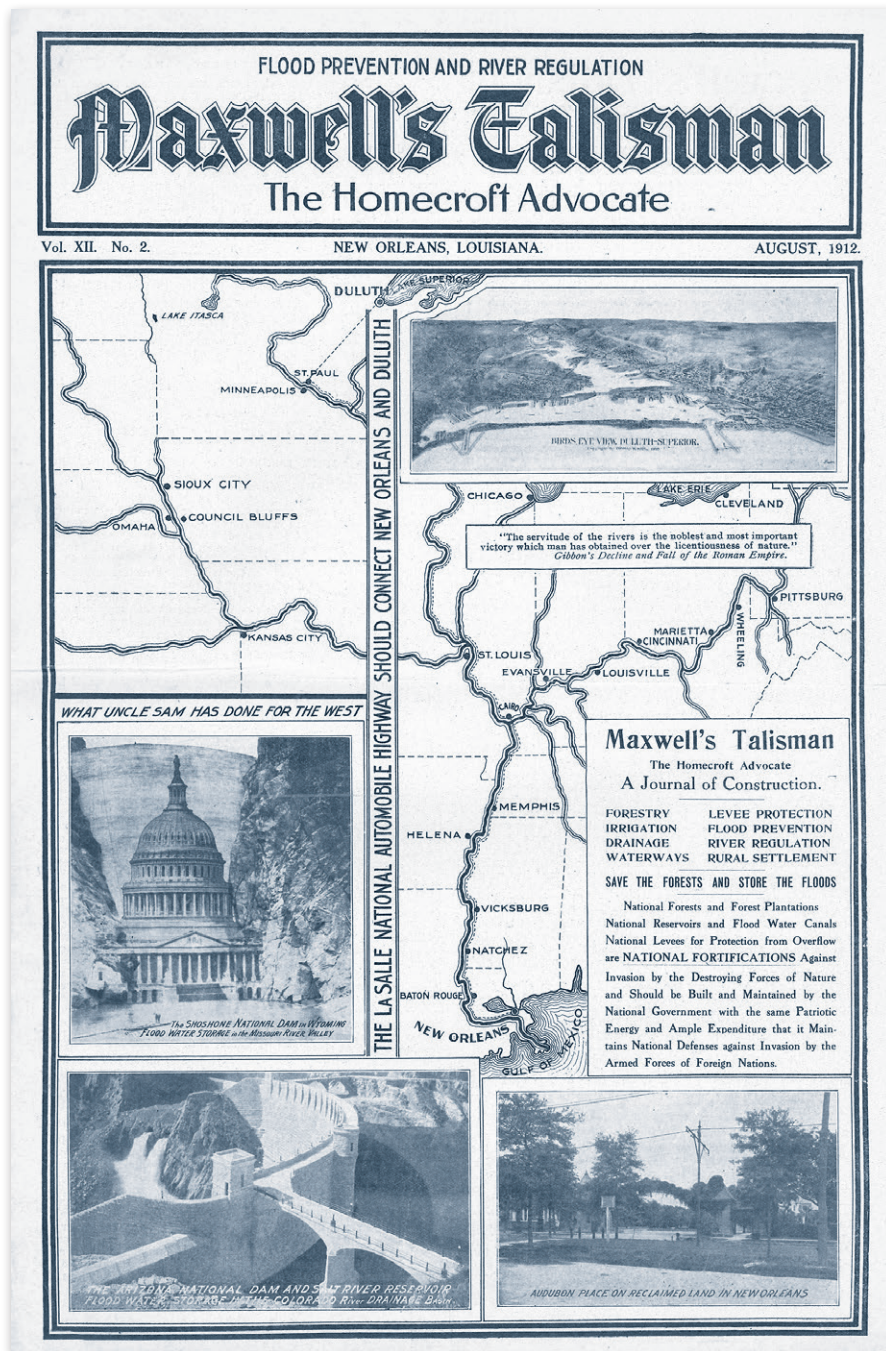
Maxwell's ideal of the home certainly had conservative implications for women and children, whose unpaid labor was key to the workingman's "independence." Women were expected to return as much as possible to their preindus-

trial role as producers. According to Mrs. R. P. Boyington, keynote speaker at a May 1912 meeting of the Duluth Homecroft Society, the average woman prepared a very poor meal because she is "too frivolous" and pays "too much attention to frills and finery." Women, she lamented, "would rather spend their afternoons at a matinee" and "buying [costly] ready-made bread," while "their husbands slave for \$60 a month."²¹

A mutually beneficial relationship

Over the next several years, both Maxwell and Duluth boosters sanguinely exploited one another. When Maxwell consulted or lobbied for an irrigation or flood control project, when he was invited to speak, and when he solicited funds from small businesses, corporations, and individuals nationwide, the promise of Duluth often operated as his hook. *Maxwell's Talisman* reprinted articles from Duluth's newspapers and devoted many pages to the pleasures of living there. If you want to see the results of homecrofting for yourself, Maxwell told the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* in 1912 while campaigning for projects along the Mississippi River, go to Duluth, where "working men of moderate means are moving their families into suburban homes where they can enjoy light, fresh air, and the joys of a garden."²²

Local boosters, meanwhile, garnered a master propagandist who hyped Duluth across the country. "In localizing the [Homecroft] society," exclaimed the *Duluth News Tribune*, "the city has also acquired George H. Maxwell, and which is the greater acquisition remains to be seen." Here was a man who had rallied a fractured and reticent nation around federal reclamation. He literally had made the desert bloom.²³



Cover of Maxwell's Talisman, with map of New Orleans

There was certainly no apparent downside to being at the center of Maxwell's lobbying apparatus. "If the aim of the Homecroft Society succeeds," reported the *Duluth Herald*, "it will be the most and best advertised city in the world." In fact, the efforts of high school students, workers, and women's organizations to reclaim Duluth did receive a great

deal of attention, and the Commercial Club congratulated themselves on the "many thousands of dollars" worth of free press their activities had garnered. "If Duluth can become famous as the 'Homecroft City,'" commented the *Herald*, "we will gladly let the world forget 'Zenith City of the Unsalted Seas.'" A few years later, the newspaper confidently announced

the “awakening of a civic and social consciousness that has placed the city in the front rank of Progressive American Municipalities.” Social and economic problems, it reported, were “given unstinted moral and financial support.”²⁴

Even the ultimate example of corporate America, US Steel, participated in this wave of social experimentation. Hoping to avoid the slums that abutted its other plants, it commissioned Duluth’s Morgan Park, a company town in line with City Beautiful principles, complete with single- and multifamily homes, paved streets and alleys, parks, immaculate landscapes, churches, a clubhouse, stores, and a hospital. Corporations around the nation would regard the suburb of Morgan Park as a material testament to the efficacy of welfare capitalism. Another Duluth company town, Riverside, founded by ship-builder McDougall-Duluth Company, followed suit a few years later. The aim of these endeavors was to illustrate that the private sector could take the lead in managing the urban poor and mitigating class conflict.²⁵

Maxwell’s unfounded obsession over an “Oriental empire” in Baja California inflicted untold injury on his reputation.

Homecrofting’s advocates saw great potential in the ability of giant private economic entities to build company towns, and, yes, these homecrofters sought corporate input in the form of donors and taxation as necessary components of reform, but they offered a different suburban model. Homecrofters thought it imprudent for urbanites to count on sustained economic growth or corporate fealty. Morgan Park was still under construction when Maxwell anointed Duluth the Homecroft City, but he correctly predicted that US Steel and other giants like it would be unable to shield the city from financial depressions. He was also leery of households that “wasted” time and space on inedible lawns and conspicuous consumption. Higher wages and nicer amenities could only offer tepid and temporary relief and, inevitably, add more “petty extravagance.”²⁶

Fruit and vegetable gardens, on the other hand, were a “balance in the wheel of industry.” They both beautified the city and reduced the cost of living. According to an article from the *Duluth Herald* that Maxwell reprinted in his *Talisman*: “A workman equipped with an acre home, as the Homecroft movement would have him, can be independent as you please. If he is out of employment . . . his garden will supply the major portion of the family’s food; and if the rainy day comes and need presses [this garden] can supply practically all of [their food].”²⁷

In 1917, that “rainy day” arrived when America entered into World War I. Severe food shortages compelled President Wilson to beseech Americans to grow “war gardens.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, over 10,000 Duluthians heeded the call, many transforming their homecrofts to war

Morgan Park neighborhood, with US Steel plant in background, 1942.



MAXWELL AS XENOPHOBIC AND RACIST

In his writings and speeches, George Maxwell regularly painted homesteads as micro fiefdoms that would ward off “twentieth century Huns and vandals.”¹ By keeping their inhabitants on the straight and narrow, homesteads would hold un-American forces at bay. In this fashion, Maxwell politicized and weaponized gardening. On the East Coast, the “Huns and vandals” were often the hyphenated, non-Protestant Americans from eastern and southern Europe, whom he associated with radicalism and vice. The American West, however, was the venue for his most zealous xenophobia. Like other prominent advocates of federal reclamation, Maxwell targeted Japanese and Chinese immigrants as the greatest threat to national security.²

Though he was far from alone in his fervent fear of the “yellow peril,” few individuals so thoroughly wedded the ideologies of conservation and white ethnic nationalism as did Maxwell. To him, Anglo-Saxon family farmers were an endangered species, in need of special government protection, such as provided by California’s Alien Land Laws, which prevented Asians from owning land. Asians, according to those who feared them, were not able to assimilate. Thus, their presence presented a state of emergency that demanded immediate intervention in matters of western water. By making small farms and homesteads possible and affordable, Maxwell argued, irrigation projects could counter white flight from the agricultural regions.

gardens. Though Maxwell devoted an entire front page of his *Talisman* to Wilson’s War Economic Proclamation, which explained the ways in which gardens were patriotic, he saw America’s participation in the war as a lamentable waste of resources; he hoped, however, that the national emergency would finally ignite the kind of social transformation he championed.²⁸

Yet, by the end of the decade, Duluth’s daily newspapers were no longer printing features such as the Homestead Corner, and the Homestead Committee of the Commercial Club had been dissolved. Immediate and long-term factors can account for the movement’s gradual disappearance. In 1918, the devastating Cloquet–Moose Lake forest fires

laid waste to much of Duluth’s garden suburbs, including every home and the school in Homestead Park. With 550 fatalities, people were reluctant to risk renewing the acre-city experiment. The influenza epidemic of 1918–19 compounded this reluctance, as people were encouraged to remain indoors. The rapid succession of war, agricultural recession (in the war’s aftermath), disaster, and disease sapped people’s enthusiasm.²⁹

Even before these catastrophes, Maxwell’s attention to the homestead movement was diverted on two fronts: he was being hounded by creditors and he was directing most of his attention to the Colorado River and its perceived connection to the “menace” of Japanese immigrant agriculturalists, an “emergency” that,

In his 1915 book *The Patriotism of Peace*, Maxwell argued that the Colorado River needed comprehensive dams because every drop of water that flowed past the Mexican border would be stolen by Japanese imperialists colonizing Baja California. He vainly hoped such fears would rally railroads, Wall Street, labor unions, and the federal government to support homesteads across the nation. In the same work, he proposed a homestead reserve system, a fantastical hybrid of the National Guard and what became the Civilian Conservation Corps. In times of war, he proposed, homestead reservists would police the borderlands. In times of peace, they would fight fires, erect levees, and construct homestead villages.³ Maxwell’s xenophobic conspiracy theories began to tear at his credibility. They may have been the last gasp of the homestead movement if it hadn’t been for the residents of Duluth, Minnesota, keeping the gardens alive.

Notes

1. *Maxwell’s Talisman* (May 1906), box 1, entry 57, Bureau of Reclamation.
2. For an analysis of the impact of xenophobia on the federal reclamation movement, see Eric Boime, “Beating Plowshares into Swords: The Colorado River Delta, the Yellow Peril, and the Movement of Federal Reclamation, 1901–1928,” *Pacific Historical Review* 78, no. 1 (Feb. 2009).
3. George H. Maxwell, *Our National Defense: The Patriotism of Peace* (Washington, DC: Rural Settlements Association, 1915). The National Park Service website lists Maxwell’s idea as a precursor of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

he hoped, would summon further patriotic entreaties to homesteading ideals. (See sidebar.) In actuality, his unfounded obsession over an “Oriental empire” in Baja California inflicted untold injury on his reputation. (At one congressional hearing, a senator from Utah inquired if Maxwell was smoking peyote.)³⁰

Such immediate explanations for the demise of the Duluth Idea ignore the larger sweep of the twentieth century. Like so many other movements that deigned to challenge mass-consumer culture, homestead advocates were simply unable to present a credible alternative to the dominant suburban ideal that presented the home as a refuge from any and all production. As Maxwell explained to the owner of the New York Yankees



Ruins of Homecroft School, Duluth, 1918.

in 1931, homerofting was “submerged by the wave of riotous prosperity which made it impossible to get anybody interested in anything but joyriding and the movies.” New mass-production technology, refrigerated railroad cars, and modern grocery stores—demonstrations of that same prosperity—also did not help the cause for universal garden ownership.³¹

In 1924, Charles Craig and Maxwell crossed paths in Washington, DC, where the two former presidents of the American Homecroft Society commiserated over the movement’s decline in Duluth. In a follow-up letter Craig nevertheless assured Maxwell that “there are hundreds of families in Duluth today who have never heard of [the organization] who are working on principles which were, years ago, put forth by that Society.” It was a prescient observation about the homecroft’s currency in later eras. During the Great Depression, Maxwell himself mused on consequential New Deal conservation legislation he had influenced, including the Department of the Interior’s Division of Subsis-

tence Homesteads, which instructed young men to achieve independence from the land. This federal program financed almost a hundred planned homestead communities, including one in Duluth, which became one of its “most successful” models. Unlike homecrofts, occupants of homesteads farmed full time for wages, but the idea evoked the acre-culture suburbs of the previous decade.³²

Its shortcomings aside, the Duluth Idea offers a unique perspective into the cultural values underlying the Progressive conservation movement. To luminaries like Maxwell, and to the people he inspired, the era’s natural resource policies were more than a set of means and strategies for managing nature’s wealth. They were also principles for managing everyday men, women, and children. Conservation policies not only could reclaim wasted waters and rejuvenate arid and swampy lands; they also could reclaim lost souls and rejuvenate wayward citizens in the modern industrial age.

Many components of homerofting continue to be co-opted and

applied to modern-day problems. Gardening remains a popular remedy for returning veterans, inner-city children, children with special needs, and other people confronting societal marginalization. Best-selling author Michael Pollan or former first lady Michelle Obama would have little patience for Maxwell’s xenophobic nationalism, but they would readily agree with the civic, educational, and economic values he associated with horticulture. What Maxwell would have made of the first African American first lady one can speculate, but if he could have seen the example set by the vegetable garden she planted on the White House lawn, he probably would have beamed, much as he did for the gardens of Duluth. □

Notes

1. “St. Louis County Again Triumphs at the Minnesota State Fair,” *Duluth Herald*, Sept. 9, 1912, 3; *Duluth News Tribune*, Sept. 7, 1912, republished on the front of *Maxwell’s Talisman* (June 1920), box 1, entry 57, Records of the Bureau of Reclamation, Record Group 115, National Archives–Rocky Mountain Region, Denver, CO (hereinafter cited as Bureau of Reclamation).
2. Donald Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 13.
3. William Smythe, *The Conquest of Arid America*, rev. ed. (London: MacMillan Company, 1911), 272–73; Laura Lovett, “Land Reclamation as Family Reclamation: The Family Ideal in George Maxwell’s Reclamation and Resettlement Campaigns, 1897–1933,” *Social Politics* 7, no. 1 (Mar. 1, 2000): 88.
4. Donald J. Pisani, “Reclamation and Social Engineering in the Progressive Era,” *Agricultural History* 57 (1983): 46–63.
5. Conservation in the Progressive Era was a potent political movement that wholly redefined government’s relationship to both nature and the public domain. Maxwell’s National Reclamation Act was an example of the Progressive conservation movement’s far-reaching consequences. For decades, historians defined conservationists as self-styled experts who applied science, planning, and policy to maximize nature’s utility. In recent years, historians have interpreted the movement more broadly, as a set of ethics and principles that everyday Ameri-

cans should adopt. The homeroft movement is reflective of this more inclusive interpretation.

6. Maxwell to C. S. Prosser, Director, Federal Board for Vocational Educations, Sept. 24, 1918, box 6, folder 4, Bureau of Reclamation.

7. See Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); Kevin Armitage, *The Nature Study Movement: The Forgotten Popularizer of America's Conservation Ethic* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009), 113.

8. "Public Affairs: The Annual Report of the Chairman of the Public Affairs Committee of the Commercial Club of Duluth," 1910, folder 53065, Duluth Chamber of Commerce, Archives and Special Collections, Kathryn A. Martin Library, University of Minnesota Duluth (hereinafter cited as "Public Affairs"); Randel D. Hansen, "Food from Scratch for the Zenith of the Unsalted Seas," in *City of Famers: Urban Agricultural Practices and Processes*, ed. Julie C. Dawson and Alfonso Morales (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 11-18.

9. The timber and mineral industries made Duluth home to "more millionaires per capita at this point than any other city in the United States": Hansen, "Food from Scratch," 12-13. Frank Parker Stockbridge, "Two Cities That Turned Farmers," *World's Work* 25 (1913): 460-61; "Public Affairs"; *The Lake Superior Farmer* 2, no. 21 (May 23, 1914): 1. For an examination of Duluth's "food systems quandary," see Hansen, "Food from Scratch."

10. Arnold R. Alanen and Chris Faust, *Morgan Park: Duluth, U.S. Steel, and the Forging of a Company Town* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 31.

11. Armitage, *The Nature Study Movement*, 113. Chicago architect Daniel H. Burnham was perhaps best known for his role as director of works for the "White City" of the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, which established the Classical Revival style nationwide.

12. Ad, "Tomorrow is the grand opening of Exeter Farms," *Duluth Herald*, July 24, 1915, 26; *Duluth Herald*, 1912, reprinted in *Maxwell's Talisman* (July 1912); *Duluth Herald*, July 24, 1915.

13. Ad, "The Last 7 Acre-Lots for Sale Sunday at Homecroft Park," *Duluth Herald*, Oct. 8, 1910, 28. See Nancy S. Nelson and Tony Dierckins, *Duluth's Historic Parks: Their First 160 Years* (Duluth: Zenith City Press, 2017), 202-3; *Duluth Herald*, Oct. 26, 1912. While I have been publishing articles about Maxwell for more than a decade, Nelson's account of Duluth's "garden suburbs" was an inspiration for this article.

14. Exeter Farms founding, *Duluth Herald*, Oct. 26, 1912. For various advertisements: *Duluth Herald*, Oct. 3 and 24, 1914; July 10, 17, 23, and 24, 1915.

15. *Zanesville Press*, May 19, 1935; transcripts in the George Hebard Maxwell Papers, entry 404, MG 1, 1902-55, Arizona State Archives, Phoenix.

16. "Must Have Agricultural District Before

THE LAST 7 "ACRE-LOTS" FOR SALE SUNDAY AT

ONE DOLLAR DOWN **HOMECROFT PARK** **ONE DOLLAR DOWN**

After the summer's tremendous selling of fine acre-garden tracts in beautiful Homecroft Park, we have only seven lots left. They will all be sold tomorrow.

SUNDAY IS YOUR LAST CHANCE TO BUY ACRE LOTS FOR \$1.00 Down, Balance \$1.50 to \$2.00 Weekly.

Investigate the big developments which have already commenced at Homecroft. Investigate the great possibilities that are coming. Many homes have already been built. Street car line is to be extended through Homecroft. These tracts are ideal for truck farming or poultry raising. Soil consists of deep rich black loam, which is immensely productive. Homecroft tracts are the best possible investment. These "little farms" are growing valuable every month.

HOW TO GO--- Visit Homecroft Park tomorrow, Sunday. Our auto will meet every Woodland car after 9 a. m. and take you direct to Homecroft, until all the lots are sold.

W. M. PRINDLE & CO.
No. 3 Lonsdale Bldg. Zenith Phone, 239—Bell Phone, 2400. Duluth, Minn.

Ad, *Duluth Herald*, Oct. 8, 1910.

Manufacturing Develops," *Duluth News Tribune*, Mar. 25, 1911, 8.

17. "Duluth Becoming Known as the Homecroft City," *Duluth Herald*, Oct. 24, 1912, 12; *Maxwell's Talisman* (June 1920); "Homecroft Idea is Giving Duluth Publicity Throughout Country," *Duluth Herald*, Sept. 28, 1912, 22.

18. *Caledonia Argus*, Apr. 19, 1912; Nelson and Dierckins, *Duluth's Historic Parks*, 200; Hansen, "Food from Scratch," 60.

19. Stockbridge, "Two Cities That Turned Farmers," 465; "Potato Special Travels for Harbinger Business," *Duluth News Tribune*, Mar. 31, 1911, 8.

20. "St. Louis County Again Triumphs," *Duluth Herald*, May 29, 1912; yearbook containing "Annual Reports of the Officers and Committees of the Commercial Club of Duluth," 1915, Duluth Homecroft Movement, Duluth File Clippings, Duluth Public Library. The verse is from a second banner at the Homecroft Society of Duluth's booth at the 1912 state fair. A copy of the "Garden Primer" is filed at University of Minnesota Duluth's Kathryn A. Martin Library, folder 53065.

21. "Reducing Living Cost," *Duluth Herald*, June 1, 1912, 20; for a gendered critique of homecrofting, see Lovett, "Land Reclamation as Family Reclamation."

22. "Homecroft Advertising," *Duluth Herald*, Sept. 25, 1912, 10; *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, Sept. 12, 1912, reprinted in *Maxwell's Talisman* (Jan. 1913); "Maxwell Lauds Duluth in South," *Duluth Herald*, May 14, 1913, 2.

23. *Duluth News Tribune*, 1911(?), reprinted in *Maxwell's Talisman* (July 1912).

24. *Duluth News Tribune*, 1911(?), reprinted in *Maxwell's Talisman* (July 1912); Julius Barnes, Public Affairs Chairman, to the Members of the Commercial Club, Mar. 30, 1913, Duluth Chamber of Commerce, Correspondence and Reference Material, 1890-1967, Kathryn A. Martin Library, University of Minnesota Duluth; *Duluth Herald*, Sept. 25, 1912; "Awakening of Civic and

Social Consciousness of Duluth," *Duluth Herald*, Jan. 11, 1913, 9.

25. Alanen and Faust, *Morgan Park*; Matthew Lawrence Daley, "Duluth's Other Company Town: The McDougall-Duluth Company, Riverside, and World War I Shipbuilding," *Minnesota History* 63, no. 5 (spring 2013): 176-89.

26. *Duluth New Tribune*, Mar. 30, 1911, reprinted in *Maxwell's Talisman* (July 1912).

27. *Emancipation: A Journal of Construction and National Service* 14 (1917), box 1, entry 57, Bureau of Reclamation; "Gardening for the Year Around," *Duluth Herald*, May 29, 1912, 8, reprinted in *Maxwell's Talisman* (July 1912).

28. Alanen and Faust, *Morgan Park*, 207.

29. Nelson and Dierckins, *Duluth's Historic Parks*, 203; Robert Autabee, "Every Child in a Garden: George H. Maxwell and the American Homecroft Society," *Prologue* 28, no. 3 (fall 1996): 202.

30. Beverley Bowen Moeller, *Phil Swing and the Boulder Dam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 53.

31. Maxwell to Tillinghast L. Huston, Apr. 15, 1931, box 23, Bureau of Reclamation; Autabee, "Every Child in a Garden" 205.

32. Charles P. Craig to Maxwell, Aug. 22, 1924, general correspondence, 1911-54, box 11, Bureau of Reclamation; Timothy J. Garvey, "The Duluth Homesteads: A Successful Experiment in Community Housing," *Minnesota History* 46, no. 1 (spring 1978): 2-16.

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