

RAMSEY COUNTY
History

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Chamber and Community
The Midway and Its Colorful History—Page 4



University and Snelling Avenues around 1916. Streetcars were in their heyday and their barns occupied the entire corner. See article beginning on page 4. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

This issue of *Ramsey County History* focuses exclusively on the Midway area of St. Paul. We have done this because the Midway Chamber of Commerce is celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary in October. As you will find in reading this issue, the story of the Midway area is rich and varied, ranging from the early days of settlement and statehood to the present period of industrial, commercial and residential vitality. The Editorial Board thanks the Midway Chamber of Commerce for its help in producing this issue of our magazine and congratulates the Chamber on its many contributions to the Midway area over the past seventy-five years.

John M. Lindley,
chairman, Editorial Board

Growing Up In Saint Paul

Remembering: 'Towns Within' and Their People

Joanne Englund

It was 1910 when my grandmother, Minda Sands, walked from her home in Minneapolis near Franklin Avenue and the Mississippi river to the city limits at University Avenue in order to pay only a single fare for the streetcar ride to Snelling and University where her husband, Paul, and a real estate agent had gone to look at lots for sale. Grandma wanted to be sure she was satisfied with the choice that would be made. They were looking at lots in the area southwest of the intersection. Grandma saw that area as too low and swampy, so they walked northeast about a mile to higher land where they bought a lot on Edmund, between Albert and Pascal, north of what would later be the Montgomery Ward location. Nearby on Hamline Avenue was Bohn Refrigerator Company where Paul worked.

For the first summer, the family lived in two small tents on the front of the lot while Paul built a shack in his spare time on the back of the property. The family then folded up the tents and moved into the shack while he had a house built on the front of the lot. My grandfather intended to use the house as rental property and to get enough money in a few years to build a better home for his family. The house was built in 1914 and for the next six years they and the three children lived in the shack while the house was rented. Grandma had already bought a square, rosewood piano, had it in the shack, and was taking lessons. The shack wasn't luxury, but it was liveable. City water and gas were supplied; sidewalks and gas street lights were in place about the time the lot was purchased, but it was many years before curbs, oiled streets, and electricity were installed.

By 1916 Minda's patience had reached its end, and the depression at that time was a good reason for them to move



The author (second from left) with neighborhood friends in 1947: Verg Scott (left), Phyllis Barron, Bev Gallinaugh and Katie Woods. Photos are from the author.

into the house. During World War I, with women entering the workforce, grandma went to work at Bohn Refrigerator, along with Paul, on the enameling and baking line. She worked nights and he worked days, so that someone was always home for the children. During the winter of 1918, Paul died unexpectedly after only two weeks of illness during the flu epidemic. By the following summer the family had to move back into the shack so that the house rent could help pay the bills. This time, Minda added a fine new Victrola to the furnishings.

Even though most women were dismissed from their jobs after the war, Minda continued for a short while after Paul died, then found work in a more typical women's job as a night-shift short-order cook at "Parsley's," a local restaurant. That way she could be home with the children during the day when they were awake.

By 1919, the economy was again booming. The Midway Club, now the

Midway Chamber of Commerce, was founded during this upturn. For the next decade, Snelling and University was the center of new housing starts and business development. Grandma told me how she could see from her house the streetcar barns at University and Snelling because, when they first moved in, the land was still very open. By the next depression in the early 1930s, grandma had been married to Laros Wilson and they had separated. The shack had been torn down and used to add two rooms to the back of the house, rooms in which grandma lived after her separation. My dad was out of work and my grandmother had no tenants. My mother and dad, Audrey and Alfred Wickoren, and I moved in with my grandmother. At that time, there were only two vacant lots left on our block and few on the surrounding blocks.

My early memories are of an established neighborhood, finished streets, shady trees, and stable businesses. Around our block, on three of the four

corners, there were thriving grocery stores. Two blocks away, on the southwest corner of Hamline and Thomas Streets, was Kemp's Pharmacy with a wonderful soda fountain and a magazine stand where we would try to read all the comic books before buying any. Around the corner to the south on Hamline, was Ryan's Ice where my red wagon and I would be sent to get a big block of ice before we owned a refrigerator. There was an enticing "five and dime" store, Strandy's Bakery, Kelser's Barber Shop, and Harris' Taylor shop.

Around the corner to the west on Thomas was a beauty shop, Spicer and Schaller Meats, and Tallen Brothers Grocery. The dentist, Kenneth Spates, was located on the second floor. A gas station was on the northeast corner. Across the street on the south side of Thomas was a Henry's Shoe Repair with a narrow, creaky, wooden aisle and counter little wider than the door, already filled with two or more, barking, over-friendly dachshunds and their eternal litter of puppies. Toward the corner was Keenan's Bakery, Maloney and Tysk Grocery, and Hetzeneker Meats. The streetcar came by every few minutes heading toward either a Minneapolis connection at Prior and University or downtown St. Paul.

We lived with my grandmother and various aunts and uncles throughout my childhood. My children knew my grandmother and her house almost as well as their own. My mother still lives there. Today, my grandson lives nearby with his family and is learning to walk and bike his way around the neighborhood as I did a half century earlier. My uncle George was my "big brother." Fifteen years older than I, he was my example of growing up. Together, we would bike to Battle Creek Park, Phalen Park, and other outside worlds. He worked for Griggs Cooper Wholesale Grocery on University Avenue. He once hid me on the floor of the cab of his semi-trailer while we drove out of town, and I got to travel with him on his deliveries to the small grocery stores in and around Forest Lake, Hugo, and White Bear.

My world was usually quite complete within the bounds of Snelling, University, Lexington, and the railroad tracks to

the north, and occasionally a mile or so beyond. It was a small "town in town." For the most part, everything I needed was within walking and biking distance, and I could go alone—Galtier School and Girl Scouts, Hamline Playground and its ice skating rink, Hamline Library's books and puppet shows, my friends' homes, Hamline theater's Saturday matinees, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, shopping, and jobs—all within walking distance. I could walk to my classes, the Friday night Teen Kanteen, and school plays at Wilson High School; football games at Central High School's stadium; Madelon's Ice Cream Parlor on Snelling at Blair; a host of movie theaters; and food stops equipped with booths, soda fountains, cherry cokes, and juke boxes.

Going to my physician, Dr. Ruby Smith Viers, was less than a two-mile walk to Prior and University. My mother worked nearby at the Northwestern Aeronautical Factory (on Minnehaha near Prior) during World War II and, later, at The Logan Bindery on Prior, south of University. Reaching out, I could bike to Como Park, the Mississippi river, and other city neighborhoods. My dad's father lived about two miles away at the end of what is now Taylor Avenue at Prior. All of his children and my cousins lived in between. I could bike or walk to their homes. My year-older cousin, Charles Fillmore, was my "closest brother;" we shared our thoughts, lives, and parents with each other. The whole family gathered in grandpa's backyard each year to watch the State Fair fireworks burst overhead. And I could walk to Montgomery Ward.

Montgomery Ward was a world of its own. Its tower was my "lighthouse" for finding my way home if I wandered too far.

While enrolled at the University of Minnesota, I worked at Ward's along with, it seemed, almost every student from miles around. Hours were flexible, the variety of jobs was endless, and the number of employees was incomprehensible. Retail was a world of its own, out front, in public view. But behind the "employee only" doors were rows of timecards and endless spaces—the mail-

ing room where rows of us stuffed envelopes while competing with time-set quotas, the "records" area where people hunched over small file drawers of cards and recorded individual mail-order purchases, "merchandise" where cavernous rows of endless material goods loomed before you as you searched to fill an order in preparation for mailing, and "packaging" where items and collections of items of every sort were prepared for individual delivery, often by Ward's trucks. Many marriages had their beginnings in the friendships that started at Ward's and the romances that evolved.

The streetcar was my independent access to the larger world which lay only a short walk and one "token" away (I remember that twelve, ten-cent tokens could be purchased for a dollar). I could go downtown to window-shop the row of dime stores on Seventh Street, east of Wabasha. Everything outside of that area, although visited, felt like foreign territory. It was a part of a metropolitan area both familiar and foreign to me. I remember driving by the cement block house on the corner of Dale and Wheelock. I knew then that I was out in the country, far, far away from home. Going to Minneapolis, including the University of Minnesota, required two tokens, one for travel in each city. Usually I would walk to the city limits in order to save half the cost of the fare. For my fourteenth birthday, my parents "rented" a streetcar, and my guests and I had our private party while the driver toured the Twin Cities for a couple of hours—awesome.

Snelling and University was the heart of the community with easy access to all areas of the Twin Cities. It had two drug stores, the Midway Movie Theater, Barr's Flowers, Henry Funeral Home (now Holcomb-Henry-Boom), bars and restaurants. West of Snelling was Midway Gardens Bowling Alley and Bar, Midway Bank (its original site), a furniture store, Western Auto Supply, Hurley's Men's Clothing Store, a dry cleaner, pool halls, and liquor store. Midway Department Store was on the south side of University, west of Snelling. At age thirteen, I bought my first pair of high heeled shoes there. What a memorable

event! The streetcar barns took up the whole southeast corner. Many choices of streetcar lines began there. That's where my dad worked when my family moved in with grandma. He joined the St. Paul police force in 1937 and "walked the beat" on Snelling and University. His job included directing traffic, checking door locks and windows, and talking with the merchants and people who shopped in the area. When I got to walk the avenues with him during his off-duty hours, it seemed that we walked in and out of every store, and that he introduced me to everyone.

Dad worked for a business associated with the Minnesota Transfer before he joined the police force. His father, his uncles, and a brother also worked for the Minnesota Transfer as foremen and switchmen. This area formed the railroad hub for heavy industrial uses, with connections fanning out in all directions. I remember, as a child, sitting on a wooden fence while my dad and uncle talked, watching the steers and other animals in a holding yard while they waited to be transferred to another train for shipment to slaughter. We would go there also when the circus arrived and watch the workers unload the animals and equipment, and then we would follow the parade to the southwest corner of Lexington and University. This corner has also been home to the ball park for the St. Paul Saints, a roller-skating rink and, before that, a dance hall. It now houses a mini-mall.

The Centre Movie theater was further east on the south side of University. We would go there on occasion as well as to the Park Theater on Selby, west of Snelling, the Bluebird on Front, east of Lexington, and the Grand, west of Hamline and Grand. (I remember walking to the Grand with my mother one April evening. It had snowed heavily, the sidewalks were thick slush, and the lilac branches and blooms were weighted way down.) We walked everywhere. Three or four miles was nothing. Before going to bed, I would often walk alone at night to University, then Lexington, Minnehaha, Snelling, University, and home. I felt "invisible," secure, and comforted while enjoying the sounds, smells, and lights of

the businesses and homes along my path.

The Hamline Playground was built when I was six or seven. I remember walking to the site many times during construction to ask the workers, "when are you going to be done?" My grandmother and I would walk along Hamline



The house on Edmund, with Paul and Minda Sands (left and right). Children are Audrey Sands Wickoren, perched on the porch railing, and her sister, Gladys.

to and from Como Park. We would cross the walking bridge that arched over the furnaces at the Koppers Coke Plant and trudge up or down the multi-story open-metal stairs that connected the bridge to the ground on the north. The Coke Plant was magnificent; we would stop and watch the enormous fires, feel the heat blast, and listen to the roaring sounds of the fire and the clanking of the huge, moving, metal parts.

The Northern Pacific Hospital block (later named the Samaritan Hospital) was vacant when mom grew up. Mom had her appendix out at the old Midway Hospital, which was then located in a large, green, old house on Snelling Avenue. She had her tonsils out right at Montgomery Ward, while she was employed there. Dr. Skinner took them out in his company office on the third floor, and she walked home after the surgery. My mother remembers her family packing a lunch and walking to Roselawn Cemetery to visit my grandfather's grave. When my mother grew up, Galtier grade school was newly finished. Mom, and I after her, had only three blocks to walk to school. Mom and I both had the same teacher, Mrs. Bailey, for math. During World War II, my mother and I would walk to

the school to collect our rationing stamps and tokens—red for meat, yellow for butter, and blue for gasoline. I remember that sugar was allocated right at the school and we carried it home.

Going with my dad to the local dump was a favorite pastime. The dump took up a couple of city blocks at about Minnehaha and Victoria (now the Minnehaha Shopping Center). The mysterious and immense estate called the House of the Good Shepherd (a home for unwed mothers) was situated right across the street on a high hill. We would dump our trash and bring home almost the same amount of someone else's that looked especially useful to us. The dump was a smouldering mass of wet smells and surprises. The ground under our feet would shift in unpredictable ways as we walked.

The local dumps are now gone. The coal dust and soot from heating houses, industries, and train boilers no longer collects on the window sills. The trolley wires no longer web the air and the tracks no longer catch your shoes as you cross the streets. Almost all streets are paved and well lighted. Many houses have been rehabed and sparkle like new, but many corner businesses have closed and the vitality of a walking public has dwindled. Much of the human and financial support has left for finer facilities and greener expanses in monotone, suburban spaces, where connections are almost fully inaccessible by foot.

St. Paul is still "my town." I like it here. Even though it has faced many changes, some of its "towns within" are still operating. St. Paul still has human-scale neighborhoods—like the Midway area—with close, complex, interactive relationships of business and community. Along University Avenue, the diversity of styles, cultures, and choices—new and old—provides opportunities for new, rewarding relationships, discoveries, and growth.

Healthy, small businesses and the people who walk to and from them are the human connections that build the real structures of a city. The buildings are only icons of past human relationships which built them. Old buildings help people remember their past and celebrate those past relationships. They are made

for walking. They continue to bring people together and maintain the “human structures” of the city. St. Paul’s health is maintained by maintaining its many “towns within,” including its downtown, and by its wonderfully diverse people. Its strength is in its human scale, its diversity, and the connections among the people who visit and live in it. The suburbs cannot compete with that. I like it.

Joanne Englund is a lifelong resident of Ramsey County. Born and raised in St. Paul, she lived in the Midway area on Edmund Avenue, and she attended Galtier grade school, Wilson High School, and the University of Minnesota. She retired from St. Paul city administration and an independent consultant with non-profit agencies and government. She is the president of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

Richard T. Murphy, Sr.

I have had a long and wonderful experience working and living in the Midway district. As a child, I grew up on its fringe, a block away from the College of St. Thomas, and my father, in 1936, moved his business, E. L. Murphy Trucking Company, from Minneapolis to a location at 1924 University Avenue.

This was just close enough for me to ride my bike to the office after school or, during the winter months, walk from St. Mark’s school to the office so that I could begin to learn what it was to work. This was around 1937. After school, it was my job to fuel all the trucks and back them into the garage for parking. After that, I checked oil, aired tires and did anything else the shop foreman asked of me. For this I received the princely sum of 50 cents per week. Wow! I had more spending money than most of my friends. This set me on the road to a career that has been fulfilling, richly rewarding and much loved.

My first recollections of the Prior and University area were of the team track operated by the Minnesota Transfer Railway on the southwest corner and of our own building located in the middle of the



E. L. Murphy Trucking Company at 1924 University Avenue, before its move to Roseville in the early 1950s. Photo from Murphy Warehouse Company.

block to the east. Across the street, the Midway Club had its offices on the second floor of the Esslinger building. This was a multiple story, older type of building with a cafe and bar on the first floor. I’m not sure who the other tenants in the upper floors were.

Next to this was a machine shop called Lloyd Products. Its owner was a former Navy veteran who apparently was highly skilled at tool and die-making. I recall seeing him in the area frequently. Always driving a large Lincoln or Pierce Arrow automobile replete with white wall tires mounted on the sides just ahead of the front doors. He always seemed to have a cigar in his mouth. Next to us was the H. V. Smith Company. Smith was in the extermination business, and I never really understood what that was all about.

Our company, in those days, was in the machinery moving and local cartage business. Dad had an extensive fleet of motor vehicles that operated up and down University Avenue between the warehouse and rail areas adjacent to the “loops” in both Minneapolis and St. Paul. In addition, we delivered orders to the homes of Sears Roebuck’s customers—a myriad of wonderful things, none of which we seemingly could afford.

Saturdays were big days at our company because every truck had to be washed and swept out. Guess who

headed up that project. I would start at 6 a.m. and usually work until 6 or 7 in the evening in order to complete the job. The highlight of the day was my father taking me across the street to Esslinger’s cafe for lunch. Boy, did I eat well!

I graduated from St. Mark’s in 1937, and went on to high school at St. Thomas Military Academy. This was then located on the college campus so I could continue my afternoon routine. During the summer, I was able to work fulltime and earned the handsome amount of \$2 per week; half of that had to be placed in a savings account at what was then First Security State Bank located at Raymond and University.

I graduated from St. Thomas in June of 1942 and, much to my surprise, was commissioned a second lieutenant in the United States Army as a result of my military training at St. Thomas. During my senior year, Congress had lowered the age for commissioned officers from twenty-one to eighteen, and on June 4 I not only received my high school diploma but also my commission. A scant ten days later I was at Camp Wolters, Texas, assigned to an infantry replacement training unit.

After service in the Army and subsequently the Army Air Corps, I returned from the war in 1945 and enrolled at the University of Minnesota. During that

time, I continued to work at the trucking company and had a rather ingenious method of transportation. In the early morning, I would catch a ride on one of the trucks that was heading to Minneapolis from the garage. In the afternoon, when I finished my classes, I simply went to University and Fifteenth Avenue Southeast and waited on the corner until the first Murphy truck came by. The driver would stop, pick me up and take me to the office where I changed my clothes and resumed my "gofer" duties.

During the war, much changed in the area of Prior and University. The Birnberg Company, a wholesaler, still existed, but Lloyd Products, I believe, disappeared, Lloyd having died. Smith still exterminated and next door the Twin City Hardware Company plied its trade. Our company had prospered during the war and had expanded to where it was hauling heavy, cumbersome articles throughout the Upper Midwest. Much of that was for Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company and the old Minneapolis Heat Regulator Company, now known as Honeywell.

After World War II, while at the University, I lived on campus much of the time, but continued to work part-time at the offices at 1924 University. I vividly remember being sent to Midway Transfer's team truck with instructions to supervise the unloading of the famous Tucker motor car. This was a radically designed new approach to motor vehicles and it was being sent around the country on a promotion tour.

When I opened the boxcar, I stood in awe of this magnificent vehicle with its "cyclops" headlight and other aerodynamic features. Obviously designed way ahead of its time. As I examined the vehicle, I suddenly discovered it couldn't be operated because it didn't have a motor. Needless to say, there was a lot of pushing and shoving, but we finally got it out of the boxcar, loaded onto our truck and on its way to the St. Paul auditorium for exhibition.

In the early 1950s, business had improved to the point where we could no longer utilize the Prior and University location because we had outgrown it. Along with most of the other trucklines

then in the Midway area, we moved north to Roseville, locating on a huge piece of ground on County Road C.

This ended forever my daily foray into the Midway area. It is a piece of my life that I recall with a great deal of fondness. It was a wonderful learning experience.

Richard T. Murphy, Sr., is chairman and chief executive officer of the Murphy Warehouse Company, a past president of the Ramsey County Historical Society and a longtime member of its board of directors.

Dick Reiter

The Midway area has long nurtured its share of St. Paul's interesting people and I remember at least three of them vividly.

There was Ralph R. Kriesel, who founded Midway Chevrolet in 1923 with \$5,000 that he borrowed from his mother. The first site of Midway Chevrolet was the northwest corner of University and Fry. In 1924, Kriesel moved the dealership to its present location at Albert and University. From there he expanded his empire.

Kriesel owned Downtown Chevrolet in Minneapolis, as well as Viking Chevrolet in Duluth. He built the Blue Horse restaurant at University and Hamline as a place for wining and dining, as well as transacting business. The Blue Horse always made money during the years Kriesel owned it. He also owned three small loan companies strung along University between Snelling and Raymond, and several banks. He was president of the Midway Chamber of Commerce from October, 1955, to October, 1956.

I remember Kriesel as a sharp businessman. He had a certain savvy and an ability to analyze a business situation. He would buy a business, improve it and sell it for a profit.

When Ralph Kriesel died at Lockport, Illinois, he was at his favorite place—alongside his captain, Lord Roberts, as they were bringing Kriesel's sixty-four foot Burger motor yacht back from Man-

itowoc, Wisconsin, along the Illinois ship canal.

* * *

Alfred Anderson founded Anderson Welding in 1930 with \$1,500 that he had saved. His original building was at 502 North Prior, but he moved in 1946 to 492 North Prior, still his site today.

The trucking industry played a vital role in the development of the Midway area and all trucking companies had in-house welders. However, when it came to a difficult job, there was one man they called on—Andy Anderson.

After fifty years of welding, Andy took a metallurgy course at the University of Minnesota. He reported later, in his gravel voice: "The course was interesting, but I think the professor learned a whole lot more than I did."

Anderson Welding is now owned by Andy's son Ronald, still doing quality work the "old-fashioned way."

* * *

You have seen him on television as well as in the TV section of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. The gentleman with gray hair and mustache is Jack L. Prescott, attorney, whose slogan is "That's all I do and I do it well."

Jack Prescott is another product of the Midway district. He was born, raised and educated there and he opened his first law office there. He attended Wilson High School and studied pre-law at Hamline University.

In 1955 Jack opened his first law office across from KSTP. He moved it in 1959 to the Borchert Ingersoll building on University near Vandalia. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s he opened additional offices, so that today he has nine. Many companies in the Midway have retained his legal services. Apparently, whatever he does, he does it well.

Dick Reiter is a true son of the Midway. Born at Midway Hospital, he attended Hancock grade school and Wilson High School. He graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1953. He's the second generation owner of the Regina Agency located at 1681 University Avenue.



Hamline Park Playground candidates for one of the Midway's Winter Carnivals, probably 1929 or 1930. Can anyone identified these young women? Midway Chamber of Commerce photo. See article beginning on Page 4.

R.C.H.S.
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