

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Volume 47, Number 3

*The Center of the Universe
for Car Buyers:
University Avenue Dominated
the Local Automotive Scene
for Fifty Years*

Peter B. Myers—Page 13

Hands-On Historian:

Ethel Hall Stewart and Preserving the Gibbs Farm

Steven C. Trimble

Page 3



A 1970s postcard of the Gibbs Farm Museum, showing the east side of the Gibbs farmhouse at 2097 Larpenteur Avenue, alongside a photo of Ethel Hall Stewart from the 1950s. Photo of Ethel Hall Stewart from the Ramsey County Historical Society archives; Gibbs Farm Museum postcard courtesy of Steven C. Trimble.

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

C O N T E N T S

- 3 *Hands-On Historian:*
Ethel Hall Stewart and Preserving the Gibbs Farm
Steven C. Trimble
- 13 *The Center of the Universe for Car Buyers:*
University Avenue Dominated the Local Automotive
Scene for Fifty Years
Peter B. Myers
- 17 *Growing Up in St. Paul*
University Avenue: Then and Now
Joanne A. Englund
- 21 *A School to Remember*
St. Joseph's Academy: The Legacy Lives On
Mary Jo Richardson

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Until now, few people associated with the Ramsey County Historical Society knew much about the Society's origins. Some may have heard of Ethel Hall Stewart, but even they were not likely to know what role she played in the Society or how she was able to save the Gibbs Farm. Thanks to historian Steve Trimble, we know who Ethel Stewart was, the part she played in the creation of RCHS, and why she was so determined to preserve the Gibbs farm and turn it into a museum. From rural Ramsey County, we turn to University Avenue in the 1950s with Peter Myers's study of the auto and truck dealerships that once populated that busy thoroughfare. Joanne Englund then gives us an insightful memoir of growing up along University Avenue and how it's changed from her youth to a street that today bustles with all manner of new activity and questions centered on the impact of building light rail transportation there. In our concluding article, Mary Jo Richardson recounts how the alumnae of St. Joseph's Academy, which closed in 1971, keep the memory of their school alive and contributing to the health of our community.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

The Center of the Universe for Car Buyers:

University Avenue Dominated the Local Automotive Scene for Fifty Years

Peter B. Myers

If you were to go shopping for a new car in the Twin Cities today, chances are that you would head out to one of the suburban areas where dealers have clustered in recent years. The East Metro would offer you a multitude of choices along Highway 61 in White Bear Lake, I-35 in Forest Lake, or near the intersection of Highway 110 and South Robert Street. In the West metro, you could find virtually any domestic or foreign brand at the dealers clustered along I-494 in Bloomington, I-394 in Minnetonka or I-35W in Burnsville.

These suburban locations, with their huge showrooms and vast expanses of asphalt, enable dealers to maintain hundreds of vehicles on their property, ready for immediate sale. But these mega-dealers are a relatively new phenomenon. Before the completion of the Interstate highway system, you could buy your new car without ever leaving the city limits of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Dealers were scattered throughout the two cities, but no place offered more choices than the stretch of University Avenue between Raymond Avenue and Rice Street. Along with familiar brands like Ford, Chevy and Dodge, you could also find names like Hupmobile, Edsel, Rambler, DeSoto, Plymouth, Oldsmobile, and Pontiac, marques that have since retreated into automotive history.

“University Avenue was the place to go to get your car,” recalls Pete Latuff, whose father and uncle opened Latuff Brothers Auto Body at 880 University Avenue in 1933. “I remember that vividly. Every September the new models

In 1952–1953, the *City Directory* listed the following automotive and truck dealers:

- General Truck and Equipment, 2400 University Ave.
- Hetfield-Park Inc., 1037 University Ave.
- International Harvester (commercial), 215 University Ave.
- Mack International (commercial), 2505 University Ave.
- Minnesota FWD Co. (commercial), 1455 University Ave.
- Rihm Motor Co. (commercial), 2108 University Ave.
- University Avenue Truck Sales (commercial), 611 University Ave.
- Baker Motor Sales, 604 University Ave.
- Central Motor Co., 225 University Ave.
- Hassberder-Jones, 1197 University Ave.
- Hayden Motor Sales, 1800 University Ave.
- Hetfield-Queenan Inc., 1037 University Ave.
- Bud Johnson Pontiac (later Arrow Pontiac), 1515 University Ave.
- Kennedy Motor, 1020 University Ave.
- Kieffer Motor Sales, 570 University Ave.
- Kline Oldsmobile, 1469 University Ave.
- Midway Chevrolet, 1389 University Ave.
- Midtown Motor Sales, 1205–45 University Ave.
- Minnesota FWD Inc., 786 University Ave.
- Owens Motor Sales, 709–719 University Ave.
- Peters Motor Sales, 654 & 1164 University Ave.
- Sather Motor Co., 809 University Ave.
- Slawik Motors (later Midway Ford), 1850 University Ave.
- Whitney Motor Sales, 604 University Ave.

When all the allied retail operations along University Avenue, such as gas stations, auto parts stores, and auto repair shops, which supported or complemented these dealerships and the vehicle owners who needed their services are taken into account, there is no disputing that University Avenue was a powerful economic engine for the city of St. Paul in the 1950s.

would roll out and there was a big fanfare—cars were brought in on transports with covers on them so people couldn’t see the new models, and they’d have food and hors d’oeuvres and free pop for the kids. You got to look at all the new cars and it was a pretty exciting time. Especially when you’re a young kid.”

“You could almost set your calendar to when the new cars would be coming out in fall,” says retired St. Paul police officer Tom Owens. “University Avenue was the center of the universe for car buyers back then.”

Owens’s grandfather, Thomas J. Owens, was one of the early automotive pioneers. In 1915 he and his business partner, J.B. Rihm, opened Owens Motors at 709 University Avenue. In 1917, they expanded the building and opened Owens Motor Sales, becoming one of the first Ford dealers in St. Paul. During the Depression, Rihm left the partnership to go into the trucking business and subsequently formed Rihm Motor in 1932 (which remains a thriving University Avenue business today). As the Ford franchise grew, the Owens building
(continued on page 15)



Harold Slawik sold DeSotos, left, at his dealership at 1850 University Avenue during the 1940s before opening Midway Ford. DeSoto was a division of the Chrysler Corporation from 1928 until 1960. Photo courtesy of the Midway Chamber of Commerce.



Owens Motor Sales, center left, was a pioneer in the auto business, opening in 1918 at 709 University Avenue. Over the years, the owners expanded the building several times until it reached the size seen here. Today this building is occupied by Lifetrack Resources. Photo courtesy of Kari Rihm.

From its beginning, the Owens Motor Sales showroom, center right, gave customers plenty of space to examine the latest models. Photo courtesy of Kari Rihm.



During the first half of the twentieth century, St. Paul businesses routinely sponsored sports teams or marching bands, bottom that represented the company in parades and other civic festivities, such as the Winter Carnival. Owens Motor Sales sponsored this ensemble. Photo courtesy of Kari Rihm.



Midway Ford, top left, anchored the southwest corner of University and Fairview for many decades. It was distinguished from its competitors by its tall, lighted pedestal on which the latest model was always displayed. The dealership relocated to Roseville in 1977. The property is now occupied by Episcopal Homes. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

In the late 1940s, Kline Oldsmobile, top right, took over the building at 1469 University Avenue that had once sold Hupmobiles, a vehicle produced from 1909 to 1939. When General Motors phased out the Oldsmobile in 2004, it was the oldest surviving American automobile marque, and one of the oldest in the world. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower waved to the crowds along University Avenue as his motorcade passed in front of Whitaker Buick, center, in 1956. Bill Whitaker had recently opened the dealership and ran it for many decades before turning it over to his sons. Today, Steve Whitaker runs Whitaker Buick in Forest Lake. Photo courtesy of Whitaker Buick.



Motor Cars Incorporated, at 809 University Avenue, right, sold Ford products including the ill-fated Edsel, one of the shortest-lived brands in automotive history. The Edsel was produced only during the 1958, 1959, and 1960 model years. Today, that site is occupied by Ngon Vietnamese Bistro. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



The surprising success of the Volkswagen Beetle, an import from Germany, prompted General Motors to develop a worthy small-car competitor. Rather than design and build one in the U.S., GM chose instead to import the Opel Kadett, left, made by its Opel affiliate in Germany. Bill Whitaker is second from the left in this photo from the early 1960s. Photo courtesy Whitaker Buick.

Midway Chevrolet, right, located at 1389 University Avenue, was a landmark of the Hamline-Midway district for more than 70 years, and the last dealership to vacate the street. Norton & Peel photo. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.

(continued from page 12)

was expanded several times, both vertically and horizontally. Today it houses Lifetrack Resources, making it one of the few pre-World War II dealership buildings that has survived into the twenty-first century.

While everyone knew that University was a good place to buy a car, few people today remember that it was also a place where cars were built, at least for a short while. In 1915, the Willys-Overland Company built a mammoth manufacturing plant on University Avenue near Franklin Avenue; there, they built the Willys-Overland, which for several years was the biggest competitor to Henry Ford's Model T. The building was converted to aircraft manufacturing and mechanic training during World War I and ultimately became a major facility for International Harvester. Today it is known as Court International.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the avenue, Henry Ford had built a handsome three-story building near Rice Street where Model Ts were assembled. That manufacturing operation was short-lived too. Ford soon acquired a much larger site on the Mississippi River in the Highland Park neighborhood where he could take advantage of hydro power and build a plant optimized for efficient assembly-line production. That plant operated from 1925 until 2011.

There is no comprehensive record of all new-car dealers that have operated on University Avenue from the 1920s until today. Many of them were short-lived or changed hands frequently. The *Saint Paul City Directory*, however, provides a listing of new auto and truck dealers at intervals from 1930 until 1960. The 1930 directory lists 12 new-vehicle establishments, of which at least three were truck dealers. The number of dealers gradually increased through the late 1940s; by 1949, 24 dealers were listed on University Avenue. The peak came in 1952–1953, with 25 dealers listed, of which at least six were selling trucks as opposed to passenger cars. By 1956, the number was down to 15, and by 1974 there were only 10, according to the 1973–74 *Minnesota Automobile Dealers Association Yearbook*.

The slow exodus continued into the mid-2000s, driven by economic forces and zoning restrictions that made it difficult to acquire more land in the middle of the city. The coming of the Central Corridor light rail line, and the desire of city planners to promote University as a high-density transit-oriented corridor, no doubt gave dealers another reason to relocate.

While all the showrooms are gone, the memories live on, especially in the automotive families who have kept their businesses going in new locations. The dealers founded more than a half-century

ago by Harold Slawik, Ron Saxon, and Bill Whitaker are still operated by family members at suburban locations in the metro area. Tom Krebsbach, whose family had owned Midway Chevrolet since the 1970s, was the last dealer to leave the avenue; he merged with another dealer just before light rail construction engulfed his building at Hamline and University.

Peter B. Myers is the executive producer of a new historical documentary entitled University Avenue: One Street, a Thousand Dreams. Produced in partnership with Ramsey County Historical Society and Twin Cities Public Television, the program will be premiered on tpt 2 on Tuesday, December 18 and Friday, December 28. Both broadcasts are at 8:00 P.M. Free public screenings will be held on Monday, November 5 at 10:00 A.M., Saturday, November 17 at 10:00 A.M., Monday November 19 at 7:00 P.M. at the Wilder Foundation 451 Lexington Parkway North, St. Paul

The program runs one hour. Admission is free but space is limited. Refreshments served beginning a half-hour before each showing; conversation about the film afterwards. There is also a showing on Thursday, November 8, at 7:00 P.M., at Gordon Parks High School, 1212 University Avenue West, St. Paul, MN. Advance reservations are required for the showing at Gordon Parks High School.

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Summer nights at Porky's were a University Avenue tradition for nearly six decades. Ray Truelson opened the restaurant in 1953, and his future bride, Nora, began working there a few years later. For anyone who loved cars, cruising the avenue, and stopping at Porky's was the perfect way to spend an evening. The Truelson family sold the property in 2011 to Episcopal Homes, which is planning an expansion of its senior housing campus. Photo courtesy of Nora Truelson. For a nostalgic look at University Avenue as the center of the universe for car buyers for fifty years, see Peter B. Myers's article on page 13.