



REeCHO

PARK HISTORY TODAY

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Volume 19.2 / SUMMER 2020

EDITOR'S NOTE:

We welcome guest columnist Barbara Aslakson who shares her 52-year history of involvement with the St. Louis Park Chapter of the League of Women Voters during the organization's century year. And another century celebration on pages 4 and 5.

– Bill Beyer, FAIA

1920-2020

THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS CELEBRATES 100 YEARS

Since 1920, when the League of Women Voters was founded by leaders of the women's suffrage movement, we have been a nonpartisan, activist, grassroots organization that believes voters should play a critical role in democracy. The right to vote was its calling. Voting rights is still the number one item on LWV's agenda.

From that 1920 beginning, each state has a LWV, and many states have multiple chapters. Minnesota was one of the early state groups.

LWV is a non-partisan political organization formed to encourage informed and active participation in government and to influence public policy through education and advocacy.

The St. Louis Park chapter organized in 1954 as a result of a city charter vote failure. At that time, members were part of the Minneapolis league in their own unit.

In order to become a local league they had to perform a civic project. To get the Home Rule Charter to pass became its goal.

It passed and the Charter Commission gave the LWVSLP kudos for the organization of the campaign and its efforts on behalf of the issue. The Provisional League dropped the "provisional" from its title.



Mrs. E.C. Williams, Mrs. Ernest (Bunny) Marotta, Mrs. William (Gladys) Beirnz, and Mrs. Carl Vetter attend a pre-organization meeting for the Park chapter at Lenox School on Oct. 27, 1953.

From the beginnings, we focused on city government. Attending meetings, studying issues, publishing our outcomes and focusing on making needed changes have been our long-term goals.

>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

For a list of things accomplished over the years, see the article "League of Women Voters" on the Historical Society website. Working with the city, the school district and the community to keep St. Louis Park a thriving and welcoming place to live has been the working goal of our hard working members.

Membership in LWV is open to anyone. Men have always been members as have youths in high school. This group is non-partisan. The only requirement is a wish to secure voting rights and to make this country, state and city the best places to live.

In LWV, I have found it a place to live out my civic responsibilities, meet some great long-time friends, learn how to study a subject and plan a campaign to reach a goal, and gain the skills to be a leader and a better public speaker. Over time voting rights is still top of my list and secondarily, I have joined all those who have great concerns over our environment. There are many opportunities in LWV to branch out in other areas of civic life.

Please consider joining, even if only to support our goals. We have our fingers in government, social issues, environment, world issues, education and so much more. We collaborate with other leagues and groups in many ways. The latest example is the Upper Mississippi River Region group.

Each citizen's number one responsibility is to be informed and vote in all elections. Maybe we should tattoo that on everyone.

I just passed my 52nd year as a member. Joining LWV was one of the smartest things I ever did.

Barbara Aslakson

President of LWV St. Louis Park, 1977-79

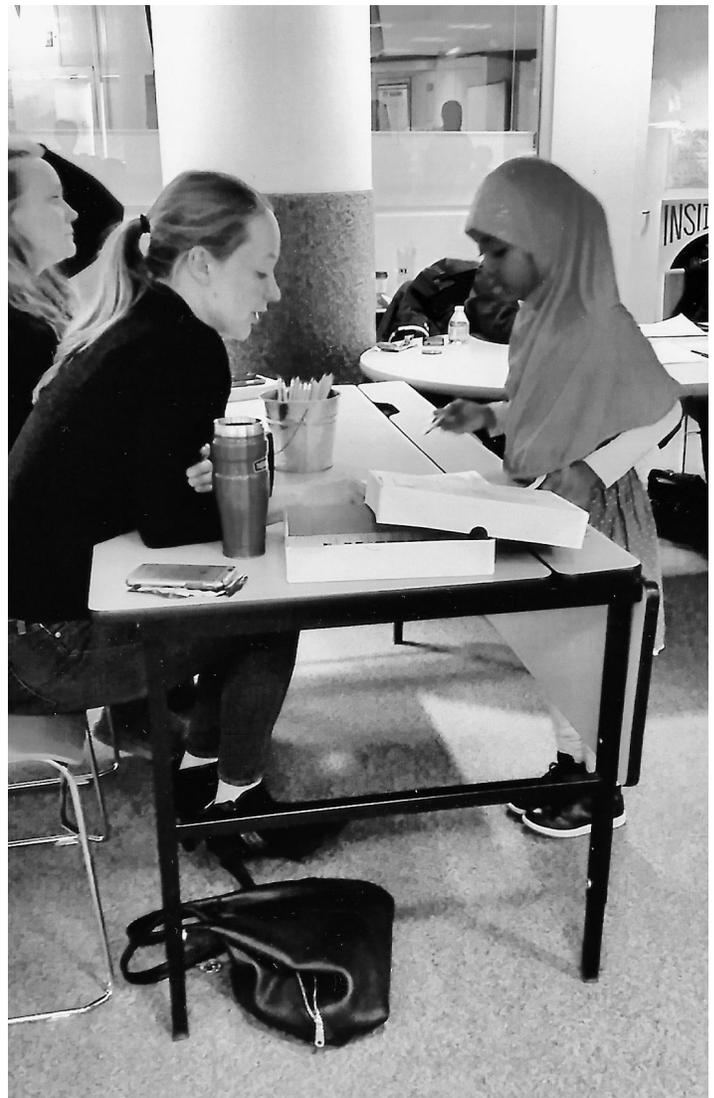


(Left to right) Barbara Aslakson, Elaine White, Celia Andersen and Eilseen Knisely are proud to be members of the St. Louis Park League of Women Voters.

Barbara Aslakson and others celebrate the Park Chapter's 50th anniversary.



Above, 1958 SLPLWV President Mrs. Kenneth Schlenker joins Edwin Owen and Howard George of the Park Commission in celebrating our state's centennial. Below, a new generation of women and girls gets turned on to voting rights and responsibilities.



LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Dear readers,

In my last letter I wrote about a quarantine that was just starting in Minnesota and wondered what the future held. I didn't think more than three months would go by and we would still be mostly restricted to our homes due to COVID-19. On top of that, the tragic death of George Floyd happened in that time sparking protests, vigils and more in our city and around the world. Mr. Floyd was a resident of St. Louis Park, and it is painful to know that a neighbor, who lived blocks from me, had his life taken.

Our newsletter this quarter focuses on the history of The League of Women Voters. It is an appropriately timed look at this great organization that encouraged active participation in government and public policy. I specifically appreciate their annual candidate forums for our city elections, it has been my preferred way to learn about new candidates. As Barbara writes, the St. Louis Park chapter has been a non-partisan voice for democracy for over 60 years and was started to help advocate for St. Louis Park to approve the Home Rule Charter which would allow the village to become a city and thus raise taxes and hire a city manager to improve services for local citizens. It was actually the third attempt at passing a Home Rule Charter (1938 and 1947 failed) and it garnered 79% of the vote on December 7, 1954.

As I read about past efforts like these and others, it is a reminder that understanding and recording history is more important than ever these days. At the Historical Society, we are taking photographs and collecting stories of how our city is impacted during these historic times. If you have your own photographs or stories to share, specific to St. Louis Park, I encourage you to email them to us at slphistory@gmail.com so we can build our collection further.

Now is also a great time to join our Board of Trustees. We have five open Board seats for our September 2020 elections and welcome anyone living in the area with an interest to consider applying. And it is ok if you haven't been active with us in the past. We appreciate new voices and thoughts and are simply looking for people who think it matters to preserve and share our city's history so that we build our sense of community, can learn from our past, and can share it now and with future generations. Duties of a Board member can be as simple as monthly meetings and occasionally pitching in on a project, or can be as involved as weekly writing, photography, or researching. There are no financial obligations besides being an active member while on the Board. If you are interested, download our simple application (due Sunday August 2nd) from our website www.slphistory.org or just email us about your interest at slphistory@gmail.com.

With Park pride,

Ted

CONNECT WITH US

Stop by: 3546 Dakota Ave. S., Suite C
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Saturdays, 1-4 p.m.,
and by appointment

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Email: history@slphis.org

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Founded in 1971, the St. Louis Park Historical Society collects, preserves and shares the history of St. Louis Park. The *ReEcho: Park History Today* is an official publication of the Society.

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100 YEARS OF HOSPITALITY - EL PATIO TO BUNNY'S

In a town like ours that's officially only 134 years old, we don't get to celebrate many 100th birthdays, but we've got TWO this year. The building at 5916 Excelsior Boulevard, now the home of Bunny's, is a century old according to tax records.

In 1920, it might have seemed shrewd to locate a new restaurant building on the main drag at the edge of town, with automobile ownership exploding and a new rail stop right across the road that promised passenger service north to downtown Minneapolis in 20 minutes; one stop away to the south was the Brookside Station on the Como Harriet streetcar line with access to everywhere. (The Dan Patch Railway had opened in 1915 with a stop at Excelsior Boulevard and was bankrupt by 1916, but its successor continued passenger rail service until 1942.)

And while the 1920s were reportedly "roaring," historical records of the building's first decade are mainly silent. We believe the original restaurant was named El Patio and that it was owned by four Greek immigrants, at least that's what documentation from 1930 onward tells us. Why four Greek immigrants would give a vaguely Spanish name to a new restaurant in a city with zero Spanish heritage is lost to history.

The new restauranteurs arrived at a time of peak Greek immigration to the U.S. Between 1900 and 1920, 350,000 Greeks, (about one seventh of the country's population and mostly men), sailed for the U.S. An unusual number of them opened dining establishments wherever they settled.

John Eliopoulos, George Broumas, John Ellis, and his brother George were variously identified as proprietors and cooks at El Patio, which began the 1930s as a place for fine dining and world-class jazz music, as described in Jay Goetting's book, "Joined at the Hip:"

When Twin Cities old-timers recall their first exposure to jazz and the after-hours life, Rook Ganz's name invariably arises... Ganz was at home at some more respectable clubs, including the popular Cotton Club at 5916 Excelsior Boulevard in suburban St. Louis Park—not to be confused with the Near Northside's Cotton Club at Sixth Avenue North and Lyndale. The suburban club earlier bore the name El Patio ("PAY-show") and briefly reverted to that name but, like many clubs around the United States, it tried to cash in on the fame and notoriety of "the" Cotton Club in New York City, where Duke Ellington's band and others held sway. Many remembered the Twin Cities' Cotton Club as a speakeasy. After the repeal of Prohibition, co-owner Pete Karalis brought in Boyd Atkins to front the band.

Peter G. Karalis was not identified as an owner of El Patio in any documents we found, but might have been the silent-owner type, unable to front the house due to a criminal record, (like the set-up at McCarthy's, where Tommy Banks, head of Minneapolis' Irish mob, ran the show from behind



the scenes), or Goetting was mistaken about ownership. Pete came out of North Minneapolis' 4th Precinct, an area of town largely owned and operated by notorious mobster Isadore Blumenfeld, better-known as Kidd Cann.

Respectable, southside members of the Karalis clan, (some lived in the Park), were also in the food service business, running the Lake View Café at 1411 W. Lake Street for many years, and opening a massive bakery downtown in 1930 that aimed to bake 5,000 pies each day. The 1930 Census listed Pete Karalis as proprietor of a candy store, frequent fronts for illegal booze during Prohibition. The 1937 SLP village directory listed the place as El Patio-Cotton Club.

Goetting continues:

Club manager Pete Karalis knew talent when he saw it. In 1934, police closed down Minneapolis's notorious Apex Club, whose band featured Rook Ganz, Popeye Booker, Adolphus Alsbrook, Bill Pew, and Harry Pettiford. "It struck me this group would be unemployed," said Karalis, "so I decided to sign them to a contract even though I didn't have a place for them to play. I did have a place in mind, though." Karalis brought Boyd Atkins up from Chicago to front the group and write arrangements at the El Patio in St. Louis Park. Karalis said, "I sold the idea to the four Greek boys at the club. I then auditioned the group with Bob DeHaven and Lee Whiting at WTCN. They really liked the group and said they'd give me a line out there for thirty-nine dollars a month. I spent the

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..It Even Includes Lingerie Shows

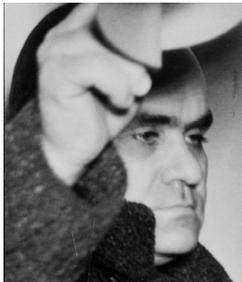


The girls gave shelter as the cocktail hour lingerie show program at Culbertson's Cafe, 1818 Excelsior Blvd., St. Louis Park, Minn. Carl (left) reminds the waitress that they may buy anything she catches their eye. "In the way of lingerie, this is." "There girls do be show, taking care of the number with each comment as "You'd better order another martini. You're not in right back with your regular drinks." One of the girls makes some money modeling a bra in a week that she does in her 48-hour receptionist job.

>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

remainder of my capital on paint to write 'Cotton Club' on the roof. We had a fairly good dinner trade, and the boys were proud of their restaurant ... The group used to play the dinner shift.

In sight of El Patio's front door in 1934 the Park's most infamous murder transpired, when the gangster Babyface Nelson gunned down Park resident Ted Kidder kitty-corner across Excelsior on Brookside. It is likely no coincidence that the last northern stop on the old Dan Patch, was only two blocks from the former Apex Club at 6th and Lyndale Avenue North.



Top, John Eliopoulos. Bottom, Rook Ganz.



The years of World War II were good for no one, and El Patio became Culbertson's in 1947, a fine dining, drinking, and entertainment establishment that ran until 1968. It then became, in succession, George Faust's, the Anchor Inn, Bongiorno, Duggan's, and finally, in 1999, Bunny's.

Henry John Aretz (pronounced "Arts") was a builder and a realtor, constructing a building at 4730 Excelsior Boulevard as a speculative venture in 1932. As the Depression deepened, his tenants became

tardy on their rents, so he decided to open the building as a restaurant, running it himself with his family despite lack of experience. After Prohibition in 1934 Henry got one of the Village's first liquor licenses and the famous Bunny's Tavern was rolling.

The story goes that the place was supposed to be named Aretz's, but when Henry went to purchase a sign, he was offered an unused or secondhand sign with "Bunny's" on it. Henry got it cheap.

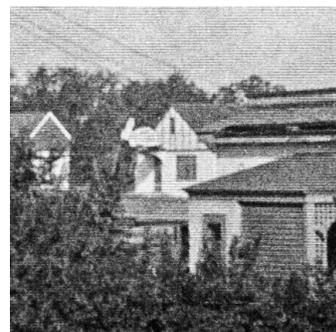
The Tavern had a small bandstand and a piano where kids



could take lessons. In the basement was a club room with a juke box where they could jitterbug to big band music, and a slot machine, until Luther Youngdahl became Governor in 1947 and shut them down. Bunny's became, and remains, one of the Park's most beloved businesses.

In January 1988, father and son Sherman and Gary Rackner bought the tavern from the Aretz family and Bunny's became a sports bar, with a bunny wearing a referee uniform as its new logo. In 1999 Gary and his new business partner, Steve Koch, moved Bunny's Bar and Grill to make way for Excelsior and Grand. It was a great way to preserve both the business and the building.

Bunny's itself is a venerable 87 years old, but the building it now occupies celebrates 100 years of hospitality in 2020.



St. Louis Park officially became a city in January 1955. City Hall was still the old Lincoln School at the corner of Alabama Avenue and 37th Street, built in 1895 and sold to the Village for a dollar in 1938. The new City Council met there, and the League of Women Voters held its candidates' forum there in 1955.



The Feature Section
You'll find today's Feature Section filled with features, comment and columns of interest to suburban Hennepin residents.

St. Louis Park Dispatch

A progressive, independent newspaper serving St. Louis Park

ST. LOUIS PARK, MINNESOTA Thursday, December 9, 1954

Major Market Place
Our classified page is a gigantic market place for rural Hennepin. To use it, profitably, call MO 9-8551.

ST. LOUIS PARK A CITY; CHARTER OKAYED

Council Votes 'No' On 6 Items

"We sound like a bunch of 'spineless' tonight," said Trustee H. J. Bumpers Monday night during the St. Louis Park village council meeting.
The council voted on record "no" the following:
• Extension of the new 20th St.

cities in the state considering the plan.
The council agreed with him in that if there is any surplus, it should be returned to the municipality where the individual lives, not where he works.

Hiss The Villian, Cheer The Hero Tonight

City Charter Takes Effect Here Jan. 6

The new city charter adopted Tuesday for St. Louis Park will take effect Jan. 6, 30 days from the date of its adoption.
But there will be no whirlwind changes in municipal government at that time.

Proposal Wins By 4-1 Margin

St. Louis Park voters Tuesday showed overwhelming support for a home rule city charter and voted in the new form of government by a 4 to 1 margin. The vote was 2822 to 724 for a 74 per cent margin of victory. Only 37 per cent was needed. Thus St. Louis Park, fourth largest community in the state, will become a city of the second class when the charter takes effect Jan. 6. After two previous tries at winning the voters' approval, both of which were defeated soundly, the charter won strong support from all sections of the city Tuesday.



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UNAUTHORIZED ART

We were walking to the office during the COVID-19 lockdown and happened upon what has to be the most unusual phone banks in the region. While none of our board members had ever encountered it, one found an article from Kare-11 News from September 2019 proving a little background. The reporter discovered the culprit, but didn't name him:

Someone is behind the art. And we traced the line back to 'Phone Banksy.'

"Well they built that retaining wall and I saw it as just a huge blank canvas," Phone Banksy said. He added that he couldn't let a grey wall go unadorned. "Just a little hobby of mine, I had one phone then someone gave me another phone, then someone gave me another phone," he said. "Pretty soon, I had a giant pile of phones. I didn't know what to do with the phones and then inspiration struck."

So, we at the St. Louis Park Historical Society thank you, Phone Banksy, for making our day with unexpected, unauthorized art.

