

P3 / PRESIDENT'S LETTER

President Ekkers goes down a rabbit hole in Meadowbrook and resurfaces in Shelard Park.

P7 / DISPATCH LOOK-BACK

The Editors were confused and grumpy about street name changes in 1950.

P8 / RELIGIONS ADDENDUM

We add recognition of a long-time Catholic parish that disappeared in 2012.



REeCHO

PARK HISTORY TODAY

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Volume 20.3 / Winter 2021

MEADOWBROOK MANOR ERA ON EXCELSIOR

I've lived in the Park for over 35 years, and have driven past the Meadowbrook Manor housing development on Excelsior Boulevard at least a thousand times. Until a couple of months ago when I drove through the development on Meadowbrook Drive and took a few photos. I expect many if not most Park residents share my lack of awareness; after all, it's not on the way from anywhere to anywhere, so you probably drive through only if you live there or are visiting.

A direct result of the original distribution of uplands and wetlands laid down by the retreating glaciers 11,000 years ago, a squint test view of the 1901 USGS map shows at least half swampland in the Park. The Meadowbrook Manor site is a lonely island along the southwest border of the city in what historian Norman Thomas referred to as, "the great swamp."

It was part of about a square mile of land including the

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HONOR ROLL

In the last issue, we failed to make the distinction between honoring those people still with us and remembering those who have passed. **Former City Manager Tom Harmening** is still among the living, so we repeat here **Diane Steen-Hinderlie's gift in honor of Tom** on 21 August 2021.

IN MEMORIAM

The St. Louis Park Historical Society has received gifts in remembrance of loved ones from the following persons:

- From **"The Brown Girls, Beverly and Mary Lou,"** in memory of their parents, **Lewis and Earlene Brown** and grandparents, **Earl and Olga Ainsworth**, in November 2020.
- From **Bert and Susan Gross** in memory of **Marjorie Wall Bingham** on 5 October 2021
- From **Daniel M. LaFontaine** in memory of **Albert Yngve** on 20 July 2021
- From **Mike Reynolds** in memory of **Albert Yngve**, July 2021
- From **Matt and Joan Yager** in memory of **Albert Yngve** July 2021
- From **Hal and Ellie Yngve** in memory of **Albert Yngve** July 2021
- From **Golden Valley Golf and Country Club** in memory of **Albert Yngve** on 20 July 2021
- From **Joan L. Ronbeck and Roberta Jo Ronbeck** in memory of **Albert Yngve** on 20 July 2021
- From **Dr. Thayer E. Porter and Dorothy Lou Porter** in memory of **Albert Yngve** on 22 July 2021
- From **Alan J. and Rose Stans** in memory of **Albert Yngve** on 20 July 2021

future Brookside neighborhood originally owned by Dr. Calvin Goodrich when platted in the 1860s, then passed to his son, Calvin Jr. and then to various real estate companies. Minneapolis Parks pioneer, Theodore Wirth, snapped up 210 acres of the property south of Excelsior Blvd. for a Minneapolis golf course in 1925. The course opened for play in 1926 but was forced to shut down in 1927 due to flooding from Minnehaha Creek. To dry the course out, a twenty-acre lake was dredged from the swamp as a stormwater buffer. That worked for the next 87 years until the Creek again swamped the course, shutting it down for three years.

The beautifully located 25 acres of upland north of Excelsior embraced by the Creek remained undeveloped until after World War II, when the Park boomed sixfold from 7,700 souls in 1940 to 44,000 in 1960. One good reason for lack of development was the city sanitary sewer and water services were located a quarter of a mile away and were unlikely to be extended under Minnehaha Creek for a small island at the literal end of town. Hopkins was unlikely to extend services from the west, no sewers in the golf course to the south, and to the north was Skunk Hollow, undeveloped wetlands rebranding Norman Thomas' "great swamp."

That changed around 1947 when a St. Paul construction company and land developer decided to take a flyer and propose the developing apartments for the property. The firm was incentivized by the post-war building boom and the imminent end in 1949 of a Federal Housing Administration (FHA) program known as Section 608.

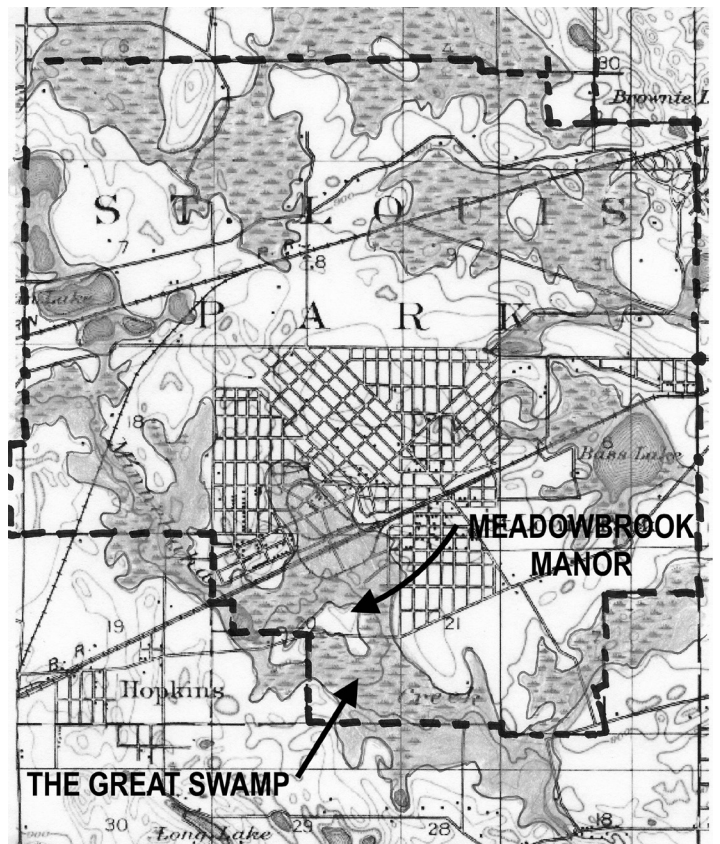
Enacted in 1941, the 608 program provided government guarantees amounting to 90 percent of construction loans, the closest thing to risk-free money any banker ever drooled over. As it turned out, the developers secured their federal financing six short hours before the program was due to expire, on midnight, June 30, 1949.

In 1950 the Donovan Construction Company of St. Paul completed the project of 556 units in 58 buildings on 25 acres, about 22 dwelling units per acre, at a cost of \$6 million, reportedly the largest apartment housing project in the Midwest at the time. One-bedroom units above the "garden" level rented for \$85/month and rowhouses for \$93/month in November 1950.

The project's architect was Perry Crosier & Son, a well-known Minneapolis firm that had designed the Park Theater on Minnetonka Blvd. in 1939 but was also known for its apartment housing designs including the Fair Oaks Apartments and 75 other projects in Minneapolis plus and the Highland Village Apartments in St. Paul.



The "great swamp" tried to reclaim Meadowbrook Golf Course in 2014 (photo courtesy of Board member Rick Sewall). The island site of Meadowbrook Manor is apparent in the 1953 aerial.



LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Winter has settled into St. Louis Park, with our first true snowstorm of the season coming down as I write this letter. I have the benefit of getting to read the Re-Echo in advance, which often helps me reflect on what I might say to you all. And this season, Bill got me racing down a rabbit hole.

Bill shares an interesting look at the development of Meadowbrook Manor, owned by the Bigos family since 1979. In my last letter I had mentioned the census data for 2020 that had recently been released showing our city's population just above 50,000 residents. Some other interesting housing information came to light in digging through the City's 2040 Comprehensive Plan. Chapter 5.2 is the Land Use Plan, in which you can learn a lot about our city's development history as well as the direction for the future. But one thing that caught my eye was that there are just 4 out of the 35 neighborhoods that contain predominantly high density residential – Meadowbrook, Shelard Park, Triangle, and Wolfe Park.

The story of Shelard Park is the real rabbit hole I went down, and it is described in detail on our website. I won't spoil all the fun for those who want to read the details, but the highlights for me are that the area was annexed from Minnetonka in 1955, it featured a racquetball club co-owned by Bud Grant, and it included a mining-themed restaurant called the Amalgamated in the 1970s (with artifacts, a "mine entrance," and a fake elevator that shook like it was in a mine). That restaurant eventually became the Greek restaurant, Santorini Taverna and Grill in the 1990's until it closed and eventually demolished in 2013. That site has sat empty since then, but it is now the newly approved site for a 233-unit housing development proposed by none other than Bigos Management – the longtime owner of Meadowbrook Manor and feature of this newsletter. Isn't history fun like that? And for those who want to dig into the new development information, which has also been covered in the Sun Sailor, it is referred to as "Platia Place" on the city's development project list online.

On an administrative note, we raised over \$1,500 during the Give To The Max Campaign in November from 28 different donors. The money raised patches up the budget for the year and we feel strong going into 2022. Thank you to those who donated!

This holiday season I wish for everyone to find a good history story in which to get lost.

With Park pride,

Ted



CONNECT WITH US

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

Call: (612) 465-9288

Email: slphistory@gmail.com

Visit online: www.slphistory.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.

Editor

WILLIAM BEYER

Writers

TED EKKERS

Contributing Writer

JEANNE ANDERSEN

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Photos from our collections show Excelsior Boulevard as a sleepy, 2-lane gravel road in 1950.

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The hyper-frugal ethic of the Great Depression carried through in the spare unit designs, 360 identical one-bedroom units at 550 square feet plus 36 identical studio units in 36 garden apartment buildings, plus 160 two-bedroom, two story plus basement, rowhouse units at 1,100 square feet. Parking was provided at two spaces per unit, with some spaces in garages. The buildings were faced with brick, an upscale signal, and also featured "picture windows" in the living rooms.

One might justifiably call the site layout "cookie cutter design," although the architects took care to create nice entry courtyards for the rowhouse clusters, with surface parking sited internally and housing along the natural creek edges.

The 36 apartment buildings were identical in plan, but some had pitched roofs and some flat, presumably to minimize monotony. The project was completed and occupied starting in 1950, two decades before Louisiana Avenue was extended south, through the abandoned Republic Creosote site and across the great swamp, to Excelsior Boulevard.

In 1954, The Harvard Crimson wrote a series of articles explaining Section 608:

The nation was at war in 1941 when Section 608 was written. Created under the title "War Housing Insurance" it was aimed at meeting the pressing needs for middle priced dwellings. Time, not money, was the short item, and the government turned to the private builder to get the job done quickly. At the same time, it wrote the builder a code of minimum standards that was not as stiff as the one governing public construction. With this flexibility, the private contractor was able to cut certain costs and build more cheaply than the government itself could... Rent controls, which lasted up until 1952, made apartment

building seem even less economically inviting. Profit hopes looked slim, while risks multiplied.

Meanwhile, growing needs for housing forced Washington to prod the private builder into action. Section 608 was written with a series of gaping loopholes built in as lures. Under a loose and generous appraisal system, the builder was encouraged to pad his estimated costs and borrow more than he needed. At the same time, the government gave up the control position it had formerly held in the private firm. Under this earlier provision it had been able to watch the builder and block his attempts to overborrow. With 608, the government stepped down and turned its back.

The big killings were not made until 1948. At that time, the provisions were changed to favor the builder in another way. Up until 1948, private construction firms had been permitted to borrow federal-backed money on a per-room basis. (By 1948, they were being granted \$1,800 per room.) But now the rule was changed to let the builder borrow up to \$8,100 per apartment. The result was a rash of small one-bedroom "efficiency" apartments and some gross cases of overborrowing.

Washington was not being "duped." The FHA, the Administration, even the Congress knew very well what was going on. Money was being pumped into the building industry for a reason. In 1948, the national economy had begun to show signs of faltering, and businessmen were acutely concerned with the possibility of a slump. Industry turned to the federal government for help, and the change in 608 was part of the response. Democrats were not inclined to be stingy with a national election imminent.

...No one condones the clear cases of fraud and bribery that did occur in some instances. But by and large, the builders acted, and profited, in accordance with the law. Federal Housing chief Albert Cole admitted that

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A dozen photo albums from the Meadowbrook Collaborative were donated to the Society by Linda Trummer in 2019.





Current photos of the Meadowbrook/ERA complex show a well-maintained, neat and tidy place to live, with the Minnehaha Creek Preserve and boardwalk as a unique recreational amenity.

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the builder "had a right to outguess" the appraiser if he could. Instances of inadequate, matchbox construction do appear, but they are rare. There certainly was no widespread jerry-building reminiscent of the 1920's. On the credit side, FHA established a code of minimum building standards that was uniform for the whole country. But more important, it did what nobody else could do: it got the houses built when they were needed.

We have uncovered no allegations of hanky-panky with Meadowbrook Manor. But astute real estate developers who were plugged into Congressional manipulations always made sure they were ahead of the game, then as now.

Construction firms like Donovan are generally not in business of owning and managing apartment buildings and set up Meadowbrook Manor, Inc. in November 1949 to manage it. According to the Hennepin County Recorder, the property was sold to Berek Benjamin Bigos and Helena Bigos in 1979. Benjamin died at age 56 in 1981 and

Helena assumed management duties of Meadowbrook and many other apartment properties they had acquired over the years.

The low rents, likely due to poor maintenance, attracted poorer and poorer tenants, including college students. Police calls escalated, and by 1992, civic leaders decided to intervene. A partnership among the City of St. Louis Park, St. Louis Park School District, Park Nicollet Health Services and the Ridgedale YMCA created The Meadowbrook Collaborative in 1993. The Collaborative worked with the property owner and residents to offer services and activities aimed at ensuring that residents' health, education and safety needs were met. It hired Linda Trummer, a former resident of the complex, as outreach coordinator. As described by Jeanne Andersen on our website in a 2006 interview with Trummer:

Meadowbrook [was covered with] overgrown weeds and broken glass and discarded beer cans. This was a

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scary place to visit in the early '90s and an even more frightening place for good people to live...Felony drug arrests were common a dozen years ago.

Led by Trummer, the Collaborative gradually improved lives of the Meadowbrook residents, attracting the attention of First Lady Laura Bush and Governor Tim Pawlenty back in 2004. As noted on our website:

Mrs. Bush recognized the Meadowbrook Collaborative as an example of the type of communities in her initiative, Helping America's Youth. "The great example that Meadowbrook is for the rest of the country is it is a housing project that's turned into a real community where a number of groups work together to make sure all the children and adults in the community have a chance to live in a real community," Bush said.

Interviewed in the Sun/Sailor in 2013, former Park Mayor Jeff Jacobs remembered that:

"There were people who were willing to write it off, but fortunately, others who were not and were willing to work to make Meadowbrook a safe place and a great place to raise families," Jacobs said. He points to the Meadowbrook Collaborative as one of the city's "great successes" and credits Trummer as being "one of the main reasons why."

In 2016, the ownership of the property was transferred from a property management firm directed by Helena Bigos to one directed by her son Ted. Long-needed upgrades and maintenance to the complex were begun, long-time tenants were made to re-qualify, and rents were raised 30-40 percent. A couple of original buildings were removed to make room for a new community building. Trummer resigned as outreach coordinator after 23 years

due to ill health and Deborah Wells assumed her role. In 2017, Wells moved her office to the Lenox Community Center due to renovations of the spaces they had occupied. She recently brought us up to date:

The programs of the Meadowbrook Collaborative were greatly reduced in 2017, when Bigos moved us out of the Collaborative's embedded community center...They allowed us to continue very limited programming after school for kids in their new Clubhouse, but they were very strict about what we could do there and it made programming difficult. By the middle of the 2017-18 school year, we just couldn't sustain programming in the clubhouse because of the restrictions... Park Nicollet Foundation has kept in close touch with me about the needs of Meadowbrook (now ERA) kids and I think would be willing to help if we could identify a level of need and make the services formerly provided by the Collaborative accessible. But, so many young families have moved out of ERA because of the high price of their rents, that there really isn't currently a substantial enough cohort of students to develop programming around.

Which, in a nutshell, is how gentrification solves social problems.

My photo tour through the site in September showed neatly trimmed grounds and a meticulously maintained property, a real feat when dealing with 71-year-old buildings. Accessible units for people with disabilities were never part of the mix and are still missing. The complex remains pet-friendly and smoke-free, and still accepts Section 8 rent vouchers for qualifying low-income residents, although the new, higher rents might discourage some. Development by the city and the watershed district of a boardwalk and trail system directly abutting the complex along Minnehaha Creek provide an amenity that many homes in the Park could only hope for.

DISPATCH LOOKBACK

Back in 1950, the Editors of the Dispatch were not amused by the Village council's street naming adventures. The confusion continues to this day.

It Ain't Amusin' . . .

An End to Confusion, Yes?

Confusing as it may sound, it was all done to end confusion. Yep!

Once upon a time there was a St. Louis Park street named 43rd street. But eight years ago along came the council and changed it to Littel.

Then trouble began—for nobody could seem to find Littel street. So the people who lived on Littel—sometimes still called 43rd—went to the council last August for help.

And this is the solution the councilmen came up with: "We won't call it Littel, but then we won't call it 43rd either. Instead let's rename it 42½ street." And they did.

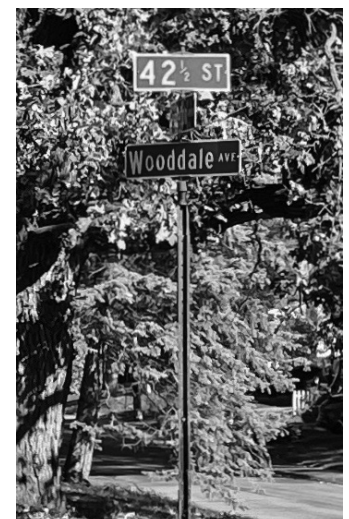
Monday the council adopted an ordinance renaming the street that was once 43rd and later Littel. As men of their word, the councilmen this time decided upon—yep, 42½ street.

While they were about it, they changed another street name. Long ago there was a street called Highland avenue. But along came a name-change and it became 36th street.

Nice, except now there were two 36th streets. Which was awfully confusin'.

"This won't do," said the conciliatory council. So they decided to name that part of Highland avenue—or the duplicatory 36th street—lying between Natchez and Excelsior boulevard 36½ street.

And from this day forth, so be it.





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RELIGIONS ADDENDUM

In our last issue, profiling places of worship in the Park, we focused mainly on those still standing. One long-time Catholic parish was mentioned only in passing; here's more on it:



MOST HOLY TRINITY CATHOLIC CHURCH

Most Holy Trinity, the second Catholic parish established in the village, dates to 1945 when the first mass was celebrated in the Lilac Lanes bowling alley. In 1952 the new superstructure of the church-school was completed. The church was merged by the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis with Our Lady of Grace in Edina in 2012. The former church/school site now features the Wooddale Flats Condominiums, just west of Miracle Mile.