



# RE-ECHO

*Newsletter of the St. Louis Park Historical Society*

Volume 8, No. 3

Issue No. 34

## **PARK'S "MEXICAN GENERALS"**

The rhetoric was colorful: "Voters of St. Louis Park – You Swept the "Mexican Generals" out of State Government! DO THE SAME AT HOME!!" This was the language on a campaign poster used in the December 6, 1938 election for president, councilman, and recorder of the village council. The poster asserts that "'The Big Three' is a menace to the future of St. Louis Park!"

Who were the Mexican Generals and who were the Big Three? The first clue is in the small print at the very bottom of the page telling us that Morten Arneson was Chairman of the "All-Party Smith for Mayor, Nemeck for Trustee, Justad for Recorder Volunteer Committee." Arneson was a landscape architect with a nursery on Excelsior Blvd. In the early 1930s he had fought to oust politicians who let the bars and speakeasies stay open all night and disturb his sleep. He and his organization, the Better Government League, were mostly successful at this effort, and in the late 1930s they turned their attention to just that: Better Government. The issue in a nutshell was that administrative decisions should be made by paid professionals, not elected officials with little expertise. The battle lasted for years, culminating in the passage (with considerable help from the League of Women Voters) of the City Charter in 1954.

Who were the "Mexican Generals?" Statewide, the Farmer-Labor Party was voted out of office in 1938, fraught with internal confusion and disorganization. In its place, Minnesotans elected young Republican Harold Stassen as Governor. A major part of his platform was civil service reform, including the abolition of the so-called "Big Three." This was the Commission of Administration and Finance, which exerted, some thought, excessive power over expenditures in the state.

Arneson and Co. railed against our local Mexican Generals and our "Big Three." Other outrages included "Citizens insulted in open Council Meetings! Cess pool cleanage rates double that of Minneapolis! Compulsory garbage collection at greatly increased rates! Local business discouraged! Citizens' demands ignored! Countless attempts to rezone restricted property! . . . Look at your taxes! Are you satisfied that St. Louis Park cannot be run far more economically to your advantage?"

So who were Park's Mexican Generals? The incumbent president (mayor) was Earnest W. Nelson, lineman on the Minneapolis Street Railway. "Is it right to have a village council president who represents a utility?" the poster demands. "Forty-eight-passenger street cars replaced by 24-passenger buses with inferior service!" August of 1938 was indeed the last of our streetcar, a real hot-button issue at that time, and people actually went to jail for the way it was handled, but there is no evidence that we know of that Nelson had much influence on the decision.

## **MEXICAN GENERALS, Continued from Page 1**

Arneson's candidate for president was Byron M. Smith, who owned Smith Pharmacy, located at 4801 Minnetonka Blvd., from at least 1933 (when the first Park directory came out) to about 1937, when he became State Supervisor of the County Welfare Boards. Despite Smith's efforts, Nelson was re-elected in 1938.

The councilman (trustee) to be ousted was Alvin M. Anderson, accountant for the Soo Line. "Is it right to have a councilman who can vote on his own administrative actions?" Arneson and Co.'s candidate was Don Nemeč, "the most popular young man ever to file for village office... As one of the principals of our high schools he has earned the respect of every student and parent!" Despite his popularity, election records show that Nemeč lost a fairly close race to Anderson, and did not run again.

The incumbent recorder was Perham M. Ellison, whose business was variously described in directories as pharmacist, business advisor, and insurance. The poster was particularly vehement here: "Aided by 'The Big Three,' he made his position a full time job! – at the same time, he voted to increase the salary for this job - HIS OWN JOB! – from \$75.00 to \$200.00 A MONTH! Look at the record! He handles all of the administrative duties of the village and then sits as a member of "The Big Three" to vote on his own actions! If Mr. Ellison wants a full time job, let an impartial council vote him one, BUT DO NOT LET HIM VOTE ON HIS OWN ACTIONS!" Joe Justad won a close election for recorder over Ellison. Ironically, in his memoir, Arneson states that Justad was against the passage of the City Charter because the office of recorder would be lost, but in the end it was replaced by the office of city clerk, which Justad held until retirement in 1964.

It is difficult to guess how Depression-weary residents of St. Louis Park reacted to this inflammatory poster or cared about such administrative issues, except that only one of the candidates was elected. We do know that Morten Arneson worked tirelessly for 16 more years to see that the council-manager type of local government was put into place. The poster is a valuable look at just how early this important fight started. Thanks to David Anderson, Don Nemeč's great nephew, for donating this fascinating piece of our political history.

## **THIS 'N' THAT**

**THE NEW LILAC PARK** was dedicated on July 13, 2009 on a glorious summer night. Hundreds came out to hear the Mayor speak and to see Bob Jorvig of the Historical Society cut the ribbon on the restored Beehive. Lilac Park is now a showplace that St. Louis Park can be proud of, and we heartily thank everyone who donated to the "Save the Beehive" fund so that we could provide \$10,000 to the restoration effort.

**PARKTACULAR:** We didn't participate in the parade this year because we couldn't line up any vintage cars (it was the same weekend as the mammoth "Back to the '50s" car show at the State Fairgrounds), but we did have a table at the Share Fair and talked to people about the Beehive project. And we got to watch the parade!

**AL'S BAR** is but a memory. A final party was thrown on July 11 (which was mobbed), and the wrecking began on July 20; see pictures on our web site at [slphistory.org/history/als.asp](http://slphistory.org/history/als.asp). The old regulars came to witness the event, no doubt with tears in their eyes. The developer was very accommodating, allowing the gallery to don hardhats and watch up close. Neighbors in their lawn chairs also witnessed the event, but then retreated to close the windows of their houses because of the awful stench of 83 years of dust and mold and just old house smell. Days later we got a call from Buzz Griffin, one of the owners, who wanted to know if we wanted one of Al's cash registers. Yes! Buzz said he used to cash \$20,000 in payroll checks every Friday using the old crank register. It now resides at the Depot. Thanks, Buzz!

## DONATIONS RECEIVED

*As you know, the Historical Society does not have a museum, only administrative space at Lenox and some unheated storage space at the Depot. We hope, of course, that some day we will have a museum and will be able to make our artifacts collection available for the public to see. In the meantime, we will gladly accept donations of materials pertinent to St. Louis Park History as we have the capacity.*

Connie Swenson sent us her husband Don's working papers for the writing of "Something in the Water." They contain documents and letters and pictures, many of which we have not seen before, and we will integrate them into our own files.

Phil Davis sent us a 1945 Park Student Directory.

On behalf of her aunt Grace H. Downing's estate, Anne Heller donated class portraits from 1923. And on behalf of her mother, Alberta Hembre Heller,

Anne donated a senior annual from 1926, copies of the *St. Louis Park Dispatch*, and photographs, one of which was mounted on glass. These artifacts come from old St. Louis Park families and we are very happy to receive them.

Manny Camilon of the City Inspection Dept. donated a framed aerial photograph of Flame Metal.

Scott Coltrane donated his time and expertise to scan five oversized photos for us. Some of the photos were from Anne Heller's donation, and some we had. One showed a Fourth of July celebration from 1909, complete with greased pole.

Carol Hartvigsen donated a picture of Christopher and Friedericke Hanke's 50th anniversary party taken in 1901 in front of the original Hanke farm house on Excelsior Blvd. It includes all of their children and their children except Carol's mother who was not yet born. Carol has donated several items pertaining to the pioneering Hanke family.

## COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUES

The Historical Society has now placed three commemorative plaques on historic sites in the Park. One is on the Historic Milwaukee Road Depot, and the other two are on the Walker Building: one for the Walker Building itself and the other in honor of the Swenson-Redeen Grocery Store that was located in the building for 25 years.

The plaques were paid for with funds donated in the name of Don Swenson, the author of *Something in the Water*, who passed away last year. Our thanks to Doug Winters, owner of the Walker Building and his company *Audio by*

*Design*, who had the plaques installed. We heartily encourage you to seek out the Walker Building, which was built in 1892 as part of a failed attempt to create a downtown St. Louis Park. It's on Walker Street, north of Highway 7 between Wooddale and Louisiana (the street in front of Central).

We have more money in the Don Swenson fund, and are thinking of sponsoring plaques for private homes that are more than 100 years old. If you have such a house and are interested, please contact us by email or call Kathy Johnson (see back page).

## STEP NEEDS YOU

The St. Louis Park Emergency Program needs your help. STEP has been providing food, clothing, and other necessities to families in need since 1975. Their previous building at Highway 7 and Wooddale has been torn down in anticipation of the overpass project there, and STEP is now located at 2239 Edgewood Ave. So., off of Cedar Lake Road. They are still working on getting a permanent home, though, and the levels of the food shelves are low. For more information, see [stepslp.org](http://stepslp.org) or call them at 952-925-4899.

## WHO WE ARE

The St. Louis Park Historical Society was founded in 1971 to collect, preserve, and disseminate the history of the City of St. Louis Park, Minnesota. The archives of the Society are located in the Historic Depot in Jorvig Park (37<sup>th</sup> and Brunswick) and at the Lenox Community Center (6715 Minnetonka Blvd.). Office hours at the Lenox site are Mondays and Thursdays from 10 to noon, and by appointment. Our mailing address is:  
3700 Monterey Drive  
St. Louis Park, MN 55416

Our email address is  
**history@slphistory.org.**

We do not have a central phone number, but you may contact a member of our Board:

President: John Olson. 952-929-6156  
jrocwr@juno.com  
Vice President: Robert Jorvig. 952-938-6553  
rjorvig@comcast.net  
Secretary: Kathy Johnson. 952-926-5040  
drjksj@msn.com  
Treasurer: Megan Crosby. 952-933-1399  
mcrosby@mmrf.org  
Trustee: Barbara Reiss. 952-830-9676  
Trustee: Don Schimmel. 952-890-7107  
donaldkschimmel@comcast.net  
Trustee: Faye Ross. 952-929-7423  
fross@braunintertec.com  
Trustee: Doug Johnson. 952-926-5040  
drjksj@msn.com  
Trustee: Jeanne Andersen. 612-396-6292  
jeanneandersen@comcast.net

## ABOUT THE RE-ECHO

The Re-Echo is published quarterly by the St. Louis Park Historical Society. Its purpose is to share information about the City's history and the Society's activities. The Re-Echo was started by Robert C. Reiss. The name was inspired by the *Echo* newspaper, which has been published by and for the students of St. Louis Park High School since 1917.

## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Sources for our cover story include Minnesota A History of the State by Theodore C. Blegen, St. Louis Park A Story of a Village by Norman Thomas (unpublished manuscript), The True History of Saint Louis Park by Morten Arneson (unpublished memoir) and Park directories from the 1930s. The full text of the poster can be found at [slphistory.org/reecho/default.asp](http://slphistory.org/reecho/default.asp).

## JOIN US!

The St. Louis Park Historical Society is a nonprofit organization and is wholly dependent on membership dues and donations for its operating costs, including the cost of mailing the Re-Echo. You don't have to be a member to receive the Re-Echo, but we need new members, especially active ones. Meetings are at 7pm on the first Tuesday of the month, and are open to all. They are held at Lenox Community Center October-May and at the Historic Depot June-September.

---