



The Re-ECHO

St. Louis Park

A Newsletter for the members of the St. Louis Park Historical Society

The Re-ECHO is published quarterly by the St. Louis park Historical Society and is edited by Robert C. Reiss. Its purpose is to acquaint the members, volunteers and friends on how the activities, programs and resources of the Society are used to preserve the history of St. Louis Park. The name was inspired by the ECHO newspaper published by and for the students of the St. Louis Park High School since 1917.

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The St. Louis Park Historical Society invites you to be a 2003 member

From the Editor:

We need your help. Please fill out the attached membership form and send it to the Historical Society.

The object of the St. Louis Park Historical Society is to collect, preserve and disseminate knowledge of the history of St. Louis Park. This includes activities about peace and war, population, ethnic groups, wealth, education, arts, science, agriculture, manufacturing, trade,

transportation, religion and finance.

Something in this list must fit your talents and interests.

If you have ever lived in St. Louis Park, you are part of that history and you need to record it. It now exists only in your memory and will be lost. It is fun! When you discuss the memories, you relive them. More of the old memories come back.

Join us, and have fun with us. It is a big

Jorvig Park, Home of The St. Louis Park Historical Society

On November 25, 1969, the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad St. Louis Park Depot was entered into the "National Register of Historic Places" On April 21, 1971, the St. Louis Park Historical Society was incorporated. Its founding was part of the "Save Our Depot" campaign conducted by Marie Hartman and a small group of enthusiastic supporters. Marie Hartman served as the President until her death in 1996.

As a result of this committee's work, the Depot became the property of the City of St. Louis Park. With the help of a federal grant was moved to its present location in Jorvig Park. Moving was a condition of the railroad because the original site was too small

for development.

The Depot was built in 1887 by the railroad that was better known as the Milwaukee Road. It was originally located on 36th Street between Brunswick and Alabama Avenues along with the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad, better known as the St. Louis line, it served a very important function in the history and development of St. Louis Park. The railroads were the only method of getting freight into the village. From 1983 until 1955, the Milwaukee Road also provided passenger service to and from the cities.

The Depot is of typical nineteenth century wood frame architecture and construction and is divided into a passenger waiting room, office and freight room. The freight room is ground level plank floor, one foot

Jorvig Park

lower than the other sections. The station interior has a built-in desk, counters and storage areas. Today the Depot is essentially in the same condition as when it was moved. It has never been restored and still lacks plumbing, rest rooms or heat.

Jorvig Park itself is significant in the history of St. Louis Park. It was the first suburban park outside of Minneapolis. When a depot was first built by the St. Louis Line, the stop became known as St. Louis Park.

At various times, the park has been known as Center, Bandstand, Fireman's and finally Jorvig. During the 1930's a bandstand was located on the current site of the Depot. Village bands held

concerts during the summer. For years, the popular Fireman's Carnival was also held on this site, which at that time was directly across the street from the Firebarn. It was a money raiser for volunteer firemen. Finally, it was formally named Jovig Park after Torvil Jorvig, one of St. Louis Park's premier councilmen.

The original intent was that the Depot be used to house the historical documents and other items significant to the development of St. Louis Park. It is still currently used for storage of records, papers and pictures that have been donated to the Society.

Summer meetings of the St. Louis Park Historical Society are held in the Depot the second Tuesday of every month but is not open to the public any other time.

Historic Excelsior Boulevard

The new construction of Excelsior & Grand brings to mind the many businesses that were replaced and the various goings-on that took place on this historic stretch of Excelsior Boulevard.

Instead of luxury apartments and condos, Excelsior Boulevard was traditionally populated by bars and restaurants, a mecca for those in search of entertainment. Bunny's, Al's, and Jennings were the most prominent but there were others such as the Foo Chu Cafe, the Pizza House, Walt's, Culbertsons, and Roach's.

Toward the beginning of the last century, there were also a great many "chicken shacks" up and down the boulevard. These establishments had licenses to sell beer but only if they also sold food, so chicken it was. In 1926 the Village Council was pressed to pass the "Chicken Shack Ordinance" to control the proliferation, but the otherwise lawless Excelsior Boulevard seemed not to notice and the chicken shacks survived.

Gas stations were another common sight along Excelsior Boulevard. A count of those advertised in the Park's street directories found some 43 stations at one time or another. For several reasons, only a fraction of that number exists today. First, the oil scare of 1974 drove a lot of stations out of

business. Also, the EPA began controlling the size and life of underground storage tanks and replacing them became very expensive. The nature of cars also contributed to the demise of the gas stations.

Whereas a kid could learn how to work on cars from his dad (or by just doing it), modern cars are full of sealed systems and computerized parts that require special equipment and training. As a result, dealers get more business and the stations were forced to close. Finally, with better gas mileage, people needed less gas.

In the 1930's, before prohibition was repealed, the street was rife with joints that stayed open all night, despite Village ordinances to the contrary. In his memoirs, Morton Arneson, a prominent citizen who owned a nursery on the Boulevard, described the racket that ensued. One hot night he took his family to a friend's house to get some sleep and escape the banjo player at the club across the street who played the only three songs he knew, over and over again. The village constabulary was no help, issuing advice about "if you do not like it, move back to Minneapolis." Thanks to Tom Smith of Minikaha Mobile for his insights reflected in this article. The history of Excelsior Boulevard is rich with colorful characters and places that thrived on the strip long before the Excelsior & Grand project. For more information on its history go to the Brookside Time Line at www.jeanneandersen.com.

"Invasion of the Colored People"

The first black family moved to St. Louis Park in 1952. Woodfin Lewis, the head of the family, was the first black nuclear physicist in the country. The Lewis family rented a house on Jersey Avenue in September of 1952 after both Lewis and the landlady checked with the neighbors to ensure that they would be accepted. It was not until the family moved that one or more vocal opponents complained to the landlady. Those complaints prompted her to serve the Lewis family with an eviction notice.

The eviction notice outraged many people, from the mayor to the city's church membership. A group of seven young ministers issued a statement in support of the family, and spread their message to many local civic groups. Finally, the Minneapolis Urban League acted as mediator and convinced the

landlady to rescind the eviction.

The Lewis family did not stay in St. Louis Park for long. After six months they moved to Minneapolis. Woodfin Lewis passed away before the decade was out, most likely from the amounts of radiation he was exposed to at his job at a research center in Hopkins.

Daughter Ellen Lewis is now a writer in New York and has written a play about her family's experience that she has named "Invasion of the Colored People". It is written in a 1950's Sci-Fi movie genre with many humorous touches. It was given its first reading in January of 2002 and is being reviewed by New York producers. One day, we may see the story on Broadway or even the big screen. Jeanne Andersen saw it in New York and gave it rave reviews.

Jeanne Andersen

Jeanne Andersen is a member of the St. Louis Park Historical Society. She recently moved back to Minnesota after a 22 year absence.

Jeanne was born and raised in St. Louis Park, but specifically she identifies with the Brookside Neighborhood. Her home was on the west side of a completely different Highway 100, known then as Vernon Avenue. She graduated from St. Louis Park High School in 1975 and took her undergraduate work at the University of Minnesota. For the last fifteen years she worked in Washington, DC for the US Department of HUD.

Jeanne's interest in the history of her hometown was sparked while working on her family's history in 1999. This has turned into her passion. She has

conducted extensive research into the history of St. Louis Park and particularly Brookside. Her "Brookside Time Line" web site is now 176 pages on 20 subjects and is growing. It contains an abundance of previously undocumented information. Her hope is to continue to publish the city's history that was started by Don Swenson in "Something In The Water." The "Brookside Time Line" web site can be found at:

www.Jeanneandersen.com

Please note that the Fall 2002 issue of the Re-Echo misspelled Jeanne Andersen's last name, which made it impossible to find her website. My apologies.

In this issue of Re-Echo, Jeanne's uses her research as the basis for the articles on "Invasion of the Colored People" and "Historic Excelsior Boulevard."

What's not Happening

Phone Books

Jeanne Andersen still needs early St. Louis Park directories. There was a ray of hope when she was contacted by the family of Lydia Rogers but that has faded. Jeanne's e-mail address is jandersen3@mm.rr.com.

Quack

A duck's Quack does not have an echo or re-echo.

Fire Queens

No one identified the 1955 Fire Queens. One possibility is that the center Queen was Molly Hodgkinson. Help!

Crocodiles

No sightings reported probably because they hibernate. They could have been disturbed with all of the snowmobiles going in and ice houses being fished out.

Oral Interviews

The St. Louis Park Historical Society has a collection of oral interview tapes that are available for viewing. Some of these tapes were recorded from cable presentations while others were done strictly to record memories before they are lost. Many memories exist only in someone's mind and these are an attempt to capture as many as possible. Multiple subjects are covered in these

tapes. A listing of these subjects is available through the Society. One typical example is Ben Brown, Bob Jorvig and Doug Gullifer walking through the Elmwood neighborhood while discussing the historic sites. Another is called "From Morse Code to Fax to Internet" as related by Bob Jorvig's mother, who experienced them all.

Eddie Rickenbacker

About 1915, Mrs. Dagmar Nelson had a boarding house at what is now Wooddale and 35th Street in St. Louis Park. That summer she had a boarder that spent the summer tuning up his race car in an old blacksmith shop on Walker Street near the creosote plant. That fall he won several races at the Minnesota State Fair. His name was Eddie Rickenbacker.

Eddie Rickenbacker went on to be a World War I flying ace. He shot down 22 enemy planes and four balloons. After the war, he gained an international

reputation in automobile racing, owned the Indianapolis Speedway for 18 years and was President of Eastern Airlines for 21 years.

No one remembered his St. Louis Park connection until World War II when Eddy and his crew, were downed in the Pacific while on a inspection trip for Secretary of War, Henry Stinson. They drifted on rubber rafts for 24 days before being rescued. During this period, reporters from the Minneapolis Star Journal came to interview Mrs. Nelson to see what information she had.

The St. Louis Park Historical Society meets at City Hall at 7:00 pm the second Tuesday of every month. The next meeting dates are:

March 11, 2003

April 15, 2003

May 13, 2003

You are invited to attend.

"Something in the Water"

A history of St. Louis Park prior to 1945 written by Don Swenson. It make a great gift.

Available from the St. Louis Park Historical Society for \$18.00 plus \$2.00 for handling. Send your name and address to:
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