

Approximate boundaries:

N-W. Grange Ave; **S**-W. Ramsey Ave;
E-S. 27th St, **W**-S. 39th St

FAR SOUTH SIDE *Gra-Ram*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Gra-Ram is a neighborhood of moderate population density. Most of it is flat with gently rolling hills. Neighborhood home architecture is mainly ranch style, with a few recently built duplexes and a number of multi-unit apartment buildings. Most of the streets in this neighborhood are winding and follow no rectangular grid. The business corridor is along South 27th Street.

The only green space in Gra-Ram is Kilmer Park, an MPS playfield next to Garland Elementary School.

HISTORY

Gra-Ram is one far south side neighborhood among many that makes up today's Garden District. The neighborhood is named after its two border streets, Grange to the north and Ramsey to the south. The boundaries of the Garden District are those of the 13th Aldermanic District. All Garden District neighborhoods were once part of the unincorporated Town of Lake, with boundaries of Lake Michigan to South 27th Street and Greenfield to College Avenues. By the mid-1950s, the City of Milwaukee had annexed most of the areas that today encompass the Garden District. Areas within Gra-Ram were among the last to be annexed.

Early populations

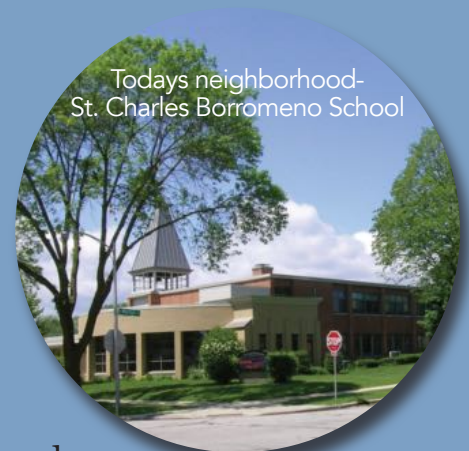
Many of the far southside neighborhoods that comprise today's Garden District owe a debt to the dreams of a local Norwegian named John Saveland. Saveland owned a booming business on Water Street that provided provisions for fishing boats, steamships, and schooners that sailed from Milwaukee. And he also had an interest in real estate. In 1887 Saveland organized a group of investors that purchased 30 acres of land bordered by today's Bradley, Howard, Whitnall, and Howell. The group hoped to attract upper middle class home buyers to their project—people who would work in the city and retire to their county estates at the end of the work day.

But despite a convenient Milwaukee streetcar with stops along Howell Avenue, few lots were sold in the early days. Saveland ultimately turned some of the land into a recreational venture, with an amusement hall and grounds. It wasn't until the time of Saveland's death in 1909 that the area was finally beginning to attract settlers. These were not the upper middle-class professionals that Saveland had expected, but south side working class people—mostly Poles.

It wasn't until the end of World War II that the housing market really began to boom and new and improved streets emerged. Newly arriving settlers were migrating mostly from Near South Side and Historic South Side neighborhoods.

Neighborhood population growth

By the mid-1960s, Gra-Ram had over 500 residences and was virtually filled. Most of the settlers were Polish or German, but with a significant number of Italians, and a scattering of Irish, Lithuanians, English, Canadians, Russians, and Norwegians. See the randomly selected resident profile below.



Today's neighborhood-
St. Charles Borromeo School

Random family--Gra-Ram

*Resident randomly selected from 1966/67 Milwaukee City Directory
(Information from U.S. Census, obituaries, and school yearbooks)*

The Chmielewskis

In the 1960s, Audrey and Marvin Chmielewski and their children lived at 5734 South 39th Street in the Gra-Ram neighborhood. Audrey Chmielewski (nee Mastopietro) was the daughter of Italian immigrants, Ighajia and Lucy Mastopietro. She had grown up on South 31st Street and attended South Division High School (*see her photo from her school yearbook*).

Marvin Chmielewski was the son of Polish immigrants, John and Emily Chmielewski (nee Berka). Marvin had grown up in the Lincoln Village neighborhood. The family had rented a unit in the same house as Marvin's maternal grandparents, Jacob and Hedwig Berka, on South 16th Street. Marvin attended Boy's Trade and Tech High School where he received emblems in football, baseball, basketball, and track (*see his photo from his school yearbook*). The family might have selected the Gra-Ram neighborhood as their family home because of the number of Polish and Italian residents that were already settled there.

Marvin served in the United States Army between 1954 and 1956 and was a U.S. Army and Naval Reserve and member of American Legion Post No. 444. He worked most of his adult life at the Allen Bradley Company. Audrey was a homemaker.

The Chmielewski's remained at their Gra-Ram home until at least the late 1990s. Marvin died in 2009 and Audrey in 2017.



In the mid-1960s the neighborhood had few businesses. A modest commercial corridor was developing along South 27th Street. See list below.

<i>Addresses on S. 27th St. in Gra-Ram area in 1966/1967</i>	<i>Names of businesses and organizations from <u>Milwaukee City Directory</u></i>
5510	Keer McGee Service Station
5565	Harris Lumber Mills Inc. Cash & Carry
5575	Pet Village Pet Grooming
5606	Henri's A&W Drive-In
5655	Factory Distributors Inc. Atlantic Spartan Thrift Center Adelman Laundry & Dry Cleaning
5701	Spur Service Station
5727	Red Owl Stores Inc.

Addresses on S. 27th St. in Gra-Ram area in 1966/1967	Names of businesses and organizations from Milwaukee City Directory
5848	Edgerton Contractor
5882	Twin's Tap

Notes:

- At one time the Red Owl chain had 441 stores operating in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Michigan. It had started out as a coal company in the 1920s before specializing in groceries. The chain's name was purchased by Supervalu Inc. in 1988 and the name was gradually phased out.
- The Adelman Laundry Corp. once had scores of laundry outlets in Milwaukee. The corporation was involuntarily dissolved in 1982.

The population of Gra-Ram and the entire Garden District would gradually become even more diverse. This happened for two reasons. First, Milwaukee Latinos continued migrating south from the Near South Side in the 1970s and 1980s. Second, the founding of the Islamic Center of Milwaukee in 1982 attracted Muslims from the Middle East and Northern Africa.

Current populations (as of 2021)

Today, Gra-Ram has approximately 2,200 residents. Over 7 in 10 are European Americans (most still of German and Polish ancestry, but with a good number of Italians and Norwegians), and nearly 2 in 10 are Latinos (almost all of Mexican ancestry). There is also a scattering of Asians (most Vietnamese), Arabs, African Americans, Jordanians, Egyptians, and people of multiple backgrounds in the area.

The median household income in Gra-Ram is just over \$50,000 a year, placing the neighborhood in the middle-income stratum. The largest number of occupations claimed by residents are in the fields of administration, food service, and education.

Gardening is a major hobby among Gra-Ram residents—a tradition carried over from the time when the neighborhood was part of the unincorporated Gra-Ram. In 2008, the Common Council approved a resolution to name all the neighborhoods in the 13th Aldermanic District the *Garden District of the City of Milwaukee*, capitalizing on a long tradition of gardening among residents and businesses. At the time, Alderman Witkowski said, "Residents and businesses here have worked hard to solidify this identity. We have had perennial exchanges and gatherings, lectures by noted gardeners, and even awarded area businesses landscaping awards to encourage and foster the character of our area." The idea for the Garden District grew from discussions between the alderman and residents about the interest in and tradition of gardening and landscaping within the district. The effort began in earnest in early 2007, when a group of individuals formalized a garden committee and met regularly to create a vision for the 13th Aldermanic District that focused on gardening and landscaping to beautify and improve quality-of-life.

RECURRING NEARBY OUTINGS (Health conditions permitting)

In the following section the website addresses have been eliminated due to technical problems with the various ways different web browsers display PDF files. Website information on these events is available through the book *Milwaukee Area Outings on the Cheap*. See below.

GARDEN DISTRICT FARMERS MARKET			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Jun. through mid Oct., Sat.'s 1-5pm	Just south of Howard on 6th St.	Market of fresh vegetables and other vendors.	Free

GARDEN DISTRICT CRAFT FAIR			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Apr., Sat. 9am-3pm	3333 S. Howell	Fair of over 25 vendors, concessions, prizes, bake sale, and more.	\$1

JULY 4TH CELEBRATION--WILSON			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
July 4, 9am-10pm	Wilson Park, 1601 W. Howard Ave.	Parade, Doll Buggy, Bike & Trike, and Coaster judging, music, games, fireworks.	Free

GLOW SKATE			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Dec., Fri. 7:30-9pm	Wilson Park Arena, 4001 S 20th St.	Skating, glow-in-the-dark necklaces, holiday lights, music, prize drawings and a gourmet hot-chocolate bar (skate rentals available).	unk

Most of these outings are provided courtesy of MECAH Publishing. To access the book that provides nearly 600 outings—all priced under \$10—for the entire Greater Milwaukee area, go to <http://mecahmilwaukee.com/NonFiction.html>

QUOTES FROM RESIDENTS

Quotes from an ongoing oral history of the Garden District by Urban Anthropology Inc.¹—about THEN

“Of course, personally, the Garden District was an area through which one would drive to get to the Interstate to the airport. So, my memory of it back then was business, residential, mixed use, not—I don’t know how to say this—not a very fancy neighborhood. Rather working class and light commercial, industrial.”

“Up until the last decade, a lot of people were involved in manufacturing jobs. And jobs around the airport. West of the airport were a lot of trucking and freight.”

Quotes from an ongoing oral history of the Garden District by Urban Anthropology Inc.—about NOW

“[Witkowski’s] goal was to create an identity for his district. The Town of Lake did not have a lot of identity—just a lot of farms. So, when people moved in, they kept to their families. People don’t live very far from their family. In Wisconsin, families do not move away from each other.”

“There’s been a concerted effort in the last ten years to improve the look—especially of the businesses. There’s been some effort to add some green space which the Islamic Society of Milwaukee has participated in. Also, there’s been an effort to kind of spruce up the businesses in the area—especially along Layton Avenue.”

“I think that everyone in this neighborhood wants to see the neighborhood succeed. We all want to have safe, clean streets. A lot of people in this area are long-time residents and they are in favor of clean, safe neighborhoods.”

“The biggest change in the district over the last 35 years is the introduction of businesses that are culturally appropriate to Muslims—for example, restaurants, clothing stores, other services.”

“The UW-Extension is a big presence in Garden District.”

“The threat that we have today is people who work for the city moving out of the neighborhood because they are no longer required to live here.”

¹¹ Urban Anthropology Inc. complies with human subjects requirements of formal research and asks informants to sign informed consent forms that stipulate anonymity, hence names are not provided with the quotes.

PHOTOS



Today's neighborhood-Houses at Green Ave. & Melinda St.

Today's neighborhood-St. Charles Borromeo School



Today's neighborhood-
Houses at 30th & Parnell



For more information on Milwaukee neighborhoods, refer to John Gurda's *Milwaukee, City of Neighborhoods* and Jill Florence Lackey's and Rick Petrie's *Germans in Milwaukee: A neighborhood history*.

Do you have great photos of this neighborhood? Are you a resident with an interesting quote about this neighborhood? Do you have recurring outings, additions, corrections, or general comments about this neighborhood? Please email your input to Dr. Jill Florence Lackey at: jflanthropologist@currently.com