

**Approximate boundaries:**

**N**-W. Harrison Ave; **S**-W. Oklahoma Ave;

**E**-I-94; **W**-S. 20<sup>th</sup> St

# SOUTH SIDE *Polonia*

## NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Polonia is a densely populated neighborhood and the main housing types are early 20th century bungalows and two-story wood frame houses. Today South 13th Street is the major business district. Other commercial corridors are on West Oklahoma and West Cleveland.

Despite its population density, Polonia has considerable green space. The Kinnickinnic River runs through parts of Polonia. There is additional green space at Pulaski Park, nestled between Windlake Avenue (north), 18th Street (west), 16th Street (east), and Cleveland Avenue (south). Pulaski has 25.9 acres, a soccer field, sledding hill, and an indoor pool. Modrzejewski Park is also in the Polonia neighborhood and is located between 10th and 11th streets along Cleveland Avenue. The park features a playground, basketball court, and softball/baseball diamond. See Polonia photos below.

## HISTORY

Today's Polonia neighborhood once occupied a southern section of an area known as the Old (or Historic) South Side, an area encompassing today's Kinnickinnic Avenue to 27th Street and Greenfield to Oklahoma. Parts of Polonia are also part of today's Garden District. The boundaries of the Garden District are those of the 13th Aldermanic District.

### Early populations

Milwaukee's Old South Side owes its history in large part to the arrival of a wave of Polish immigrants in the late 19th century. Polish immigration to America resulted from a combination of 'push-pull' factors. Between 1795 and 1918, Poland was partitioned by Austria, Russia and Prussia. In

the 1870s Prussian leader Bismarck initiated a Germanization policy in the western section of Poland designed to bar speaking of languages other than German, impose a draft for the German army, weaken the Catholic Church, and replace Polish landowners with German citizens. This policy, coupled with the sharp drop in grain prices in the 1880s, led to massive emigrations of people from Poland in the late 19th century.

Many economically-devastated Poles came to urban areas in America's Midwest where they could access entry-level jobs in industry. The settlement areas became known as Polonias, or Polish-American communities.

Today's Polonia neighborhood took its name from this older designation. Polonias tended to be self-sustaining

neighborhoods with intricate parish systems and a wealth of

Polish institutions. The major area of settlement was around Lincoln Avenue, but by the early 20th century some were migrating further south

toward today's Oklahoma Avenue.

Often called "cozy" by early residents, the Old South Side became a place where people lived nurtured lives, surrounded by extended families and neighbors they knew well. The Polish language was spoken by most, well into the 1930s. Some of the early residents went on to achieve greatness in their respective fields. See examples below.



## Old South Side resident (early 20th century)

(Information from census records, Wikipedia photo)

### Marianna Michalska (Gilda Gray)<sup>i</sup>

Born in Krakow, Poland to parents Max and Wanda Michalska in 1901, Marianna immigrated to the United States in 1907 with her family. The Michalskas quickly found a home on Third Avenue (today's South 8th Street) in Milwaukee's old 14th Ward. At a young age, Marianna married her neighbor, John Gorecki, son of Socialist and union leader, Martin Gorecki. Although John worked as a pattern maker while in the neighborhood, he was also becoming an accomplished musician and became a concert violinist. The couple had one child, Martin. When Marianna and John moved to New York to pursue John's career, young Martin stayed behind with her parents.

Although Marianna and John eventually divorced, Marianna may have been influenced by her performer husband. She became a dancer and is said to have introduced the shimmy to American audiences in 1919.

While her marriage was breaking up, Marianna moved to Chicago, where she was discovered by talent agent Frank Westphal, the husband of Sophie Tucker. It was Tucker who convinced Marianna to change her name—which eventually became Gilda Gray. She succeeded as a vaudeville performer and married a second time to Gil Boag.

The couple moved to Hollywood where Gilda Gray's vaudeville act gained additional recognition. By the mid-1920s she made several movies—all of which included her famous shimmy.

After the stock market crash of 1929, Gilda lost most of her assets, and returned to New York. There she worked as a dancer at the Palace Theater. During World War II she raised money for Poland and brought six Polish citizens to America during the Cold War era. Recognizing her great contributions, Ralph Edwards dedicated a *This is Your Life* show to Gilda in 1953.

Son Marin Gorecki, who had remained in Milwaukee on South 8th Street during his childhood, was greatly influenced by his musical parents. He went on to become a big band maestro as an adult, under the name of Martin Gray.



Another neighborhood resident who went on to achieve greatness is Robert J. Modrzejewski. In addition to earning the Medal of Honor, a local park now bears his name.

## Old South Side resident (1940s)

*(Information from census records, Wikipedia photo)*

### Robert J. Modrzejewski<sup>ii</sup>

In the 1940s, Robert J. Modrzejewski grew up in the Lincoln Village neighborhood, at 2431 South 9th Street, possibly just around the corner from Gilda Gray's childhood home. Like most children on his block, if weather permitted, he walked the few blocks to Cleveland Park between 10th and 11th Streets in today's Polonia neighborhood to play softball or baseball—both sports being extremely popular on the Old South Side.

Robert was the fifth child of parents Joseph J. and Rose S. Modrzejewski (nee Tarkowski), both immigrants from Poland. Among Roberts' siblings were sisters Dolores, Esther, and Adeline, and brother Arthur. As a child, Robert's maternal grandfather, Ignatz Tarkowski, and uncle Frank Tarkowski lived in his household. The father Joseph worked as a machinist for the U.S., Chicago and North Western Railroad. Like virtually all families in this Polish neighborhood, Robert's was Roman Catholic.

In 1953, Robert graduated from Casimir Pulaski High School. He later attended Wisconsin State Teachers College and the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, where he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Education.

While at UW-M, Robert became a member of the Platoon Leaders Class that led to his being commissioned as a Marine Corps Reserve second lieutenant upon graduation in 1957. By 1960 he had been integrated into the Regular Marine Corps.

Robert was ordered to the West Coast and then to the Republic of Vietnam. In Vietnam, he assumed duty as Commanding Officer of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, 3rd Marine Division. During these years Robert J. Modrzejewski distinguished himself above and beyond the call of duty—for which he was awarded the Medal of Honor. He and another Marine, John J. McGinty III, were presented the Medals of Honor on March 12, 1968 by President Lyndon Johnson.

Modrzejewski retired from the military in 1986. In an official ceremony in July 2004, the City of Milwaukee renamed Robert's old haunt, Cleveland Park, to Modrzejewski Playground. Today with fewer than 20 percent of the Lincoln Village residents still being Polish, many have trouble with the pronunciation and affectionately refer to the playground as "Mod Park."



### *Polonia neighborhood specifics*

As the Poles began to migrate south into the Polonia neighborhood, they encountered a smattering of farms occupied by ethnic Germans and a few already-established institutions. One of these was the AJ Lindemann & Hoverson Company that manufactured stoves on West Cleveland Avenue—a company that had opened in the late 19th century. The Polonia neighborhood also had its own

brewery early on, on South 13th Street. Called the Independent Milwaukee Brewery., it was locally known by its brand name, Braumeister. The Brewery opened in 1902. It was later bought by the G. Heilemann Brewery in the 1940s, and continued until 1964.

As the Polish influence grew stronger in the area, they left their mark on a local park that had been purchased in 1910. Pulaski Park, today nestled between Windlake Avenue (north), 18th Street (west), 16th Street (east), and Cleveland Avenue (south), was named after Revolutionary War hero, Casimir Pulaski. The park was altered in 1919 and 1924. Amenities were gradually added including an indoor swimming pool, tennis court, wading pool, tot lot, basketball court, and lighted sledding hills.

The Poles also left their influence on the various business corridors.

### *Polonia businesses in 1935*

The following table is a sample of the businesses on West Cleveland and West Oklahoma that were serving residents at the height of the Great Depression in 1935. It provides a snapshot of the close-knit community life in Polonia in its early days of settlement. See the summary notes at the end of the tables.

<i>Addresses on W. Cleveland in 1935</i>	<i>Businesses, organizations, offices from the Milwaukee City Directory</i>
601	AJ Lindemann & Hoverson Company Stove Manufacturers
1323	Independent Milwaukee Brewery Company
1326	Independent Brewers Bottling Department

### **Notes from census and other public records:**

- AJ Lindemann & Hoverson Company operated between 1888 and 1981. The company had a well-documented labor strike that began in 1935 and lasted into 1937.
- The Lindemann & Hoverson company was sold in 1958 to Chilton Metal Products, Inc. of Chilton, Wisconsin, and Otto A. Boheim, a Milwaukee industrialist.
- Albert J. Lindemann, a German immigrant, was born in 1854. He lived most of his adult life on Milwaukee's East Side. He is buried at Forest Home Cemetery.
- The Independent Milwaukee Brewery suspended operations for several years during the Great Depression (see info on the brewery above).

<i>Addresses on W. Oklahoma in 1935</i>	<i>Businesses, organizations, offices from the Milwaukee City Directory</i>
702	Alfred Falk Filling Station
733	Stanley Niemczynski Tavern
802	Sylvester Jawiecki Filling Station
803	Model Bakery

<i>Addresses on W. Oklahoma in 1935</i>	<i>Businesses, organizations, offices from the Milwaukee City Directory</i>
832	Art's Service Station
907	Lawrence Poth Filling Station
915	Industrial Service Laboratory
924	Constantine F. Sych Tailor and Shoe Repair
926	Belle Beauty Shop
928	Amanda Krzychi Dry Goods
932	Oklahoma Food Mart
933	South Star Market (Adolph Nalenz)
950	Stephen E. Piotrowski Drugs
1019	Joseph E. Sass Funeral Directors
1031	Benjamin Wisniewski Barber
1117	William B. Manske Barber
1121	Plaza Flower Shop
1122	St. Andrews Lutheran Hall
1125	Fashion Shoppe Women's Furnishings
1132	St. Andrew's Evangelical Lutheran Church
1202	Stanley Ufnowski Filling Station
1212	Stephen Markowski Carpenter and Construction
1224	Standard Oil Company Filling Station
1336	John S. Sobosinski Grocery and Meat Market
1337	Benjamin Zachowski Filling Station
1438	Frank Imanski Baker
1500	John G. Rewolinski Grocery and Meat Market
1513	John A. Struder Barber
1515	Stanley Moraski's Radio Shop



<i>Addresses on W. Oklahoma in 1935</i>	<i>Businesses, organizations, offices from the Milwaukee City Directory</i>
1519	John J. Kazmierowski Physician
1604	Public Utility Oil Company Filling Station
1629	Valentine A. Koszalka Tavern
2005	L. J. Mueller Furnace Co.

#### **Notes from census and other public records:**

- Most of the proprietors were Polish.
- Like business owners in most Milwaukee neighborhoods prior to 1970, most shopkeepers did not have a high school education. And most were immigrants or children of immigrants.
- Stanley Niemczynski, with the tavern at 733 W. Oklahoma, was a good example of a typical Polonia resident in 1935. He and his wife lived at the same address as the tavern. He died in 1979 and his funeral was at the Sass Funeral home just up the street. He was buried at the nearby St. Adalbert's Cemetery.
- Amanda Krzychi, the dry goods store owner, was a Pole who had been a tailor before owning her own shop.
- Stephen Piotrowski, the druggist, was the son of Polish immigrants and was raised on Windlake Ave. While operating the drug store, he lived in a home just two blocks east, on Oklahoma.
- Stanley Ufnowski, with the filling station, was a Polish immigrant who worked for a real estate company before starting his own business. His father, Joseph, had been a night watchmen for Harvester Mfg.
- Valentine Koszalka, the bar owner, was a Polish immigrant who had worked as a day laborer before saving enough funds to open his own business.
- Constantine Zych, with the tailor shop, was the son of a West Prussian immigrant. Constantine was very young when he opened his shop and remained living with his parents until well into the 1940s. The family lived just around the corner on S. 8th St.
- There were seven gas stations on the fourteen blocks covered.
- Polonia residents had their basic needs met in their neighborhood with grocery stores, butchers, bakeries, clothing stores, beauty shops, barbers, taverns, and drug stores.

The Polish population in the Polonia neighborhood continued to grow through the Great Depression and after World War II. It wasn't until the 1970s that the Old South Side began to experience a population sea change.

## *Arrival of Latinos*

Latinos (mainly Mexicans) began to settle on the near South Side in the 1920s and slowly migrated south into the area developed by Polish immigrants. Since the 1970s, the Mexican community has grown dramatically, and other Latinos have arrived from the Caribbean and Central and South America. In the Polonia neighborhood, they have been joined more recently by a smattering of African Americans, Asians, and American Indians.

A number of push-pull factors influenced the population changes. During the early 1900s Mexican immigration to the United States expanded because of worsening economic conditions in Mexico. A large wave of Mexicans also left the country during the political and economic turmoil created by the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Beginning in 1917, the US government implemented a series of immigration restriction policies to curb the influx of Mexicans, mainly in response to local claims that Mexicans (who often worked for low wages) were taking jobs away from ‘true’ Americans.

Although most Mexicans found jobs in local tanneries and foundries, some came to Milwaukee as strikebreakers—often unknowingly. They were hired by companies that were intent on breaking their own labor unions, and the Mexicans earned the enmity of the European workers they replaced. This situation led to early discrimination against Mexican Americans in Milwaukee.

But they found a place to fit in. Latinos were able to settle successfully alongside the Poles because they shared so many traits in common. These included the Catholic faith, the focus on the Madonna figure, polka music traditions, similarities in childrearing and eldercare practices, and an entrepreneurial spirit.

## Current populations (as of 2021)

Today, 7 in 10 residents in the Polonia neighborhood are Latinos (mostly of Mexican ancestry), and Spanish is the first language spoken in over half the households. About 2 in 10 of the residents still claim Polish or German descent. The neighborhood is also home to a smattering of African Americans, Asians (mostly Chinese), and North American Indians.

About half of the population in the Polonia neighborhood falls into the lower middle-income stratum (with annual household incomes between \$25,000 and \$50,000), and a little less than one-third fall into the low-income category (with annual household incomes under \$25,000). The most common occupations among residents are in production, administration, and facilities (construction and maintenance).

Home ownership is slightly higher in the neighborhood than what is typical for Milwaukee, with nearly half the properties being owned. Rents are reasonable with about 9 in 10 rental properties going for \$500 to \$1,000 a month.

Gardening has been a major activity among Polonia residents—a tradition carried over from the time when the neighborhood was part of the Town of Lake. In 2008, the Common Council approved a resolution to name all the neighborhoods in the 13th Aldermanic District (which includes the western section of Holler Park) 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.

## INTERESTING FEATURES

- **Redeveloping Kinnickinnic River**, with stream widening, small parks, trails, and public art.
- **Pulaski Park** at 2701 S. 16th St., with multiple amenities (see photo and outings).
- **Modrzejewski Park** located between 10th and 11th streets along Cleveland, with youth programs including a summer free lunch program.

## 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.

### ROZGA FAMILY'S OLD SOUTH SIDE SETTLEMENT MUSEUM

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
2-4 pm with reservation, email <a href="mailto:JFLanthropologist@currently.com">JFLanthropologist@currently.com</a>	707 W. Lincoln Ave.	Museum with exhibits of Old South Side history up to current date	Free with groups of 2 or more

### SLEDDING

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Winter months, daytime, lighted evenings 4:30-8:30pm	Pulaski Park, 2701 S. 16th St.	Sledding day or night on lighted hill.	Free

### JULY 4TH CELEBRATION

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

### MILWAUKEE FIRE MUSEUM

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
1st Sun. of each month, 1-4pm, (except holidays)	1516 W. Oklahoma Ave.	Opportunity to see exhibits and artifacts of the Milwaukee Fire Department back to the 1800s; stories of history of Department and fires.	Free



### UMOS MEXICAN INDEPENDENCE DAY PARADE

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Sep., Sun. 10am- 12pm	Starts at 20th & Oklahoma Ave.	Southside parade of arts, floats, local organizations honoring Mexican Independence Day.	Free

### OPEN SWIM

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Daily, 1-5pm, holiday times vary	Pulaski Park, 2701 S. 16th St.	Open swim year-round at indoor pool with diving boards, locker rooms, vending machines.	unk

### 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 Ave.	Fair of over 25 vendors, concessions, prizes, bake sale, and more.	unk

### UNGUIDED TOUR OF BASILICA OF ST. JOSAPHAT

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mon., 9am-4pm	Visitor's Center, Basilica of St. Josaphat, 2333 S. 6th St.	Opportunity to see and learn about one of the most beautiful churches in America with informational exhibits on lower level.	Free

### GUIDED TOUR OF BASILICA OF ST. JOSAPHAT

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Make reservations on Basilica's website	Visitor's Center, Basilica of St. Josaphat, 2333 S. 6th St.	Opportunity to see and learn about one of the most beautiful churches in America with informational exhibits on lower level.	Free

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 2002 oral history conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.<sup>1</sup>—About THEN**

“The Poles worked in the factories mostly. There were a lot of jobs around. Most people were laborers. Poles were good with carpentry, metals, tool and dye business, factory things. The first Poles had glass-blowing skills on the east coast. Early, some were brought here for fighting skills—to fight in the Revolutionary War. They were soldiers. Two celebrated Poles in Revolutionary War were Pulaski and other guy, Kosciuszko. We have statues in the area of these guys.”

“Some were entrepreneurs--in business, shoe cobblers, butchers, pharmacist, doctors in Polonia. The pharmacies were all run by Poles. People went to Marquette or Wisconsin and got their degrees and some doctorates. Others worked in the manufacturing plants in area—Bradley or Maynard Steel, Lindemann Stoves. Others worked for city or county, some in tanneries, foundries.”

“Most of the early residents were in the lower middle class, some in the middle and even upper middle class. Some owned businesses. They didn’t really strive to be in upper classes--no desire to flaunt wealth. The Mexicans are like the Poles in that way.”

“The big events were the dedication of the Basilica and dedication of Kosciuszko statue at that park, and the dedication of Pulaski at that park.”

“Poles have the great work ethic and keep up property so well. Latinos brought in different food and clothes, customs, and also show similarities. The media still focuses on the worst in Mexicans.”

“[During the Polish times] Couples stayed with their parents. When another child got married then the first couple might buy a home near the parents. Today, young people get apartments after they get married, then get a house later. Later some moved into condos. Families then were four to seven children. That has decreased to one or two or none. Has to do with cost of raising family today, and people thinking they need more stuff.”

### **Quotes from 2010 oral history updated by Urban Anthropology Inc.—About NOW**

“People used to live above their businesses. Today they have the business and live outside of Polonia.”

“When we got here, it was just the family. Now there are so many people here from Mexico.”

“In the last ten years most of the people moving here are almost completely Latino.”

“The thing about the Polonia neighborhood is that it’s very, very diverse. The homes are pretty nice and the neighborhood is safe. I have neighbors who are Hispanic and neighbors who are Polish and neighbors who are German. I would not move, even if I could afford to.”

“It seems to be getting better for work. People work in factories and stores. It was pretty low when I first came. Latinos are very hard working and start off with nothing.”

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<sup>1</sup> 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-  
Kinnickinnic River development



Today's neighborhood-  
Kinnickinnic River Trail bike path



Today's neighborhood-  
Houses on 8th & Manitoba







Today's neighborhood-Pulaski Park

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<sup>i</sup>Photo attribution: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/72/Gilda\\_Gray.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/72/Gilda_Gray.jpg)

<sup>ii</sup>Photo attribution: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/79/Modrzejewski\\_RJ.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/79/Modrzejewski_RJ.jpg)

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:  
[JFLanthropologist@currently.com](mailto:JFLanthropologist@currently.com)