

Approximate boundaries:
N-E. Capitol Dr; S-Milwaukee River;
E-Milwaukee River, W-N. Holton St

NORTH SIDE *Riverwest*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Riverwest is a very large neighborhood with a mix of housing styles. Most homes are bungalows and two-story wood frame houses. An area south of Kern Park between Humboldt Avenue and the river has a more suburban look with more elaborate homes than the rest of the neighborhood. The region around Commerce Street along the river is almost entirely condominiums (most relatively new). Much of this area is now partitioned out to become the Beerline B neighborhood today.

There are three large parks in Riverwest. Kern Park is in the northeastern section of the neighborhood and has tennis courts and a baseball diamond. Gordon Park is just south of Locust Street and has a pavilion for accommodating many different community events. Kilbourn Park was created with the removal of an underground drinking water reservoir that once held 20 million gallons of water. The park is on a high plateau that has spectacular views of downtown Milwaukee and the East Side.

HISTORY

A narrow stretch of urban land that borders the Milwaukee River, today's Riverwest is one of the most ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse neighborhoods in Milwaukee. But Riverwest was not always that diverse.

Early populations

In Tom Tolan's comprehensive history of the neighborhood in *Riverwest: A Community History*, he documents the historic settlements in the area from the early industrial developments on the river's banks to the defining moments in Riverwest culture in the 60s and 70s and beyond. He discusses the early German workers and "aristocrats" settled along the River and the Polish Kashubes just to the south. According to Tolan, the Polish neighborhood, or *Kompa*, "was the closest thing you could get in the middle of an American industrial city to a rural Polish village. Most residents kept ducks, geese, and chickens, and a good number had pigs, cows, or goats as well." The long stretch of land west of the Milwaukee River would remain essentially German and Polish until the late 1960s.

But Tolan suggested that the ancestry of *today's* neighborhood can be traced back to a series of events in the 1960s and 1970s. During these years, two government programs were displacing major populations in the city. One program was urban renewal, which had been designed to improve central city housing. During the same time period, the Milwaukee County Expressway Commission was building major freeway corridors in the heart of Milwaukee. Among the populations displaced by these programs were African Americans and Puerto Ricans. A major African American community was located just *southwest* of the Riverwest neighborhood, in a dense and culturally rich area called Bronzeville. A major Puerto Rican community had developed just *southeast* of Riverwest in the Yankee Hill neighborhood. Residents of both communities were forced to sell their homes or in some cases were offered alternative housing in other areas of the city.



Today's neighborhood-
Snails Crossing pocket park

Gradually members of both communities found their way into the Riverwest neighborhood. While the resettlement involved some tensions, most of the residents suggested that Riverwest was more welcoming to them than other areas of the city (see comments below from oral history project). One of the new residents during these years would prove to be revolutionary for Milwaukee. See below.

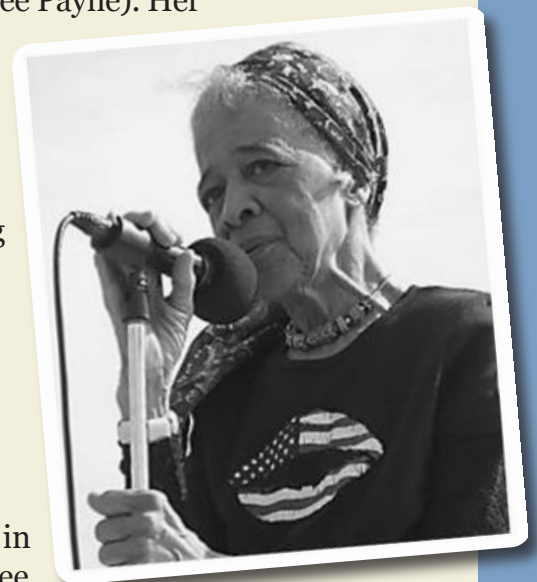
Spotlight on Riverwest family (late 20th century)

(Information from census and other public records)

The Phillips family

After their marriage, Vel and Dale Phillips moved to 2237 North Booth in the Riverwest neighborhood. Vel had grown up in Bronzeville.

Velvlea Hortense Rodgers Phillips (see photo¹), was born on February 18, 1924 to parents Russell Lowell Rodgers and Thelma Etha Rodgers (nee Payne). Her maternal ancestors included an A.M.E. bishop and African missionaries. According to World War II draft records, the Thelma and Russell Rodgers family lived at 1740 North 7th Street in the heart of Bronzeville (today's Hillside neighborhood) during the 1940s. Records suggest she may have also had a southside connection, as her father was living on South 26th Street just before his marriage to Thelma. While in the Bronzeville area, Vel attended Garfield Avenue Elementary School, Roosevelt Junior High School, and the mostly white North Division High School. Through the Elks Lodge Competition, she won a scholarship to Howard University in 1942. During her time at Howard, she married Dale Phillips.



Warren Dale Phillips was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1922. His parents were Severn Phillips and Viva Phillips (nee Scott). He served in the US Army during World War II, just prior to his marriage to Vel in 1945. After Vel received her bachelor's degree, the couple attended the University of Wisconsin, both receiving law degrees. Vel was the first black woman to earn an L.L.B. degree from the University.

But this was just one of Vel's *firsts*. With Dale's help, she became the first African American and the first woman to earn a Milwaukee Common Council seat. While Dale practiced law at his office on Wisconsin Avenue, Vel introduced Milwaukee's first open housing ordinance to the council. The bill failed several attempts. Finally, following months of fair housing marches in 1968, the bill passed.

But the *firsts* didn't end there. In 1971, Phillips was appointed as the first woman to the Milwaukee County Judiciary. In 1978, she became the first woman and first non-white to be elected Wisconsin's Secretary of State. In 2002, Phillips was appointed "Distinguished Professor of Law" at Marquette University School of Law.

While Dale died in 1988 and was buried at Wood National Cemetery, Vel Phillips never stopped fighting for social justice. She died in 2018.

Business in Riverwest

Commercial corridors developed on North Avenue, Locust, Center, Holton, and Clarke. Below is a list of businesses on East Locust Street in 1945. See notes below.

<i>Addresses on E. Locust in Riverwest in 1945</i>	<i>Name of businesses from the <u>Milwaukee City Directory</u></i>
503	Arthur C. Siefert Dentist
516	William C. Czarnecki Painter
531	Emil L. Fischer Painter
630	Raymond Rockwell Tavern
634	Mrs. Marion K. Loendorf Poultry
635	GR Products Washing Compounds
718	Lawrence A. Frymark Artist
719	J.H. Singer Hardware Company Tin Shop
720	Mrs. Lema Stoffer Grocery
726	William T. Grachler Shoe Repair
733	J.H. Singer Hardware Company
800	Garber's Food Market
803	Frank W. Jack Barber
815	Julius W. Brzeskowski Tavern
821	A & P Food Stores
824-826	Locus (Locust?) Printing Company
825	L.J. Company Bowling Alley Supplies
827	Pulaski Building Keep Clean Garment Company Uniforms Gordon Park Recreation Bowling Alley Wings Knitting Company Heller Leather Company Glove Manufacturers
828	John W. Libby Confectioner
829	Val Jashun Tavern
832	Henry J. Kiedrowski Dry Goods
833	Locust Street Nyal Pharmacy

<i>Addresses on E. Locust in Riverwest in 1945</i>	<i>Name of businesses from the Milwaukee City Directory</i>
909-913	Locust Street Garage
920	Andrew E. Strom Tavern
923	Wantoch's Hall
932	Peter Smykocz Bakery
1001	Mrs. Estelle Jarmuz Tavern
1010	Locust Machine Shop
1020	Daniel J. Rzentkowski Tavern
1025	Cudahy Brothers Company Wholesale Meats
1300	Random Ice & Coal Company Wisconsin Ice Association

Notes:

- The northern blocks of Riverwest were served well by merchants on Locust at the close of World War II, with grocers, pharmacies, butchers, bakeries, and a dry goods store.
- This stretch of Locust had six taverns.
- As in most Milwaukee neighborhoods prior to 1970, few shopkeepers had attended high school. Most were also immigrants or children of immigrants and lived at or near the addresses of their businesses.
- There were several female proprietors on Locust. This was not at all unusual for Milwaukee neighborhoods on the north side of the city, but was much more unusual for the southside of the city.
- The businesses on this street show an area moving from a Depression-era economy, with shoe repair shops, a poultry store, and an ice production company.
- William C. Czarnecki, the painter, was an immigrant from Poland. Like most Milwaukee business owners during these decades, he lived at the address of his business.
- Emil L. Fischer, also a painter, was the son of German immigrants. He grew up on N. Pierce St.
- Raymond Rockwell, with the tavern, was an anomaly on the street in that neither he nor his parents were immigrants.
- Lawrence A. Frymark, the artist, was the son of German immigrants. He had previously worked out of his studio/home on E. Chambers.
- Lema Stoffer, the grocer, was one of several female proprietors on the street. She was divorced and lived with her widowed mother, Ida Gramlow, at the address of the grocery store. Ida was the daughter of German immigrants.
- Frank Jack, the barber, was the son of German immigrants.
- Julius W. Brzeskowski, with the tavern, was an immigrant from Poland.
- John W. Libby, the confectioner, was a true anomaly on the street. He'd completed five years of college and neither he nor his parents were immigrants. He's previously been a water meter man prior to opening his own business.

- Val Jashun, with the tavern, had lived in Oconto before moving to Milwaukee. His ethnicity is not known.
- Henry J. Kiedrowski, with the dry goods store, was the son of Polish immigrants.
- Andrew E. Strom, with the tavern, was an immigrant from Finland.
- Wantoch's Hall was owned by Joseph Wantoch, a Polish immigrant. The Hall had been on Locust since before 1920. Before Joseph opened the hall, he operated a grocery store. The Wantoch family lived on Weil.
- Peter Smykacz, the baker, was a Polish immigrant. He'd had his bakery on the street since prior to 1930.
- Estelle Jarmuz, with the tavern, was the daughter of Polish immigrants.
- The ice production companies, such as Random Ice & Coal, and the jobs they provided, were partially responsible for drawing residents to the city's northeast neighborhoods in the early 20th century.

And yet another new population for Riverwest

Some years later, another population was migrating into Riverwest. These were the counterculturals or hippies of the '60s and early '70s. The hippies had originally settled east of the Milwaukee River, but rising costs of living on the Lower East Side prompted them to cross over to the west bank of the river. The counterculturals were organized around radical reform issues such as cooperative living, social justice, anti-war, and cultural tolerance. Many white hippies quickly joined forces with the African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other liberal-minded European Americans in the Riverwest area over Civil Rights and fair housing. These alliances set the tone for an enduring reign of activism and tolerance in Riverwest.

Current populations (as of 2021)

Today, the people of Riverwest occupy a variety of jobs from blue collar to professional positions. The most common are in the fields of food service, administration, sales, and education. But in Riverwest, art rules. And the art forms are as diverse as the people. The issues that united the major Riverwest cultural groups back in the 1960s and 1970s—fair housing, cultural tolerance, peace, and social justice—continue to be championed in the neighborhood. Art is routinely used to advance social causes, and a sense of civic responsibility is often reflected in the art forms.

The creative and advocacy efforts in Riverwest are practiced by a diverse population. Approximately 7 of 10 residents are European Americans, 2 in 10 African Americans, 1 in 10 Latinos (mostly Puerto Ricans), and a scattering of residents are Asians and American Indians.

While just over one-third of Riverwest residents live in low-income households (with annual incomes under \$25,000), the neighborhood is a well-educated one. Adult residents have more than twice the proportion of college degrees than Milwaukeeans overall.

IMPORTANT NEIGHBORHOOD FEATURES

- **The Art Bar**, at 722 E. Burleigh St., with temporary art exhibits.
- **Riverwest Co-op**, at 733 E. Clarke St., a cooperative food store and café
- **Club Timbuktu**, at 520 E. Center, a multicultural hangout with African food, poetry readings, and other cultural events
- **Snails Crossing**, at 3500 N. Bremen, a pocket park of ceramic images created by local artists
- **Peace Action Wisconsin**, at 1001 E. Keefe, a center for promoting worldwide peace
- **Aurora Weier Center**, which had been at 2669 N. Richards, was named after Panamanian-born Aurora Weier, a major activist in the Puerto Rican Riverwest community who was shot by another activist.

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.

RIVERWEST SECRET GARDEN TOUR

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Jul., Sun. 12-4pm	Garden Park, Locust and Bremen Sts.	Tour of 14 Riverwest gardens.	unk

SKYLINE MUSIC SERIES

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Jul. thru late Aug., Tues. 5:30	Kadish Park, south of North Ave., west of Bremen St.	A great evening of music in Riverwest, topped off with one of the most dramatic views of the city.	Free

RIVERWEST GARDENERS MARKET

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid-June-mid-Oct., Sun. 10am-3pm	2700 N. Pierce St.	Fresh produce from Wisconsin farmers, baked goods, arts, crafts.	Free

RIVERWEST ART WALK

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Oct., Sat. all day	Get tickets and maps at Art Bar (722 E. Burleigh St.), Jazz Gallery (926 E. Center St.), and Riverwest Food Co-op (733 E. Clarke St.)	A walk that features artist studios, beautiful gardens, and various sanctuaries.	unk

JULY 4TH CELEBRATION

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
July 4, 9am-10pm	Gordon Park, 2828 N. Humboldt Blvd.	Parade, music, kids' activities, art, fireworks.	Free

LOCUST STREET FESTIVAL OF MUSIC AND ART

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Jun., Sun. 11am-8pm	Locust St. between Humboldt & Holton	Featuring six live music venues and a variety of food, artists and vendors with up to 30,000 people.	Free

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Announcing
Milwaukee's ethnic guide

A literal stroll through neighborhoods where Milwaukee's ethnic groups settled

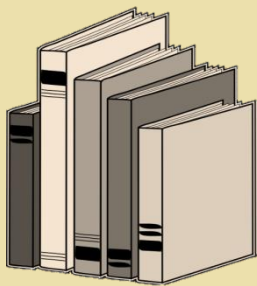
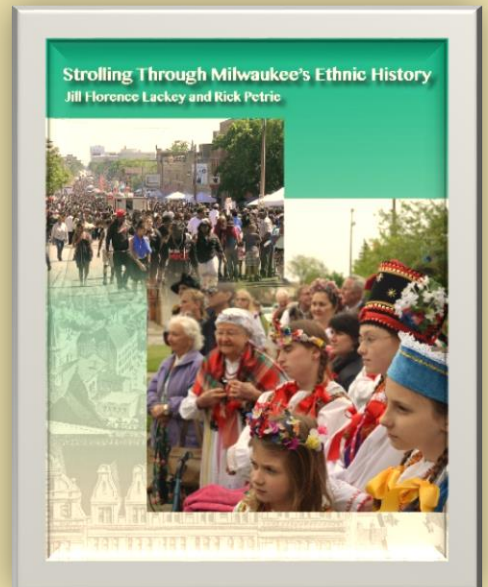
Dr. Jill Florence Lackey and Rick Petrie

Strolling through Milwaukee's Ethnic History

Chapters taking place in Lincoln Village, Walker's Point, Third Ward, Halyard Park, East Town, Lake Park, Jones Island, West Town, Riverwest

An "up close and personal" look at local ethnic life by directing readers to the neighborhoods and venues where the groups left their marks. *Strolling* brings readers directly into their experiences, whether it involves ambling through the environments they built or participating in contemporary ethnic activities.

Ethnic groups covered: Milwaukee Germans, Irish, African Americans, Italians, Mexicans, French, English, Norwegians, Jews, Hmong, North American Indians, Scots/Scots Irish, Czechs/Slovaks, Kashubes, Greeks, Puerto Ricans, and Burmese.



MECAH Publishing

Milwaukee Ethnic Collection of Arts and Humanities

<http://mecahmilwaukee.com/NonFiction.html>

"*Strolling through Milwaukee's Ethnic History* is an intriguing guide to the ethnic history in our midst and a colorful reminder that Milwaukee has always been a city of newcomers."

- John Gurda

FREE FAMILY SWIM

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Autumn, Mon. & Wed., 7:45-8:45pm Sat. 8-8:50am	Riverside H.S., 1615 E. Locust St.	Swimming. Children 7 and under must be accompanied by adult. Swim caps can be purchased at site.	Families, free

BRONZEVILLE WEEK

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Aug., 2 nd week	MLK Dr., between Garfield Ave. and Center St.	Cultural and arts festival, with a run/walk run, health screenings, trolley rides, arts night, poetry readings.	Free

CENTER STREET DAYS

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Early Aug., Sat. all day	Center St. between Humboldt Ave. & Holton St.	Music, food, arts, crafts, cart race, car show.	Free

ART BAR

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
3pm-2am	722 E. Burleigh St.	Permanent and temporary art exhibits.	Adults 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 an oral history of the Lower East Side/Brady Street currently being conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.¹ About THEN.

“Why did I move here? It was the whole aspirations for the countercultural lifestyle. I mean the East Side is the ‘trendy East Side.’ I don’t feel comfortable on Downer, for some reason. I was comfortable with these hippie people. There was a wonderful food co-op here; I was on the board, at Gordon Park. It was a shit food co-op. It wasn’t just health food. And we lived in a housing co-op through the ‘80s over here on Pierce and Hadley.”

“Our involvement was with the neighborhood, the people, the activities. It was all very appealing at that point, in the ‘70s. That was ‘74 to ‘75 and there was still a real heterogeneous mix of people here. There were still the old people who had worked at Ma Baensch’s and the small factories around. That whole mix is really what was interesting to us. That was probably prior to that artist infusion. We were active with the Outpost and we did most of our shopping at those stores so that became our circle. So, it was an easy step from there to finding a place to live and establishing some roots here.”

“There were bars in the basements at one time. One was called Humpin’ Hanna’s. Tiny Tim played there.”

“Years ago, the city wanted to broaden Locust Street so that it would be more of a junior freeway to the university, but the resistance of the neighborhood won over. That’s how we ended up with the Locust Street festival. I think that kind of activism was the roots of the community-based nonprofit associations here in the neighborhood. From the standpoint of peace, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War was founded here in this neighborhood. And we here at Peace Action bought this building about 14 years ago.”

“I remember how it was. The bakeries are all gone now, Outpost, Humpin’ Hanna’s are all gone. The churches have changed. St. Mary Czestochowa and St. Casimir have combined and are now Our Lady of Divine Providence.”

“We lived upstairs from a witch. She had one foot in the bottle and one foot in the supernatural. She was a hoot to live near. Her whole family was. There was a bar across the street, a bodega that was started by [NAME OF HER HUSBAND]. He won the lottery and went to Puerto Rico and ended up spending all the money there because his wife put a spell on him and he got into an accident there. He wanted to move the family back to Puerto Rico and she didn’t want to go. So, she put this spell on him and he came back broke. He spent all of his money on the hospital bill.”

“The Falcon Bowl across the street has served the community since the Polish days. They now have everything from quinceaneras to Polish weddings and open bowling. It’s like nothing has changed. The link between Hispanic and Polish is Catholicism. At one point the neighborhood was almost all Polish. This resulted from the expansion of St. Hedwig’s parish which got too big and they built another building in 1895. At one point there were over 1000 kids in the school.”

“Families, good families. When you walk, you would meet everybody you knew. Val Phillips lived in the area. Yeah, she was, I think, the first alderman in the area. She lived right off of North Avenue.”

Quotes from 2005 oral history of Riverwest by Urban Anthropology Inc.— About now

“There are no rigid rules here. In other words, gay families live here, mixed race families live here, single families live here, and they are families. People also just hang together as families here. There are block parties every summer.”

“On Good Friday they [Puerto Rican community in Riverwest] do a Dia de Las Cruces--the way of the cross--out here on the streets. People get dressed up as Roman soldiers, Jesus, and the cross on is a flatbed truck. The stations of the cross start at St. Casimir’s here and end at St. Mary’s.”

“I was a hippie and I still consider myself a hippie. In the ‘80s or ‘90s the hippies went underground so I was an underground hippie. Now it’s in vogue again, so I am not underground.”

“Most of the Puerto Ricans are Catholic, but there has been an interesting emergence of Pentecostal churches particularly among the PR. The children attend these churches and can retain their languages.”

“Let’s not forget the Quakers and the Peace Action Center housed there. They have had a great impact on the community.”

“There is also a group of people who come to Riverwest every summer and they always have dark clothes and look like ‘traveler’ type people. They all have backpacks and matted hair and dogs. I don’t know who those people really are, but they are always here in summer.”

“People really try to get along here. One time someone started putting letters in people’s mail boxes saying how they wanted all the African Americans out of the neighborhood, but we put a stop to that. We had a few meetings. We value diversity.”

“You’ve got so many poets here. You can go almost anywhere in Riverwest and sit in on a poetry reading. You see the African Americans and some from Africa at Timbuktu, or anyone at the Art Bar, and the serious poets at Woodland Pattern.”

“This was always the side of town where you could be free to be who you wanted to be, and the artists helped shaped that.”

“I think, you know, feeling like you can walk out of your house and some Latino kids can zip by on a skateboard and somebody else can be driving down the street blasting their hip hop, right. And then you can walk a half a block and hear some grunge rockers practicing in their attic or basement, and then a little bit further you can hear some heavy salsa music coming out of somebody’s house, with people and their Puerto Rican flag hanging in the window.”

“And so, there’s a big movement right now understanding the importance of everybody’s culture and diversity, like the African American and the Latino American, and the African and Latino community. And I do a lot of that stuff with drumming, you know, when I have everybody in a circle, I say, oh wow, what a perfect opportunity to talk about diversity, what a perfect opportunity to talk about community and how to be a community and how to work with the person next to you.”

“There’s hippies, there are punks, there are metal-heads, there are straight-edge kids, and there’s people that want to live here but don’t. And then, you know, new families. There’s a big gay and lesbian community in Riverwest. I think it’s definitely a place where they feel comfortable. I think they add a lot to the community, you know; I have a lot of gay friends here.”

“There no big clash in Riverwest, there’s not a big clash. Not on the physical level out here on the streets, not even with the young people. Young people ain’t even clashin’ with each other. You see black kids, white kids, Puerto Rican kids--all of ‘em playin’ basketball up here.”

“We have a response team of artists. If we need to throw a benefit concert for a family whose gas got cut off and they got kicked out of the house—and so that’s what we had to do. We call artists to pull people together. We’ve done coat drives for kids, food drives, you know, different situations like that with the Respect Campaign. And we’ve done practically concerts in City Hall--you know, where we bring the whole artists’ community out and speak on our issues, ‘cause we speak on it in our music, so it gives us kind of the perfect platform to deliver our message and really kind of like organize the people.”

¹ 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-Kern Park



Today's neighborhood-Gordon Park



Today's neighborhood-Snails Crossing pocket park





Today's neighborhood-
Our Lady of Divine Providence on Bremen & Clarke



Today's neighborhood-
New condos on Commerce St.

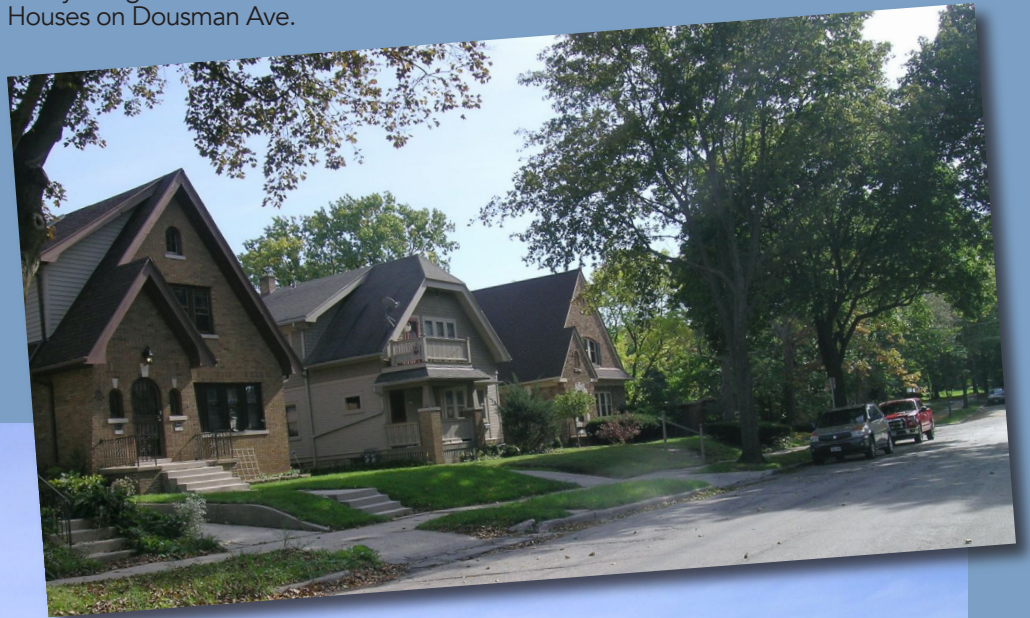


Today's neighborhood-Kilbourn Park looking north



Today's neighborhood-T'ai Chi Center on Locust St.

Today's neighborhood-
Houses on Dousman Ave.



Today's neighborhood-Kilbourn Park looking east on North Ave.

OLDER PHOTOS FROM RESIDENTS



The 1936 St Casmir's School graduating class. Photo courtesy of Gregg Jozwik



Max Charne, in his grocery store on that was located at the southwest corner of Weil and Wright Streets. Photo taken in the 1950s (courtesy of Jim Charne).



Photo contributed by Fred Hang, descendant of the butcher shop proprietor (located on Holton)

1 Photo attribution: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a6/Vel_Phillips_at_March_on_Milwaukee_-_2007.jpg

For more information on Milwaukee neighborhoods, refer to John Gurda's *Milwaukee, City of Neighborhoods*, Tom Tolan's *Riverwest: A Community History*, 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