

Midway Matters

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The Ingredients that Make a Neighborhood

By Dave Healy

What makes a neighborhood? Perhaps the most obvious answer is geography. By that definition, the area bounded by Snelling Ave. to the east, Fairview Ave. to the west, University Ave. to the north, and St. Anthony Ave. to the south is a residential island and a neighborhood par excellence.

Neighborhoods can be characterized by racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, political, religious, or housing similarity. But they don't have to be.

The neighborhood defined above, for example, while primarily residential, also includes commercial buildings and two churches. The residential housing is a mix of single-family homes, duplexes, and apartment buildings. Residents are socioeconomically similar but racially and politically diverse.

How do neighborhoods change?

Demolition and construction change the composition and character of a neighborhood. So do the influx and outflux of residents. The continuing series in *Midway Matters*, "Remembering the Midway," describes some changes to the local built environment over the years.

Monica Rasmussen has lived in the neighborhood described above for 27 years, first near Fairview and University, and since 2003 on Roy Street. She says many of her near neighbors have been there since she moved in. But two new apartment buildings just a block away have brought dozens of new residents to the area.

Monica was attracted to the neighborhood because of its central location. And in some ways it's become more convenient since she moved in.

"It's easier to bike around here now," she says. "There's a protected bike lane right on St. Anthony that my daughter Rose and I use all the time."

Light rail, on the other hand, has been a mixed blessing.

"It's slower than the bus, though a bit more reliable," she says. "And during its construction, when it was hard to get around, people who had been coming here from outside probably found other places to go. Now it's been running for quite a while, but I'm not sure that people move to this neighborhood because of the light rail. It's probably more likely that some people have moved here because of the soccer stadium."

Another thing that attracted Monica to her neighborhood was its affordability.

"I want that to stay the same," she says.

Monica, who grew up in Iowa, says, "I moved to an apartment at the end of August in 1999. Right away there was the State Fair and Porky's traffic, and I thought, wow, I'm in a neighborhood, I'm in the city."

Shopping options were reduced with the demise of Midway Center, but Monica is enthused about the new construction on that site, which will include a hotel and restaurants. She's also excited about the possibility of a new store moving into the old Cub Foods: H Mart, the largest Asian supermarket chain in the U.S.

Monica says that although some of her neighbors don't like having Allianz Field so close, she enjoys the energy that their games produce. But she misses some of the same kind of energy that was generated by Porky's, just blocks away on University Avenue, where regular vintage car shows brought outsiders into the neighborhood.

Monica doesn't consider herself a hardcore soccer fan, but she goes to a few games each year. And even if they're not attending a game, she and her daughter often go to the lawn layover, or pregame party, which includes a variety of free activities and entertainment.

Monica, her husband Dave, and their daughter live across the street from Central Baptist Church.

"I think just about everybody here loves Central Baptist, whether they go to church there or not. We feel like Central Baptist has always been here for the neighborhood—and we appreciate that they now have a parking lot."

What makes for a good neighborhood? Ultimately, it's the people. We'll profile other local residents in future issues.

The neighborhood described in the article above, which is where *Midway Matters* is delivered, doesn't have an official name. We think it should.

So think of a name for the neighborhood where you live, and send it to the email address below. The winning entry will receive a $50 prize.

Remembering the Midway

By Paul Healy

It's hard to imagine that youngsters today might not know about the retail and catalog giant that was the anchor of the Midway, a commercial and employment destination for the Twin Cities and beyond: Montgomery Wards.

They might not be entertained by the nickname "Monkey Wards" that some of us used for this impressive institution that was a significant part of many people's commercial lives for decades.

Where to begin in informing them? The famous building was constructed on University Ave. in 1921. It was a nine-story structure topped by a 257-foot tower. Though not a skyscraper, it was impressive, and I thought it was like a castle.

Our family went to Wards hundreds of times to purchase a wide range of products and services. It was one-stop shopping where you could buy anything from a car tire to a pair of pajamas.



Montgomery Wards, once the largest employer in the Midway area, was built in 1921. Its 257-foot tower dominated the landscape. A victim of increasing competition, Wards was demolished in 1996. Photo courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.

Some of the many departments that Wards offered shoppers were Candy/Tobacco, Appliances/Electronics, Catalog/Mail Order, Automobile/Tire Shop, Sporting Goods, Clothes/Shoes/Accessories, Home Goods/Hardware, Bed/Bath, Gifts/Toys, and Jewelry. Plus there was a coffee shop/snack bar and a bargain basement for thrifters.

Initially, streetcars brought customers to Monkey Wards, along with the people who worked in the store and catalog facility. Wards became the largest employer in the Midway area.

Jan Roe moved to the Midway in 1964 after graduating from high school in Spooner, Wisconsin. She worked for Wards in the catalog department, first on the fifth floor in Adult Clothing. She filled orders, wrapping the clothes and putting them down a chute to send to other parts of the building for further processing.

When she was hired, the supervisor asked if she could roller skate. An experienced ice skater, she said "yes," not knowing that workers in the catalog department worked on skates to more easily get around the warehouse and to other departments.

Jan worked at Wards for eight years. She was rewarded with a 5 rating, the highest score at Wards, and was transferred to other floors and departments. The work was demanding, but she was happy to have the job and glad she was in good enough shape to handle its rigors.

Wards even had something to offer folks who weren't buying or even window shopping. The Wards parking lot was a venue for muscle cars to start their cruise on Friday and Saturday nights. They'd head west on University, go down as far as Porky's drive-in, then return to their (and our) favorite spot: Monkey Wards.

Finding it difficult to overcome the competition from Sears, downtown retailers like Dayton's and Donaldson's, and suburban malls, the store closed and was demolished by implosion in January of 1996. The Midway is not the same with her gone.

If you have a suggestion for a *Midway Matters* article, please contact Central Baptist Church.

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