

*Approximate boundaries:*

**N**-Highland Ave; **S**-W. Clybourn Ave (partial) I-94

**E**-N. 11th St (partial) N. 21st St; **W**-N. 27th St

# DOWNTOWN *Avenues West*

## NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Avenues West is graced with houses of a variety of styles, from the mid-19th century Queen Anne to early 20th century bungalows. It also has a plethora of apartment buildings along Wisconsin Avenue and other major streets. The neighborhood is home to the Ambassador Hotel, an Art Deco landmark, as well as the Irish Cultural and Heritage Center. Another notable feature is the Kalvelage Mansion, completed in 1896. The architect was Otto Strack, who also designed the Pabst Theater.

Major green space in the area includes Norris Park, a Marquette University site for student sports and public use. See neighborhood photos below.

## HISTORY

Avenues West is a neighborhood with a diverse history that has been influenced by its own unique immigration patterns, the settlement of wealthy tycoons, Marquette University just blocks to its east, and the university's student body.

### Early populations

In the late 1800s, the area that is today's Avenues West, was settled by both tycoons and huddled masses. Along Wisconsin Avenue—then Spring Street—affluent industrialists, meat packers, bankers, and brewers built mansions. Some of the key names on Spring Street were Emil and Lisette (Best) Schandain, Rudolph Nunnemacher, and Patrick Cudahy. The street became so known for its grandeur that in 1876 Spring Street was renamed Grand Avenue.

And Grand Avenue was not the only street that attracted wealthy businessmen. On Kilbourn Avenue near 25th Street, Joseph Kalvelage, secretary and treasurer of Hoffman & Billings Manufacturing Company (that produced plumbing supplies), commissioned famed architect Otto Strack to design a German baroque masterpiece. Still standing today as the Kalvelage Schloss, the mansion has a French Second Empire, slated-convex mansard roof and extensive baroque detail (see photos below).

However, most of the blocks in today's Avenues West were settled by people of very modest means—many of whom were immigrants who sought employment at the nearby factories in the Menomonee River Valley. Early in the 20th century a small Middle Eastern community built the St. George Melkite Catholic Church on West State Street near 16th and settled nearby. These Syrian Christians from the Melkite Sect tended to make their living as peddlers in and around Milwaukee. Many of them worked for Greek and Italian merchants when they first arrived, and after they learned the trade, peddled for themselves. The wives often prepared the goods—usually notions and fabrics. Many families expanded their territories into the towns of Watertown, Green Bay, Oshkosh, and Fond du Lac, where some eventually took up permanent residence.

In the early 1930s, Hungarian immigrants also began to make their mark in and around Avenues West. They built St. Emeric Catholic Church on the same block as the Melkite church.



Today's neighborhood-  
Kalvelage Mansion (detail)

A noted member of this immigrant community was Hungarian-born Arpad Emmerich Elo, who taught at Marquette University just up the street. A professor of physics, Elo became a chess master. By the 1930s he was the most acclaimed chess player in Milwaukee, which at the time was one of the nation's leading chess cities. He won the Wisconsin State Championship eight times. He is considered the father of scientific chess ratings and his Elo rating system became a standard in the game.

The plethora of immigrants and industrial workers in the downtown area attracted social service agencies. Most of these were within or very near the boundaries of today's Avenues West. Along Grand Avenue, Deaconess Hospital was built in 1917 on 18th, Children's Hospital opened in 1923 on 17th, and County Emergency was built in 1930 on 24th. Nearby, Mount Sinai relocated to 12th and Kilbourn. With the neighborhood persona

changing from elite to utilitarian, Grand Avenue was renamed Wisconsin Avenue in 1926.

At the same time that this transformation was occurring, the halls of academia were having an influence. Marquette College that had opened in 1881 with a lone building on 10th and State Streets, was rapidly expanding into becoming Marquette University. The institution was pushing west mostly along Wisconsin Avenue and with it brought a student body of thousands. Apartment buildings were replacing most of the old mansions and many students would find homes in Avenues West.

By the time of the Great Depression, Wisconsin Avenue looked very different from its elite beginnings. Below is a list of businesses, offices, multiple dwelling units (highlighted), and organizations on the avenue between 21st and 27th Streets. See notes that follow. The highlighted areas are rental buildings with multiple units.



Today's neighborhood-  
The Rave/Eagles Ballroom

<i>Addresses on W. Wisconsin Ave. in 1933</i>	<i>Names of businesses and organizations from Milwaukee City Directory</i>
2101-15	Patrician Apartments
2102-08	Victoria Apartments
2114-24	Princeton Apartments
2126	Conrad-Thoma Realty Company
2133	Grand Avenue Congregational Church
2217	Junior Court Apartments
2227	Rische Flats
2229	The Copper Kettle Restaurant
2305	West Terrace Furniture Rooms (Mrs. John Hedwig) Wisconsin Avenue Auto Service Garage George Rabitz Heating Contractor

<i>Addresses on W. Wisconsin Ave. in 1933</i>	<i>Names of businesses and organizations from Milwaukee City Directory</i>
2308	<b>Ambassador Hotel</b> Ambassador Hotel Tailor Shop Ambassador Hotel Barber Shop Krygler Drug Store Inc.
2311	The Weston Furniture Rooms
2316	Ambassador Parking
2323	Millard Institute of Normal Speech Alvin A. Schlotter Garage
2324	<b>Roosevelt Arms Apartments</b>
2335	<b>Roseneath Apartments</b>
2401	Eagles Club Milwaukee Aerie #137 Fraternal Order of Eagles Eagles Barber Shop
2425	Hallbach Furs
2430	Emergency Unit County Hospital County Mental Hygiene Hospital
2435	<b>Sheridan Apartments</b>
2445	<b>Mathella Apartments</b>
2501	M.E. Wesley Church
2506	Frances Bach Music Teacher
2518	[Unnamed] Apartments
2525-27	Bienhiem Apartments
2620	Fireproof Boulevard Wholesale Company Milwaukee-Waukesha Delivery Company
2622	J.J. Dougherty Radios and Refrigerators
2630	Wadham's Oil Corporation Filling Station
2639	Max H. Goetz Drugs

#### Notes from census and other records:

- This stretch of Wisconsin Avenue was a renter's province. See the yellow-highlighted apartments and hotels. These were very large multiple dwellings—some with over 100 units.
- The Grand Avenue Congregational Church was once a site of a Martin Luther King speech. It was later sold and became the Irish Cultural and Heritage Center.
- George Rabitz, the heating contractor, came from Montpelier, Wisconsin. He had registered for the World War I draft but it is not clear if he served.

- Frances Bach, the music teacher, never married. She did have a passport and traveled abroad at least once. She may have traveled to Germany, as her mother, Katharina (nee Ament), was born there. She lived with her parents most of her life.
- James E. Campbell may have done very well with his tea shop. He owned a Shorewood home on Lake Drive. He'd was born in Missouri.
- John J. Dougherty, with the radio shop, was an immigrant from Northern Ireland. Gaelic was his first language and he rented an apartment on Mason.
- Max H. Goetz, the druggist, was the son of German immigrants. He rented an apartment on 40th Street.

One of the families that ran a grocery store just around the corner from 21st and Wisconsin Avenue was named Cohen. This family produced a son that went on to effect change in government policy. See the resident profile below.

### **Avenues West resident profile (1930s)** *(Information from census and other public records)*

#### **Wilbur Joseph Cohen: “The man who built Medicare”**

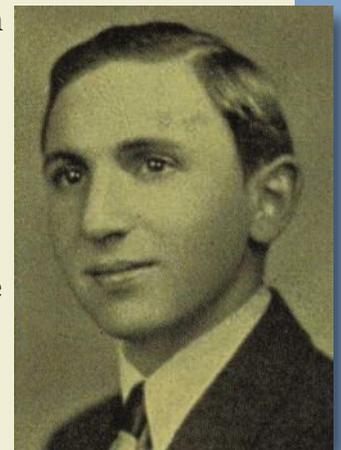
Wilbur Cohen was born in 1913 in Milwaukee. His parents ran a fruit market and later a grocery store. The family had lived on North Hopkins Street, then on North 22nd, and eventually at 751 North 21st Street, at the edge of today's Avenues West neighborhood. His family was Jewish. Wilbur's father, Aaron Cohen, was an immigrant from Scotland although his parents had been born in Germany. Wilbur's mother, Bessie Cohen (nee Rubenstein), was born in New York.

Wilbur may have been influenced by the twin agendas of education and social service in the Avenues West neighborhood. Wilbur went to Lincoln High School, where he won the Harvard book prize in 1929 and became a leader on the student council, school newspaper, and even in athletic management (see his school photo from *The Quill* to the right). In 1934, Wilbur graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. From there he took a job in the federal government, working as an economist and a research assistant for the committee which drafted the Social Security Act.

In 1938, Wilbur married Eloise Bittel and the couple moved to Montgomery, Maryland, where Wilbur continued his government service in the Franklin Roosevelt and Truman administrations. The couple had three sons.

As a staff aid on Franklin Roosevelt's Committee on Economic Security in the 1930s, Wilbur Cohen became one of the pioneers of the Social Security system. He helped design the Social Security Act of 1935. He served as Director of the Bureau of Research and Statistics of the Social Security Board (later the Social Security Administration).

Under Eisenhower, Cohen's influence waned. In 1956 he left government to take a tenured academic position at the University of Michigan. At Michigan, he became a more politically-active policy advocate. However, Cohen would return to government. In 1961, Wilbur Cohen was appointed Assistant Secretary for Legislation of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). His peak of government service came when the Johnson Administration



appointed him Secretary of the Department of Health Education, and Welfare. In this capacity he was instrumental in enacting the Medicare program in 1965. He worked with Johnson to expand social welfare programs under the Great Society initiative. At the end of the Johnson Administration, Cohen returned to the University of Michigan, where he was appointed Dean of the School of Education. He later moved to the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, where he served until his death in 1987.

By the late 20th century, many of the hospitals (that had become employers for middle class residents) had left the area, some consolidating at the County Grounds in Wauwatosa. As the student and low income population continued to grow in Avenue's West, rental housing remained a focus. Some of the older mansions became rooming houses.

### **Current populations (as of 2021)**

Today's neighborhood demographics largely reflect the influence of the Marquette students. Nearly 4 in 10 of the residents are between the ages of 20 and 24. Men out-populate the women by nearly 5 percent.

European Americans dominate. About 6 in 10 residents are white, and most of these have ancestry in Germany, Ireland, and Poland. Approximately 3 in 10 residents are African Americans. The remainder of the population is fairly evenly divided between Latinos and Asians.

Typical of a neighborhood with a large student body, most households are low income (with annual incomes under \$25,000). But this is also a well-educated neighborhood with just under one-fourth of the residents over 25 holding bachelor's degrees. The leading occupations in the area are in the fields of food service, administration, and education.

A striking feature in Avenues West is the low percentage of home ownership. Just under 97 percent of all property units are likely to be rented. This is due in part to the large number of apartment buildings and rooming houses in the area and in part due to the presence of Marquette students. Most of the monthly rents go for \$500 to \$1,000.

The Avenues West Neighborhood Association is active in the area. Their staff helps connect investors, developers, government bodies, law enforcement and residents in the hopes of attracting more upwardly mobile families to Avenues West—families that might become stakeholders in the neighborhood and bring about permanent improvements.

### **INTERESTING NEIGHBORHOOD FEATURES**

- **Rave/Eagles Club** at 2401 W. Wisconsin Avenue, a major venue for concerts in Milwaukee
- **Ambassador Hotel** at 2308 W. Wisconsin Avenue, a four-star, newly remodeled hotel
- **Kalvelage Mansion** at 2432 W. Kilbourn Avenue (see above for description)
- **Milwaukee Rescue Mission** at 830 N. 19th Street, is a major social service agency that assists the homeless
- **Sinai Samaritan Medical Center** at 945 N. 12th
- **Irish Cultural and Heritage Center** at 2133 W. Wisconsin Avenue, a place where everything Irish is celebrated

## 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.

KALVELAGE MANSION TOUR			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Consult website	2432 W. Kilbourn Ave.	Tour of a German Baroque masterpiece designed by Otto Strack.	\$20, reduced price for groups

HAGGERTY MUSEUM OF ART			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mon., Tue., Wed., Fri. 10am-4:30pm, Thu. 10am-8pm; Sun, 12-5pm	Marquette campus at corner of 13th & Clybourn Sts.	Permanent collections include Old Masters' prints, Ralph Steiner photos, Marc Chagall Bible series, Barbara Morgan photos, and Finnegan, Fishman, Tatalovich, and Rojzman collections.	Free

MARQUETTE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Nov. thru late Feb. (regular season)	Al McGuire Center, 770 N. 12th St.	Marquette University women's basketball games.	\$5 and \$10 (Subject to change)

POST ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE PARTY			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Mar., Sat. 1:30-5pm	Irish Cultural Heritage Center, 2133 W. Wisconsin Ave.	Live entertainment, children's activities, leprechaun stories, and more	Free

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 Avenues West oral history project conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc. in 2017—About THEN<sup>1</sup>

“From 1925-1935, a whole load of apartment buildings were constructed. In the West End area, into Marquette, and down to downtowns East Side. All the houses are heavy constructed, pre-World War II, because rationing and shortages set in quickly during World War II. Those apartment buildings [that are] are very well constructed are still lasting. Now, there’s new buildings over on Wells street. The style all popped up in 1965, 66, 67. I was not around for the actual construction; I was away on duty. But none of those apartments are heavy duty or well-constructed.”

“As a young adult I lived in an apartment near the Ambassador Hotel. I had a friend in a Marquette dorm just to the east and a friend living in the Deaconess nursing dormitory just a couple of blocks away. We got together to do things--sometimes just having coffee at the nearby George Webb’s or White Tower. The neighborhood was great fun then. You went to the Eagles to dance on weekends. I would walk to the Central Library to read and visit the museum which was then in the back of the library. With the students and the renters there were always people on the streets. Busses would come every five minutes and there were so many movie theaters on Wisconsin Avenue. But I remember many years later having a friend who lived on 20th and Wisconsin. That was in the 90s. Then things were not that fun. It felt a little eerie—especially on Sundays or at night. There was this feeling of danger. But I think with the Ambassador’s renovation, the new Marquette buildings, and others willing to work to improve the neighborhood—I think that things are really looking up again.”

“The neighborhood was very stable. German construction, or Germanic houses or buildings. There were the Irish that moved over into Merrill Park after the fire down in the Third Ward. People working the railroads would literally walk from Wells Street down to the Valley because there were so much work. Including my father’s twin brother [who] worked the railroads until he retired in the 1950s.”

“That was George Devine’s million-dollar ballroom. One of the biggest ballrooms in North America right here in Milwaukee just a couple streets over from Slaby’s Schools of Dancing. There were theaters everywhere. It is low cost entertainment! Lots of people did it . . . Before American entry into World War II, we were already geared up for war and ready to help Europe. Since dancing is so low-cost entertainment, so many people would go dancing. This was going on through the 1950s and even into the 1960s.”

### About NOW

“Now they are cleaning it up. Tearing down buildings and houses, leaving the nice mansions behind. Still a lot of restaurants, fast food places, corner stores. But it is changing down here. Apartment buildings throughout, churches, schools.”

“Churches are recreating and rebranding themselves. They are trying to be more multipurpose. They rent out their rooms for events. One incorporated a theater. They are trying to rethink how to use their church.”

“A lot of the women are the movers and shakers. They are the business owners, property owners, and they have made an impact on the neighborhood. Women’s role has definitely improved.”

“There is this level of understanding and acceptance [in this neighborhood]. Marquette University students often volunteer at the homeless shelter to help the residents.”

“But it has changed around here. When we first moved here you didn’t see anybody walking around, especially at night. Now, everybody is walking around; everybody is standing around. Lots of people walking up and down the streets--not just during the day but also at night. That shows me that in the beginning the neighborhood didn’t trust the neighborhood. Now the neighborhood feels comfortable with the neighborhood and people feel comfortable to walk around without fear for their life or harm coming to them.”

“Wow, it has changed. In a couple ways. First, the neighborhood associations have been strong and strengthened over time. It has become more quiet and less crime. It seems more vibrant here, with more commercial. Some bad buildings [were] closed, like the tobacco shop. My feeling is that it is on the cusp of hitting revitalization.”

“There is not a lot of neighborhoods that have the diversity we have. You don’t have many neighborhoods with the various kinds of eating places we do--the soul foods, the steakhouse, hotdogs, hotels. You don’t have many neighborhoods that get together with other neighborhoods [like us], Concordia, and Merrill Park. You don’t have many neighborhoods that have a great relationship with their police district. You don’t have many neighborhoods that do that. “

“Greek life does a lot of charitable work for the neighborhood--lots of fundraisers and events to raise money. For example, we put on the Glow Run last week to raise money to prevent child abuse in America and for Children’s Hospital. Although the money doesn’t necessarily go straight back into the Avenue West neighborhood, these events help bring people within our community together.”

## PHOTOS



Today's neighborhood-Kavelage Mansion



Today's neighborhood-Queen Anne style houses near 26th & Kilbourn



Today's neighborhood-Houses near 26th & Kilbourn



Today's neighborhood-Houses near 26th & Wells



Today's neighborhood-Ambassador Hotel



Today's neighborhood-The Irish Cultural and Heritage Center

For more information on Milwaukee neighborhoods, refer to John Gurda's *Milwaukee, City of Neighborhoods*.

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](mailto:jflanthropologist@currently.com)

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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