

Approximate boundaries:
N-W. Grange Ave; S-W. Ramsey Ave;
E-I-94, W-S. 27th St

FAR SOUTH SIDE *Copernicus Park*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Copernicus Park is a moderate-density neighborhood. Home architectural styles are mainly 1950s/1960s ranch houses and Cape Cods, with a scattering of Tudor style homes. The neighborhood topography is hilly with a few steep hills. Most of the streets follow a grid pattern, except for few winding thoroughfares such as South 22nd and Klein Avenue that curve around the southern border of Copernicus Park.

The business district is along South 27th Street--one of the major commercial corridors in the city. The street teems with fast food restaurants, strip malls, and car dealerships. The main green space is Copernicus Park, a 20-acre commons with a basketball court, tot lot, wooded area with a hiking trail, and a stream that runs through the park. See neighborhood photos below.

HISTORY

Copernicus Park is one far south side neighborhood among many that makes up today's Garden District. The boundaries of the Garden District are those of the 13th Aldermanic District. All Garden District neighborhoods were once part of the 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 the areas that today encompasses the Garden District.

Early populations

Many of the far south side 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.

Housing was reaching the far south side in the early 20th century, but it wasn't until the end of World War II that the housing market really began to boom. Newly arriving settlers were migrating from Near South Side and Historic South Side neighborhoods—mostly Poles, some Germans, and later in the century, Latinos. The Copernicus Park area was relatively slow in this development trend. By 1955 the neighborhood had only a trickle of through streets and just over 50 residences. Most of the settlers were Polish and German, with a scattering of Russians, Jews, Slovaks, English, and Austrians.



Today's neighborhood-
Houses on 20th & Grange

South 27th Street

The business corridor that was developing in Goldman Park as the result of the housing boom was South 27th Street. Below is a list of neighborhood businesses on this street in 1968.

Addresses on S. 27th in Copernicus Park area in 1955	Names of businesses, apartments, offices, and organizations from Milwaukee City Directory
5501	Edwin Mathews Batting Practice Range
5848	James H. Lusha Trucking
5882	Twins Tap Tavern
5912	Highway IGA Store Groceries

Notes from census and other records:

- Batting practice ranges are parks with automated features such as pitching machines, where children and adults can hone their baseball hitting skills. They are often run by current or former major league players. See business profile below.
- James H. Lusha, with the trucking company, appears to have been a native of Green Bay, Wisconsin, who was the grandson of a Canadian immigrant.
- IGA supermarkets were started in the United States in 1926. Stores have usually operated as independent franchises. Today the IGA brand has stores in 30 countries.

The batting practice range was owned by Edwin Lee Mathews, Jr. in the 1950s See his profile below.

Copernicus Park business profile (1950s)

(Photos and other information were found in public records at Ancestry.com)

Edwin Lee Mathews, Jr.

Edwin (“Eddie”) Mathews had an interest in a batting practice range at 5501 S. 27th Street in the middle to late 1950s. At the time, Mathews was a third baseman with the Milwaukee Braves—a team that won the National League Pennant in 1957 and 1958 and went on to win the World Series in 1957. The batting practice range was a place for children and adults to hone their baseball hitting skills, often assisted by automated features such as pitching machines.

Mathews was born in Texarkana, Texas in 1931 to parents Eloise and Edwin (Sr.) Mathews, a homemaker and telegraph operator. He and his family moved to Santa Barbara, California sometime prior to 1940. Eddie played sandlot baseball and also became a star for Santa Barbara High School.

In 1949, Eddie signed a minor league contract with the Boston Braves and was brought up to the majors in 1952. A year later the Boston Braves moved west and became the Milwaukee Braves. Mathews rose to the level of superstar in Milwaukee, becoming an

all-star 10 times, and taking the National League home run championship twice. In 1954, Mathews was chosen for the first ever cover of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. The Braves, with Matthews, moved to Atlanta after the 1965 season, and Mathews was eventually elected into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

While in Wisconsin, Mathews married Woods native, Virjean Lauby, and the couple made their home in Brookfield. In those years, major league baseball players did not have five-million-dollar salaries. In fact, in the mid-1950s, it was common for players to sign contracts for \$6,000 a year. Most players had to work other jobs in the off-season in order to support their families. Superstars like Mathews sometimes were able to earn \$50,000 or more a year. They could also use their names to open businesses such as restaurants, or in this case, a batting practice range.



Copernicus Park area development would increase in the next decade. By the mid-1960s there were thousands of small ranch houses and cape cods extending to and beyond the Copernicus Park neighborhood.

Current populations (as of 2021)

Today, Copernicus Park has just over 1,200 residents. Slightly under 9 in 10 are European Americans (most still of German and Polish ancestry, but with a substantial number claiming Irish). About 1 in 25 each are Latinos (mostly Mexican, but including quite a few Puerto Ricans) or Asians (fairly evenly divided among Laotians, Filipinos, Japanese, and Koreans). There are also a scattering of American Indians, African Americans, Arabs, Jordanians, and people of multiple backgrounds. The neighborhood skews senior, with nearly one-third of the residents over the age of 65.

Over 8 in 10 of the property units in Copernicus Park are owned. The price of home ownership is somewhat high by Milwaukee standards. Select costs for over three-quarters of the homes (e.g., mortgages, deeds of trust, insurance, taxes, contracts to purchase) range from \$1,001 to \$2,000 a month. Rents are modest, with most of the units going for \$501 to \$1,000 a month.

Nearly 6 in 10 of the Copernicus Park residents live in middle-to upper middle-class households, with annual incomes of \$50,001 to \$150,000. The largest number of occupations claimed by residents are in the fields of administration, sales, and production. Three times as many residents list farming as their chief occupation than the proportions in other Milwaukee areas.

Gardening (or as some say—farming) is a major hobby among Copernicus Park 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 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.	unk

SLEDDING--WILSON

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Winter, daytime	Wilson Recreation, 4001 S. 20th St.	Sledding hills for family and friends.	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

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

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

“Picnics were big at one time. They were good for getting groups together or families together for socializing outside. Air conditioning wasn’t all that common when I was growing up. People would go to a park or parkway. Picnicking is something I think is fading, but it was big then. I think today the computer is the most recent distraction for people. Not so much hanging around with other people. The world is at your fingertips. When I was growing up, we got our first black and white television and it was only on a certain number of days a week and certain hours and only had one station. People have hundreds of stations they can select from on cable to where they sit themselves down and get Netflix and movies right in their living room on a 70-inch screen, which changed from the little one of my childhood. Radio changed from only FM to AM/FM and maybe five radio stations when I was growing. So how people spend their time, listening, watching, versus going out with other people. One thing that has changed is softball. You had people growing up with baseball being a cool thing and playing softball after you were done playing hardball. You just don’t see people with the chance to get together with other people like you used to.”

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

“I realized early on that there was great power in neighborhood associations, but we had none. There was great power in business associations, but we had none. It helps to have them, so I went out and formed them.”

“Twenty years ago, the neighborhood was more left of center, but this past year, I’ve seen a lot more signs for Republicans . . . It is not an overtly political community. Tolerance is important, to respect each other’s beliefs. It’s been interesting to watch the change over the last 10 years as it’s gotten way more conservative.”

“The neighborhood has had a large population of police and firefighters – and they didn’t live a lot downtown. Mainly white policeman and firefighters. But the residency requirement has been lifted, so in the next 10 years, most of the city employees will most likely have scattered.”

“There has been the change along 6th Street. The entire stretch from Howard to Layton – with the emphasis on the gardens, the farmers market. And before that it was just a place to walk pets, it was nothing.”

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-Copernicus Park



Today's neighborhood-Houses on 21st & Birchwood

Today's neighborhood-Houses on 23rd & Parnell



Today's neighborhood-Creek running through Copernicus Park

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