

Approximate boundaries:
N-W. Wisconsin Ave; S-I-94 Freeway;
E-N. 27th St; W-N. 39th St

WEST SIDE *Merrill Park*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Perhaps the most striking feature about the Merrill Park neighborhood is the size of the homes. A large proportion are three stories and ornately detailed. It is rare to find a single-story abode. Most of the grand homes today have been subdivided into apartments.

Merrill Park also features the Merrill Park Playfield, a park with a staffed community center on the grounds. See photos below.

HISTORY

Merrill Park was developed by Sherburn S. Merrill, the manager of the Milwaukee Road Railroad, in the late 1800s. He purchased enough land to stake claim to everything south of today's Wisconsin Avenue to the Menomonee Valley between 30th and 35th Streets. The neighborhood boundaries gradually expanded to 27th Street on the east and 39th Street on the west.

Early populations

The first major population to purchase lots and build homes in Merrill Park was the Irish. Most Milwaukee Irish had initially settled in the Third Ward in the mid-1800s, but the Ward burned to the ground in Milwaukee's worst fire in history in 1892. Virtually all the homes owned by the Irish were destroyed, sending most to the newly developing Merrill Park.

The Catholic Irish quickly built St. Rose Parish on 30th Street. Called "St. Rose's" by the locals, this parish became their anchor institution (see photo). In its heyday— between the 1930s and 1960s—the parish had seven Sunday services at 5:30, 6:30, 7:30, 9:00, 10:00, 11:00, and noon. The last four services were often standing room only. But St. Rose's wasn't just a place to worship. It was also the community center for the Merrill Park Irish. The doors of St. Rose were open 24 hours a day, and activities ranged from Catholic rites, to social clubs, to classes on living skills, to family counseling, to youth recreation, to neighborhood planning. They soon established St. Rose school, which is today consolidated as the St. Rose and St. Leo Catholic School.

Within a few years the Irish were joined by Croations, Slovenians, Italians and others. While the Irish remained the dominant population in Merrill Park until the middle of the 20th century, they rarely comprised more than 50 percent of the neighborhood's population.

Pub, parish, performance, and public life in Merrill Park

While parish life was the model for community ideals among the Merrill Park Irish, pub life became the guide to social relationships. The east side of N. 30th Street in Merrill Park was once lined with pubs. Sherburn S. Merrill, banned taverns in his development (with a western boundary that ended on the east side of 30th Street), hence the Irish inhabitants and others built pubs just across the street. The same was true on the eastern border of Merrill's development.

Pub life was an import from rural Ireland, with a few new twists. In Ireland, English limits on industrialization and restrictions on the kinds of crops Irish farmers could raise helped create a society in which marriage of the offspring was delayed to provide manual labor for the farm,

Today's neighborhood—
St. Rose Parish



and support for the parents. Without spouses and children of their own, young people had little to do after dark. Many found the local pub a place to relieve loneliness.

But in America, marriages were not necessarily delayed. The pub remained a strong focal point for socializing among many urban Irish, but only occasionally after dark. In Merrill Park, the pubs were often stopping-off points for men and women on their way home from work.

Performance life was nearly as important as pub life during the Irish era in Merrill Park. Story-telling and poetry reading were even popular in the bars. Some took performance more seriously than others. On the corner of St. Paul Avenue and 30th Street (3001 W. St. Paul Avenue) stands a house that once belonged to the Irish Tracy family (see photo). Young Spencer Tracy was born there. He was an altar boy at St. Rose's before moving on into a phenomenal career in acting, including two academy awards and nine nominations.

Public life was another important aspect of Irish Merrill Park. While the Irish coming from the Third Ward were generally poor and a large proportion of men took entry level jobs at the nearby railroad yards, many also worked their way up the economic ladder—often through jobs and offices in the public sector. Politics was a very successful activity in Merrill Park. In fact, when researchers from Urban Anthropology Inc. conducted an oral history of the neighborhood they learned that in one half century alone in the 1900s, Merrill Park produced nearly 100 judges, district attorneys, and state, county, and city legislators and municipal department heads. During this period, three of four county executives were Merrill Parkers. And three of four Milwaukee mayors were raised in the neighborhood.

One area in Merrill Park that extends from 30th to 33rd St. was labeled “political row.” While not even half of the residents of Merrill Park were Irish, the Irish influence was everywhere. Even some non-Irish in that area took an interest in politics. At 504 N. 33rd Street stands the childhood home of Carl and Frank Zeidler, two past mayors of Milwaukee (see photo). At 546 N. 32nd Street stands the home of William O'Donnell, a former Milwaukee County Executive who served in that office from 1977 to 1988. He lived in this house most of his life and did not have a driver's license until his sixties. He took the bus everywhere and even took neighborhood kids to the lakefront by bus in his younger days.

Below is a resident profile of one of Merrill Park's more illustrious residents.

Merrill Park resident profile

Photos and additional information was found in public records in Ancestry.com.

Spencer Tracy

Spencer Bonaventure Tracy was born in the Merrill Park neighborhood in 1900. His family, consisting of father John, mother Carrie (nee Brown), and older brother Carroll, lived at 3003 West St. Paul Avenue. Like many residents of Merrill Park, the Tracys were descendants of Irish immigrants and they worshipped at St. Rose Parish. Spencer became an altar boy.

By the time that Spencer was 10 years old the family had moved to Kenesaw Street (today's Woodward Street) in Bay View. Later they moved again—this time to Woodlawn Court in today's Story Hill neighborhood. However, the family continued to worship at St. Rose's.

By 1930, Spencer Tracy was married to Louise Treadwell and working as an actor in New York City where he spent seven years in the theatre. He and his family—which now included two children—eventually



moved to California where Tracy made 25 films. Nominated for an Oscar for Best Actor nine times over his career, he won twice—once for *Captains Courageous* and once for *Boys Town*. Tracy separated from Louise in 1933 and by the 1940s took up a long term relationship with Katherine Hepburn.

Current populations (as of 2021)

Several factors led to the exodus of many Irish from Merrill Park in the latter half of the 20th century. One factor was I-94. The building of this freeway removed about one-third of the Merrill Park neighborhood, making it necessary for many Irish (and others) to seek housing in other communities. Another factor was the consolidation of many hospitals under the county direction of Executive John Doyne in the late 1970s. Many Irish had been employed at hospitals just blocks from Merrill Park, including Doctor's, Children's, and Deaconess Hospitals. When most of these were consolidated at the County Grounds in Wauwatosa, many Irish followed their jobs and moved to that suburb.

Populations of color began moving to Merrill Park to fill the grand homes (many now divided up into apartments) that had belonged to the Irish and other early residents. Today, just under half of the residents of Merrill Park are African Americans. European Americans make up just over 20 percent of the population, followed by Latinos and Asians. Just over half the population lives in low income household (with incomes under \$25,000 annually). Approximately three-quarters of all Merrill Park properties are likely to be rented rather than owned, and rents are quite reasonable, averaging just over \$500 for larger than average units.

An interesting statistic in Merrill Park is the proportion of K-12 students enrolled in private education. Nearly 9 of 10 youth in this neighborhood are enrolled in private schools, compared to just over 2 in 10 for Milwaukee youth generally. Many of the young attend Marquette University High School in the neighborhood, a highly-rated Jesuit, college preparatory school for young men.

INTERESTING FEATURES

- **Marquette High School** at 3401 W. Wisconsin Ave.
- **Merrill Park Playfield** at 461 N. 35th St.

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.

TOUR OF TRIPOLI SHRINE TEMPLE			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
By reservation of groups of 10 or more	3000 W. Wisconsin Ave.	Forty-five-minute tour of majestic temple built in 1928 with all its ornate fixtures. Lunch buffet included.	unk

SHAKESPEARE IN THREE BRIDGES PARK

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Jul., Fri. 7pm	Menomonee Valley behind Palermo Villa next to 33rd Ct.	Play performed by Summit Players along river in the park.	Free, but donations welcome

MERRILL PARK PLAYFIELD/COMMUNITY CENTER

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Daily 10am-7pm	461 N. 35th St.	Arts and crafts, computer lab, board games, video games, movie night and foose ball.	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 project conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc. in 2000¹—Discussing THEN

“The unions were very powerful and we hung out in certain bars. We used to decide everything in the bar—who would get this job and that job, who would run for this or that office, how we would get people jobs at the county.”

“We really didn’t suffer than much during the Great Depression. Most of us kept our jobs on the Milwaukee Road. Our houses here were really mansions, and even though we were just working class people, many from outside the neighborhood thought we were the elite.”

“Everything was at St. Rose’s. We didn’t play house pretending to be mothers. We pretended to be nuns—those that taught us in the school.”

“The Irish voted as a block in Merrill Park. Politicians courted us. They knew what a powerful block we were.”

Quotes from an oral history project conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc. in 2000—Discussing NOW

“The homes in Merrill Park are simply beyond belief. My home is so large that I just never stopped working on it—and the yard.”

“It was important to me and my son to grow up in a diverse neighborhood like Merrill Park. I can’t imagine how things would have turned out if he had grown up in the suburbs.”

“We just call each other Merrill Parkers here—we don’t say that there are the black residents or the whites or the Hispanics or the Hmong. We’re all just Merrill Parkers.

“The influence of the Irish with their government connections led to a lot of public jobs for newcomers like me. I was able to get a government contract for my landscape work through some of the older Irish residents that I got to know. So I think that tradition continues today in the neighborhood, even though most of us in the neighborhood now are African Americans.”

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.

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Milwaukee's ethnic guide

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

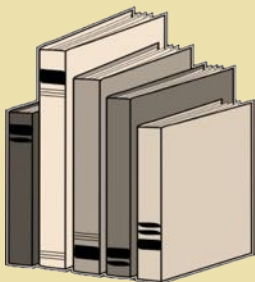
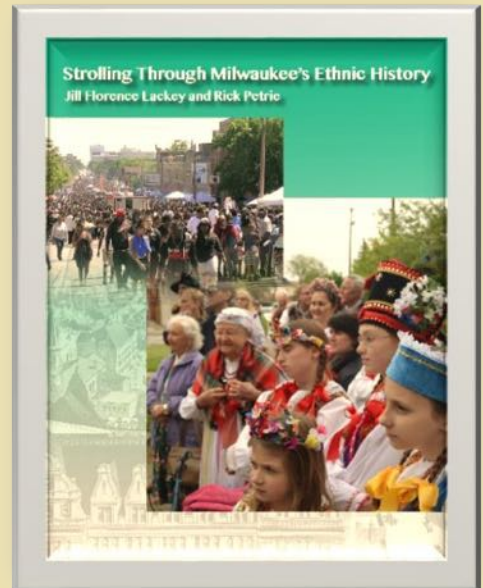
Dr. Jill Florence Lackey and Rick Petrie

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.



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"*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

PHOTOS



Today's neighborhood - Spencer Tracy's childhood home



Today's neighborhood - St. Rose Parish



Today's neighborhood - Childhood home of mayors Carl and Frank Zeidler

Today's neighborhood-
Example of large home in the Merrill Park
neighborhood



Today's neighborhood-Example of ornate home in the Merrill Park neighborhood

OLDER PHOTOS FROM RESIDENTS

Local community gardening. Shoots 'n Roots program of the late 1970s, early 1980s. (Photos courtesy of Dennis Lukaszewski of the University Extension.)



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



www.urban-anthropology.org