

*Approximate boundaries:*  
N-W. Cleveland Ave; S-W. Morgan Ave;  
E-S. 20<sup>th</sup> St; W-S. 35th St/W. Lakefield Dr

# SOUTH SIDE *Southgate*

## NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

The housing styles in the Southgate neighborhood are mainly mid-20th century suburban ranch and some early 20th century bungalows. South 27th Street is a major business district with strip malls and a number of fast food restaurants.

While the Southgate neighborhood has fewer bars than the average for Milwaukee, they have over four times the number of cafes. See neighborhood photos below.

## HISTORY

Much of today's Southgate neighborhood once occupied a southern section of an area known as the Old (or Historic) South Side, an area encompassing today's Kinnickinnic Avenue to 27th Street and Greenfield to Oklahoma Avenues.

### Early populations

The majority of settlers in the Southgate area in the late 19th and early 20th century were German farmers. But just to the northeast a Polonia or Polish-American community was developing. Polonias tended to be self-sustaining neighborhoods with intricate parish systems and a wealth of Polish institutions. The major area of settlement was around Lincoln Avenue, but by the early 20th century some were migrating further south toward today's Oklahoma Avenue. This area would later be known as Milwaukee's Old (or Historic) South Side.

### *Developments on South 27th Street*

Southgate residents were strongly influenced by developments along South 27th Street. In the early 20th century, the United States government began building Highway 41 that extended from Miami, Florida to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. In Wisconsin, US-41 ran north/south along the eastern edge of the state, which in Milwaukee included South 27th Street and Layton Boulevard. It became a direct route to Chicago.

Growth on the street would follow, but not for a number of years. The major early development was the Maynard Steel Casting Company which remains today a chief employer of local residents. Maynard Steel was founded in 1907 by Charles Maynard. But as a result of the Panic of 1907 when the New York Stock Exchange fell almost 50 percent from its peak the previous year, the steel industry experienced a major slowdown. A local Polish immigrant and officer at the Mitchell State Bank, Sylvester J. Wabiszewski, acquired the struggling company in 1913. When World War One broke out, Wabiszewski built a new plant at its present location at 2856 South 27th Street. Within a few years Maynard Steel became one of the largest electric steel casting plants in the Midwest. Local companies such as Harley-Davidson and Allis-



Chalmers started purchasing Maynard Steel's products. Unfortunately, like most enterprises during the Great Depression, Maynard Steel declined. Its number of employees dropped from 400 in 1929 to 86 in 1933.

Below is a snapshot of all the businesses on South 27th Street within Southgate's boundaries in 1935. See the summary notes following the chart.

<i>Addresses on S. 27th St. in 1935</i>	<i>Name of business or organization from the Milwaukee City Directory</i>
2701	Adam F. Knapp Tavern
2713	Mrs. Theresa Kurtz Grocery
2777	Theodore E. George Garage
2856	Maynard Electric Steel Casting Company
3015	Peter Vaivada Tavern
3025	Walter A Borchardt Auto Repair
3037	Gustav F. Borchardt Agricultural implements
3105	Wadham's Oil Filling Station
	Between Euclid and Morgan (no Milwaukee addresses)
	Glen Eakle Practice Golf Course
	John Lewandowski Gardener
	Frank G. Gray Dairy Products

#### Notes from census and other public records:

- Records analyzed from the city directory indicate that only a few Polish families or businesses were established along South 27th Street by 1935. Most were German.
- Adam Ferdinand Knapp, with the tavern in 1935, called his place a "soft drink" establishment in 1930 when Prohibition was still in effect. Probably German, he was the son of Joe Knapp and Anna Hostert and was raised on Forest Home Avenue close to where he opened his business.
- Theresa Kurtz was the widow of George Kurtz. George was an immigrant from Bavaria and Theresa was the daughter of Dutch immigrants. The Kurtz's also lived on 27th Street.
- Theodore George was listed as a machinist in the 1920 city directory. He was a German immigrant who lived in a home that appeared to be next door to his garage business in 1940.
- Peter Vaivada, with the tavern, was an immigrant from Lithuania. He lived either behind or above his tavern.

- Walter Borchard, with the auto repair business, had been raised on a farm in Dane County. While in Milwaukee, he lived on South 27th Street. By 1940 he had returned to his home town and apparently took over the family farm. Gustaf with the retail farm product business, may have been his uncle and the reason why Walter came to Milwaukee.
- Glen Eakle, with the practice golf course, was from Illinois, and apparently never took up residence in Wisconsin. Perhaps his goal was to attract the business of travelers between Chicago and Milwaukee.
- John Lewandowski was a Polish immigrant who appears to have been a tin peddler living just north of his 1935 location before migrating to Southgate and buying farmland.
- Frank Gray, with the dairy products business, moved his small operation west to Greenfield just before WWII.

### *Post World War Two*

The rural atmosphere of the Southgate area would change dramatically after World War Two. Soldiers returning from overseas would spark a housing boom and Southgate's population would soar. Poles were now migrating south in larger numbers and would become the dominant population in Southgate for decades.

Businesses grew along South 27th Street. The greatest change on the street would be the Southgate Shopping Mall, opened in 1951. Southgate was Milwaukee's first modern shopping center, operating a full generation before Brookfield Square, Northridge or Southridge. It was constructed on a 31-acre farmland parcel in the 3200 to 3300 block of South 27th.

Over 60,000 people were on hand for the grand opening, with approximately 15,000 more visiting the store later in the evening. Cars lined 27th Street six blocks in either direction and thousands packed the canopied sidewalk of the new shopping center. There were festivities. Polish and Italian folk dancers, the Bob Stevens-Lawrence Duchnow Orchestra, Native American dancers, and various other performers put on a memorable show. Searchlight beams combed the nighttime sky as several hundred stayed until nearly midnight to dance in the parking lot. Stores at the center included Krambo (a 40,000-square-foot super market), Mrs. Stevens' Candies, W.T. Grant's, Walgreens, Kinney Shoes, Badger Paint & Hardware, Spic & Span, S.S. Kresge, Ritz Hats Shop, Royal Baking Company, Luber's Green Market, H.T. Grossman's, Samson's TV & Appliance, Household Finance Company, and Three Sisters. A Howard Johnson's restaurant opened soon afterwards as well as the Southgate National Bank – the first new bank in Wisconsin since the Great Depression.

The mall's arrival was a turning point in Milwaukee history that has influenced local shopping habits ever since. When Southgate opened, it immediately challenged the old shopping districts of Mitchell Street, Wisconsin Avenue, and even Lincoln Avenue. The center allowed its visitors to park free of charge, walk a short distance to the sidewalk, and visit all of its stores without moving the car once. Every store featured a sidewalk loading area, permitting customers to drive right up to the front door and pick up their purchases. The same could not be said in the old, congested neighborhoods, where most department stores were not able to provide off-street parking.

The center brought thousands of daily visitors and automobiles to South 27th Street and the Southgate and Southpoint neighborhoods. Southgate quickly lost its rural and even suburban character.

## *Arrival of Latinos*

Latinos (mainly Mexicans) began to settle on the near South Side in the 1920s and slowly migrated south into the Polish areas. Since the 1970s, the Mexican community has grown dramatically, and other Latinos have arrived from the Caribbean and Central and South America

A number of push-pull factors influenced the population changes. During the early 1900s Mexican immigration to the United States expanded because of worsening economic conditions in Mexico. A large wave of Mexicans also left the country during the political and economic turmoil created by the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Beginning in 1917, the US government implemented a series of immigration restriction policies to curb the influx of Mexicans, mainly in response to local claims that Mexicans (who often worked for low wages) were taking jobs away from ‘true’ Americans.

Although most Mexicans found jobs in local tanneries and foundries, some came to Milwaukee as strikebreakers—often unknowingly. They were hired by companies intent on breaking their own labor unions, and the Mexicans earned the enmity of the European workers they replaced. This situation led to early discrimination against Mexican Americans in Milwaukee.

But they found a place to fit in. Latinos were able to settle successfully alongside the Poles because they shared so many traits in common. These included the Catholic faith, the focus on the Madonna figure, polka music traditions, similarities in childrearing and eldercare practices, and an entrepreneurial spirit.

## Current populations (as of 2017)

Today 1 in 5 of Southgate’s residents still claim Polish ancestry and approximately 1 in 6 claim German. The dominant people are Latinos, who comprise nearly half of the population. African Americans make up just under 20 percent. Asians also find homes in Southgate with a smattering of Hmong, Burmese, Chinese, and Pakistani families. The most populous age group in Southgate are middle-agers between 35 and 64.

Approximately two-thirds of the neighborhood’s population live in low income households (with annual incomes under \$25,000) or lower middle class households (with annual incomes of \$25,000 to \$50,000). The largest number of jobs claimed in Southgate are in the administrative, production, and sales fields.

Despite the modest incomes, houses are not cheap. Select costs (e.g., mortgages, taxes, insurance, contracts to purchase) for more than one-third of the homes are over \$2,000 a month, which is high for Milwaukeeans generally. However, rents are reasonable, with approximately 9 in 10 rental units going for \$501 to \$1,000 a month.

While South 27th Street is still a busy commercial corridor, the Southgate mall is no longer in operation. As newer malls opened all over Milwaukee, Southgate gradually lost businesses. By the opening of 1999, Southgate was more than half demolished and within the next few weeks, the mall vanished.

## INTERESTING FEATURES

- **South 27th Street Business Improvement District**, a collaborative BID between Milwaukee and Greenfield, that works to improve the business environment on S. 27th St.
- **Greenwood Jewish Cemetery**, at 2615 W. Cleveland, is a nontraditional Jewish memorial ground (see photos).
- **Aurora Saint Luke’s Medical Center**, at 2900 W. Oklahoma, is a hospital specializing in premiere cardiac services (see photo).

- **Jeremiah Curtin Leadership Academy**, at 3450 W. 32nd, is a school with a focus on student leadership (see photo).
- **Maynard Steel Casting Company**, at 2856 S. 27th (see history above and photo below).

## RECURRING NEARBY OUTINGS

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.

MOVIES AT SOUTHGATE CINEMA			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Daily	3320 S. 30th St.	Popular movies at a Marcus Theater.	\$10, \$7.50 kids, military (with ID), seniors; less for matinees

TOUR OF FOREST HOME CEMETERY			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Daily 8am- 4:30pm	2405 W. Forest Home	Tour the beautiful Chapel Gardens, Landmark Chapel, and the Hall of History that tells the story of Milwaukee dignitaries, including European founders of Milwaukee, several mayors, major African American activists, and brewery tycoons	Free

UNGUIDED TOUR OF BASILICA OF ST. JOSAPHAT			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mon., 9am-4pm	Visitor's Center, Basilica of St. Josaphat, 2333 S. 6th St.	Opportunity to see and learn about one of the most beautiful churches in America with informational exhibits on lower level.	Free

GUIDED TOUR OF BASILICA OF ST. JOSAPHAT			
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BASILICA PARISH PICNIC			
When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Late Jun., Sun. 1-5pm	Basilica of St. Josaphat, S. 6th St. & W. Lincoln Ave.	Food, raffles, games, exhibits, look at Basilica.	Free

## JULY 4TH CELEBRATION

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
July 4th, 9am-10pm	Wilson Park, 1601 W. Howard Ave.	Parade, Doll Buggy, Bike & Trike, and Coaster judging, music, games, fireworks.	Free

## MILWAUKEE FIRE MUSEUM

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
1st Sun. of each month, 1-4pm, (except holidays)	1516 W. Oklahoma Ave.	Opportunity to see exhibits and artifacts of the Milwaukee Fire Department back to the 1800s; stories of history of Department and fires.	Free

## UMOS MEXICAN INDEPENDENCE DAY PARADE

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Sep., Sun. 10am- 12pm	Starts at 20th & Oklahoma Ave.	Southside parade of arts, floats, local organizations honoring Mexican Independence Day.	Free

## SLEDDING

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

These outings are provided courtesy of MECAH Publishing.

## QUOTES FROM RESIDENTS

### **Quotes from 2002 oral history conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.<sup>1</sup>—About THEN**

“In early years there were Polish immigrants that started businesses. Maynard Steel Casting was huge, Superior Steel Dye Set, others. Immigrants brought good ideas and hard work to the area—they were very industrious. They provided labor in the early years of Milwaukee. Allen Bradley, for one—90 percent was probably Polish. We had our bank—Lincoln State Bank. So many small businesses they started that provided good solid jobs.”

“After the freeways started to be built you had most of the Poles living around Mitchell and Lincoln. But there was a housing shortage and people started looking for homes that were further south, like around Oklahoma and Morgan. Some went to the southern suburbs. The Mexicans did the same thing. They moved in around National and then Mitchell and Lincoln and when they could afford a newer house they came further south too.”

### **Quotes from 2010 oral history updated by Urban Anthropology Inc.—About NOW**

“There’s been changes. The Latinos are a lot like the early Poles, just 100 years later. The Latinos have doubled their numbers in this area. They do the jobs what others won’t do. It’s what happens. Early Poles did this. They did the cleaning, the hard work, worked in factories. It’s all part of the cycle.”

“Some changes are not so good. Gangs cropped up so fast. Kids get killed. The school system in the last 20 years has gone down. Teacher’s don’t know how to handle kids and they don’t try. People are moving out because of the kids—to get them into schools where more is expected of them.”

“The Mexicans—they are just the kindest neighbors. You watch how they are with their children and their pets and you get an idea how they are with you.”

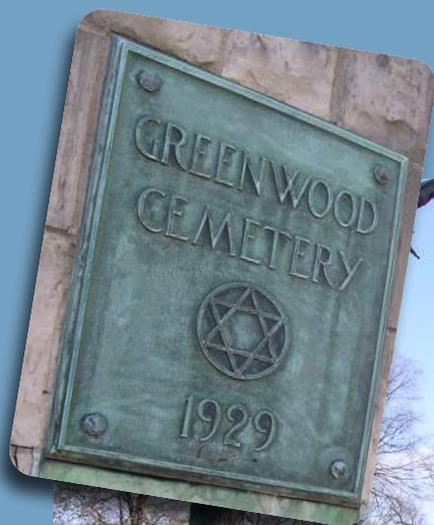
“Parks offer less recreational events than in the past. Used to be concerts. Used to have ice skating. Used to be lots of baseball games. Schools had after-school dances. Bowling was very popular on the South Side in the day—not so much now. There used to be pool tables in every bar.”

“Some things are better now. Even though there are some aldermen who talk about all the crime on the South Side, it’s really not the case. Do the numbers. Listen to the news. You rarely hear about a serious crime in this area. Rarely. But back in the ‘80s and maybe ‘90s you seemed to hear more. I keep hearing there are gangs here—but if they are, I’m not seeing them.”

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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.

## PHOTOS



Today's neighborhood-Greenwood Jewish Cemetery



Today's neighborhood-  
Maynard Steel Casting building



Today's neighborhood-  
Aurora Saint Luke's Medical Center

Today's neighborhood-  
Houses on S. 29th St.





Today's neighborhood-Jeremiah Curtin Leadership Academy

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)