

Approximate boundaries:

N-E. Norwich Ave; **S**-W. Layton Ave/E. Layton Ave;
E-Lake Pkwy-794, **W**-S. 6th St (partial)

SOUTHEAST SIDE *Town of Lake*

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

The Town of Lake is a densely populated neighborhood in many areas. There is a wide variety of home architectural types ranging from older duplexes, Colonials and Tudors, to Cape Cods and ranch-style houses. The main business corridor is on East Layton Avenue, with a plethora of fast food restaurants.

The topography of the neighborhood ranges from gently rolling to fairly steep hills. The streets follow a rectangular grid with the exception of South Whitnall Avenue that runs at a diagonal from East Norwich to Layton.

There is public green space in the Town of Lake neighborhood. The main green space is Mitchell Airport Park, a 15-acre commons with playground equipment. Another is Whittier Park, a small area next to Whittier Public School. See neighborhood photos below.

HISTORY

Town of Lake 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 larger, unincorporated 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 encompass the Garden District.

Early populations



Today's neighborhood-Houses on S. Pine Ave.

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. However, by 1926 there were only three completely paved roads in or approaching today's Town of Lake neighborhood—Howell, Whitnall, and Clement. Most of the area was occupied by farms and greenhouses. It wasn't until the end of World War II that the housing market really began to boom and new and improved streets emerged. Newly arriving settlers were migrating from Near South Side and Historic South Side neighborhoods.

By 1955 the Town of Lake neighborhood had just under 600 residences, with many new homes under construction on Allerton. Most of the settlers were Polish and German, but with a scattering of Romanians, English, Jews, Hungarians, Scots Irish, Czechs, Finns, Italians, Norwegians, and one Oneida family. See the randomly selected resident profile below.

Town of Lake random resident (1950s)

Name selected randomly from the 1955 City Directory in the Town of Lake area (photos and other information from public records in Ancestry.com)

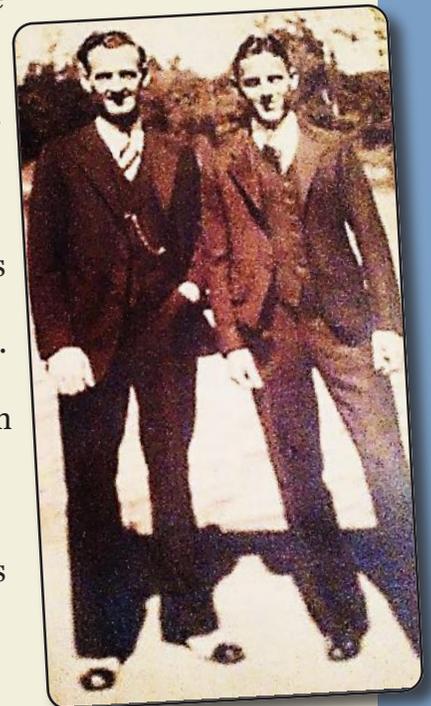
Eddie the Hatter

Edward A. Ratajczyk, his wife Helen (nee Jankowski), and teenage daughters Charlotte and Marlene lived at 226 W. Allerton in the Town of Lake neighborhood in 1955. At the time, his household was one of just two on the newly developing street. Up the block lived his only neighbor, Carl C. Baranek, a Czech from Maryland.

Edward worked as a hat maker for a women’s hat factory (possibly Kromer’s) during his time in the neighborhood. Popular women’s hat styles in the 1950s included pillboxes, turbans, sports caps, berets, and cocktail hats, often with veils.

Both Edward and Helen were children of Polish immigrants. Their parents had worked as entry-level laborers in local factories, and as WPA workers during the Great Depression (see Edward with his father Andrew in the photograph to the right from *Ancestry.com*). During these difficult economic times, neither Edward nor Helen completed elementary school. However, by 1940 the couple had married, Edward was able to secure a job as a hatter, and they’d purchased a home at 2726 South 15th Place in the Polonia neighborhood. Apparently just before 1955, the family moved to the Town of Lake.

Edward died in 1975 and was interred in his old neighborhood at St. Adalbert’s Cemetery. His wife joined him six months later.



In 1955, the Town of Lake neighborhood had fewer than 20 businesses (including the last remaining greenhouse on West Bolivar). Only two were on Layton Avenue. However, by 1970, Layton was becoming a major business corridor. See list below.

<i>Addresses on Layton Ave. in Town of Lake area in 1970</i>	<i>Names of businesses and organizations from <u>Milwaukee City Directory</u></i>
East Layton	
724	Burger Chef
704	Halmark Homes of Milwaukee, Inc.
700	Elm Tree Bakery

<i>Addresses on Layton Ave. in Town of Lake area in 1970</i>	<i>Names of businesses and organizations from Milwaukee City Directory</i>
600	Phinney's D-X Service Station
700	Elm Tree Bakery
524	Al's Custard Drive In
110	Airport Shell Station
West Layton	
130	Marc's Big Boy Coffee Shop
151	Dunkin' Donuts
160	Monte Carlo Car Wash
175	Burger Castle
200	Ponderosa Steak House
401	Consolidated Freightways Trucking
512	Brat & Beer Restaurant
545	Hennis Freight Lines Inc. Mercury Motor Freight Lines O.M. Trucking Company West Shore Transport Company

Notes:

- As today, this stretch of Layton Ave. served the automobile, with service stations, a car wash, steak house and fast food restaurants. A Taco Bell opened on the stretch shortly after 1970.
- The Ponderosa Steak House at that location burned in 1972 and was reconstructed.
- The Big Boy restaurant at the time shared its space with a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet.

The population in Town of Lake would gradually become more diverse for two reasons. First, Milwaukee Latinos continued migrating south from the Near South Side in the 1970s and 1980s. Second, the founding of the Islamic Center of Milwaukee in 1982 attracted Muslims from the Middle East and Northern Africa.

Current populations (as of 2021)

Today, Town of Lake has over 5,000 residents. Over 7 in 10 are European Americans (most still of German and Polish ancestry), and approximately 1 in 7 are Latinos (mostly of Mexican ancestry, but including quite a few Puerto Ricans). There is also a scattering of Asians (mostly claiming Chinese descent), American Indians, indigenous Africans, Jordanians, African Americans, Arabs, Palestinians, and people of multiple backgrounds in the area.

The median household income in Town of Lake is just under \$60,000 a year, placing the neighborhood in the middle-income stratum. The largest number of occupations claimed by residents are in the fields of administration, production, and sales.

Gardening is a major hobby among Town of Lake residents—a tradition carried over from the time when the neighborhood was part of the unincorporated 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

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

BAY VIEW BASH

When?	Where?	Description and contact info	Admission
Mid Sep., Sat. 11am-10pm	Between Potter and Clement on Kinnickinnic Ave.	A Community Festival of Food, Art, Music, Crafts, Books, and Community Organizations.	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 ongoing oral history of the Garden District by Urban Anthropology Inc.¹—about THEN

“We had a crick in our neighborhood and we’d go down and play at the crick. There was a park about eight blocks away, but in the summer that was a long eight blocks just to get to the corner of the park. There was another playground about three blocks away, but it was always very hot—with the asphalt. Today I’m working with people to have the asphalt removed and put in grass on that same playground.”

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

“You can afford to marry and raise a family in the Garden District. Bay View is getting very pricey. Saveland Park and Wilson Park are places where people convene and play, with the hockey rink, pool, etc. That is probably the largest area for community fun.”

“In the Muslim community, we have lots of families that live around the Islamic Center and Muslim families tend to be somewhat larger than non-Muslim families in the surrounding neighborhoods. We have lots of kids. And a lot of the kids that attend school at this campus or at the campus at 8th and Layton—a lot are within walking distance. And we have more than 700 kids in this building.”

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-Houses on 2nd St. & Plainfield



Today's neighborhood-Mitchell Airport Park



Today's neighborhood-Houses near the intersection of Pine and Whitnall



Today's neighborhood-Houses on Cudahy Ave.

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

