

veneer single-family home with the front porch, is the design that Ragan repeated one after another on the north east block and that occurs less often on the other 3 blocks. The use of one house plan was certainly another device used by Ragan to reduce the amount of investment.

A temporary home.

The social and economic conditions that prevailed at the time complemented, if not stimulated William Ragan's exploitation of the land. During the decade between 1880-1890 Minneapolis experienced a 351% population increase. It was a boom time. And the burgeoning population contained increasing numbers of immigrants who needed low-cost interim housing during their first years in Minnesota. According to Hulda Anderson Marsh, who was born on 22½ Avenue in 1899, the daughter of Swedish immigrant Otto Anderson, rental housing suitable for families was in short supply. The Anderson family of eight rented a house on 22½ Avenue despite its severe spatial limitations because it was the only low-cost rental housing they could find.

Indeed, the Milwaukee Avenue houses fulfilled the need for cheap temporary housing. Studying the socio-economic data tabulated in the State Census of 1895 and 1905, the residents of 22½ Avenue can be characterized as Scandinavian in nativity, skilled-manual and non-skilled manual by occupation and transient by their length of residence. And by and large these immigrant families were of meagre economic resources. A tiny proportion owned their own homes. And many unrelated families were forced to double-up and to take in boarders. For example in 1905, at 2112½ 22½ Ave., a widow and her 8 children shared a 1-bedroom duplex unit with another family of four. In another duplex flat five adults and nine children divided the sparse space among them. The immigrant literature tells of many families who settled first in urban areas where jobs were available in order to acquire capital to purchase a farm in rural Minnesota.

It is a well-known phenomenon that immigrants in the first years after arrival tended to form in ethnic clusters to ameliorate the tensions and strains of cultural dislocation. Certainly, Milwaukee Avenue was such an ethnic clustering and it was part of an area which was solidly Scandinavian. The neighborhood which contained Milwaukee Avenue, Seward West, was apparently the physical extension of the somewhat older Scandinavian settlement to the north, the Cedar-Riverside area. According to Hulda Marsh, Seward West

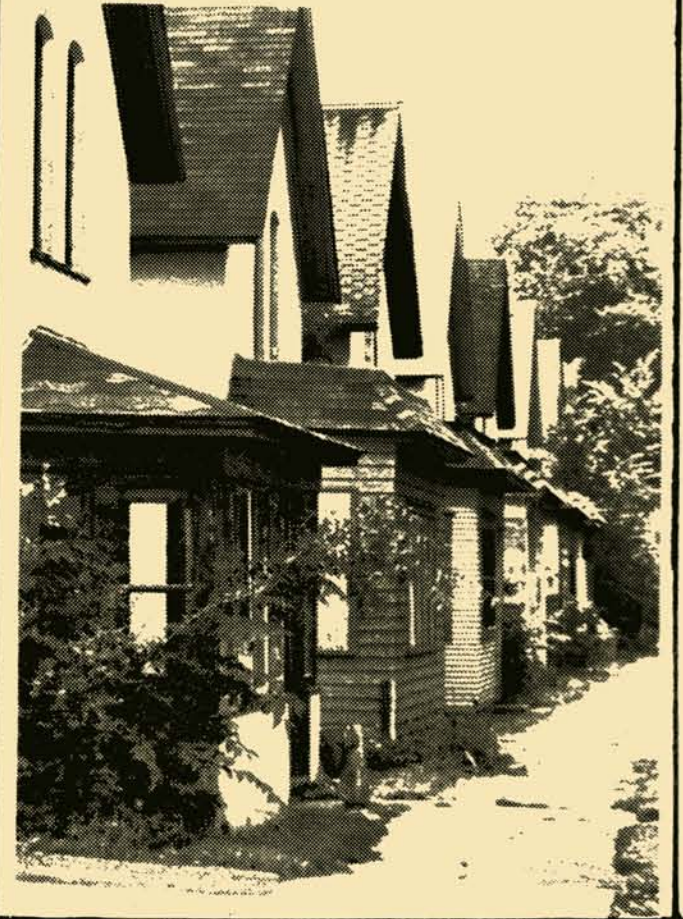
was not distinct from Cedar-Riverside as it is today. "Until the freeway I-94 we were one." The names of the churches in Seward West at the time attest to the ethnicity of the area: the Norwegian Lutheran, the Danish American and the Swedish 24th Street Methodist churches were all within walking distance of Milwaukee Avenue. But although Milwaukee Avenue was visibly ethnic, internally the population was highly fluid. The turn-over rate was high, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There were probably other areas in the city like Milwaukee Avenue, stopping-off places for immigrants who had not yet attained enough wealth to become assimilated into the larger society. In that sense Milwaukee Avenue is representative of other ethnic concentrations within the city; areas that provided the immigrant with a temporary home.

A National Historic Site.

Area residents consider Milwaukee Avenue to be a special street. The Avenue is central to old Seward West and serves as a landmark and the source of folklore. Ninety years have taken their toll on the physical condition of the 45 houses which line Milwaukee Avenue. But although foundations are cracked, bricks are loose and many interiors shabby, the basic integrity of the street remains intact. The residents of Seward West have recommended rehabilitation and historic preservation in opposition to the urban renewal plan which would have demolished nearly all of the old immigrant settlement.

Through the efforts of the Seward West Project Area Committee, city-wide attention has been focused on Milwaukee Avenue as an important historical landmark. Milwaukee Avenue was given official recognition as an historic site in 1974. After the Minnesota Historical Society recommended its designation, Congress voted to add the street, with its 45 houses to the National Register of Historic Sites. Many public and private agencies are working together to realize the redevelopment and historic preservation of Milwaukee Avenue.

Historic Milwaukee Avenue



George Washington never slept here.

The houses on Milwaukee Avenue are not mansions nor did any famous person live on the street, or glorious event occur there. Why, then, are many individuals and organizations such as the Seward West Project Area Committee, the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority and the Minnesota Historical Society interested in preserving Milwaukee Avenue for its historical merit? Milwaukee Avenue is historically significant because it is one of Minneapolis' few intact examples of the life-style of the poor immigrant who came to Minnesota when America was the New World. The narrow street with its small, look-alike houses, tucked closely together offers a visual lesson in economic and social history. It serves as a striking contrast to those artifacts of the aristocracy, which are the normal fare of historic preservation. Its vision does not entertain romantic notions of the "good old days." In the late 19th century when Milwaukee Avenue was built the tenor of life for most people was harsh and often discordant. Employment for many workers was erratic and for those who could find steady employment, the hours were long and the pay was low. The characterization of that age as the "Gay 90's" can only be a fanciful illusion in the reflective mirror of history.

There are other dimensions of life that Milwaukee Avenue brings to our conceptions of that age. The street with its continuity of forms and spaces and the scale of its buildings recalls the time when the urban environment was more intimate, more human in its dimensions. Walking along Milwaukee Avenue, one feels equal to the structures that surround; the size and design of the buildings reinforce the sense of identity and place.

Throughout its history Milwaukee Avenue has provided quarters for working-class families. Its residences served as temporary homes to many immigrants during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Because of its unique architecture the impact of the sense of history is greater on Milwaukee Avenue than in other working-class sections of the city which do not possess a similar cohesiveness. The reasons for the unique streetscape that formed along Milwaukee Avenue — the continuity of modest and similar forms — the simple rhythm of the gabled roofs of houses built right up to the sidewalk — are found in the street's earliest history.

...But August Koch did.



**Immigrant homeowner August Koch
circa 1900**

Ragan's Addition.

The first house on Milwaukee Avenue was built in 1884 and most of the other homes were completed by 1890. The houses were built along what was intended to be an alley. And until 1906, the alley-street was officially named 22½ Avenue. Why the name was changed to Milwaukee Avenue remains unknown. The elderly residents in the neighborhood claim the houses were built either for or by the railroad workers who were employed in the nearby St. Paul, Chicago and Milwaukee Railroad carshops, and thus was named after the "Milwaukee Road."

The majority of the houses on Milwaukee Avenue north of 22nd Street were originally owned and built by a real-estate agent, William Ragan, who, according to City Directories, arrived in Minneapolis shortly before he purchased and platted the street and who left the city soon after foreclosure action had confiscated his property on 22½ Ave. There was a great depression going on in the decade before 1900 and many others like Mr. Ragan fell to pecuniary disgrace.

Back in 1884, however, William Ragan who had a penchant for gambling, according to neighborhood legend, was somewhat less than modest in his approach to economic ventures. "Ragan's Addition to Minneapolis" as it was originally platted comprised two full blocks and two ¾-size blocks. In order to increase the development potential of his parcel, Ragan divided the land into four half-blocks. The alley between 22nd and 23rd Avenues was transformed to a street by taking 38 feet from the east-face of the short lots on Blocks 1 and 2 of Ragans's Addition. William went further. The lots he platted, already diminished lengthwise because of the street easement, were measured in widths of only 25 feet, about half the normal size of a city lot of the time. As a result of Ragan's intensive use of the land, the 45 single-family and duplex houses which line Milwaukee Avenue are extremely close together and have little if any setback from the sidewalk. It is apparent that such lot dissection was an attempt to increase the economic return on the land by building clusters of modest houses on small narrow lots.

Although Ragan sold many unimproved lots to individual contractors, most of the houses he himself contracted to build. It is easy to discern the Ragan-genre house from the others for he used the same house plan for each that he built. The typical Milwaukee Avenue house, the brick-