Introduction by Daniel J. Hoisington

Building a Community

Driving on i-694, one city blurs into another. You pass one exit with a McDonald's, another with a Perkins. There is a mall—one of the "dales"—with a conglomeration of stores. The stories are often replaceable parts — the early settlers were hard-working immigrants. Most suburban newspapers have carried at least one article about "the last farm" lost to encroaching development. What sets "the Brooklyns" apart? When we read the history of the community, is there something that is ours alone—special, unique, defining?

The Tessmans' Community

The land shaped the settlement and the subsequent economy of the Brooklyns. When vast tracts of Minnesota became available following the Treaties of Mendota and Traverse de Sioux, thousands of prospective settlers headed west to the new territory. As they came to the land north of Saint Anthony's Falls, they encountered four extensive prairies, interspersed with brush and groves of oaks and poplars. Since the open grassland was easily plowed, this land attracted the first settlers. The soil was a sandy loam that provided good drainage, especially suited to early harvests.

August Tessman was among the early settlers. He was born in West Prussia, Germany, in 1838, coming to America at the age of twenty as a stowaway. He settled in Chanhassen, earning a living by transporting bricks on the Minnesota River. On one of his trips to Saint Paul, he met Henrietta Hartkopf, whom he married in 1862. When they learned that Moses Blowers' farm was for sale in Brooklyn Township, they bought it and moved to the area in 1870. The Tessmans' built their home—which still stands—in 1883.

The Tessmans, like their neighbors, were farmers. Of the 132 Brooklyn township names listed in Neill's 1881 *History of Hennepin County*, 118 men gave "farmer" as their occupation. Wheat was the primary crop in the Brooklyn area in those years. The agricultural census for Brooklyn Township show that there were 270 farms producing 46,698 bushels of wheat in 1880. But the growing population of Minneapolis, combined with an increased accessibility, led Brooklyn area farmers to shift production to cater to the city demands for vegetables and flowers.

In the Brooklyns, the local farmers planted potatoes, growing varieties with names like Early Ohios, Rural New Yorkers, Irish Cobblers, Sebagos, Wasecas, and Warbas. Under the guidance of Fred Krantz, the University of Minnesota Horticulture Department developed the "Osseo" in 1954 and "Anoka" in 1965. By 1910, the city of Osseo became the largest potato-shipping point in the United States. For a more complete look at the potato industry, read Norene Roberts' essay, "Growing Potatoes in Brooklyn Park" in Chapter Ten.[1]

It was a tough business, subject to potato bugs and drought. Eldon Tessman wrote, "Potato production was on the decline even when I started farming. The peak years for potato production in Brooklyn Park were in the 1910s and 1920s." Trying to assist nature, farmers introduced irrigation in the 1930s. Tessman noted, "In 1936 my

parents used the Skinner system. It's approximately 1½ inches in diameter and has small nozzles every six feet and often they were put on posts to oscillate." The new Norland variety, one farmer said, extended potato growing in the Brooklyns by fifty years, due to its hearty nature.

Who came to Brooklyn Township? As Jane Hallberg notes in Chapter Two, a "colony" from Adrian, Michigan, were among the first landowners. Of the forty-six prominent residents profiled by Edward Neill in 1881, thirty men were from New England (with twenty-one from Maine) and only four were foreign born. In 1932, one writer described the townspeople, stating, "Brooklyn Center Township was settled by New Englanders and Scandinavians. They are the kind of folks who settle on a piece of land and stay there. Many of the old timers live there yet — the Mattsons, the Libbys, the Hamiltons, the Howes, the Swensons. They are all frugal, thrifty, honest folks. They all used to go fishing in Shingle Creek and go over to Howe's store on Middle Road in the evening and chew the fat. They dropped in at each other's houses for meals and they do it yet."

The Howe Store, located at what is now 69th Avenue and Brooklyn Boulevard.

John Wingard recalled the Scandinavian families, saying, "The Brunsells were the farmers that owned the land where Brookdale was built. Sig Edling was Scandinavian, too. The Bergstrom Brothers always spoke with a Swedish brogue — slow and deliberate."

In Brooklyn Park, however, the families were typically German or Swiss. Keith Caswell noted his family history, saying, "We had Swiss relatives who were truck gardeners and farmers that lived in this area. Some of them homesteaded. Switzerland paid them to come over to the United States because there was no future for them in Switzerland. The Swiss family names were common up in this area. There were Zopfi, Blesi, Zimmerman, and Curtis."[2]

There were tensions between the different nationalities. Glen Sonnenberg recalled,

> My mother was Norwegian and she'd say, 'Swedes, *ish*.' In this little area, there was a family called Hartson. That's a German name. [The Sardinskys] were Ukrainian. Across the road were the Stefansens and they were really Danish. They held themselves aloof and they were better than anybody else. That's the way it appeared to us. It took a long time before one family accepted another family, saying, 'I don't want you playing with that boy or I don't want you to be seen with that one.' They never explained why, but they just said, 'No way are you going to have anything to do with them.'[3]

So, the land made a difference. If August Tessman had remained in the Chaska area, he might have worked a small mixed-use farm, with alfalfa or dairy cattle. In Brooklyn Township, however, they became potato farmers.

Creating a Community

The community centered on the rural schools, the churches, and the few crossroad stores. Neill described the township in 1881: "Brooklyn is an exclusively agricultural town. With the exception of Osseo, it has no village. Brooklyn Center is the site of two churches, a store and post office; but its few residences are only a gathering of farm houses."

Howe's Store was an important landmark. Recalling the time before WWII, John Wingard said, "There was a general store on the corner of Osseo Road and what is now 69th Avenue North. As kids, we used to talk about going down there and getting an ice cream cone from Pappy Howe." The store included a soda fountain area. Wingard continued, "Alongside the store, Bergstrom brothers (Arnie, Ted, Carl, Ed, and Phil) built an implement dealership. There was a gasoline pump in front of the building. There was another little store just south of it—a confectionary store which sold groceries, candy, and stuff." Charlie Holmes owned this store.[4]

Students attended local schools until high school. Alice Tessman, for example, attended North High School in Minneapolis with cousins George and Everett Setzler. For medical care, residents visited doctors in Anoka or Osseo. Local farmers joined together and built a community center around 1920, known as "Riverlyn," where they held dances, holiday gatherings, and picnics.[5] The Patrons of Husbandry, known as the "Grange," built a hall in Brooklyn Center in 1876. Settlers organized several churches, including the Methodist Church (1855), First Freewill Baptist Church (1879), the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church (1877). It provided a place for the rural people to gather once a week.

Earle Brown's Village

Sometimes a town's history is defined by one personality—a charismatic leader who acts as a fulcrum. Earle Brown was just such a man. He was wealthy and used his farm as an agricultural showcase with prized Belgian horses. In 1919 he opened an airfield on his land—probably the first commercial airfield in Minnesota. He gained notoriety as a booze-busting sheriff during Prohibition. "He had a reputation," said a friend, "of never asking a person to do any job that he himself would not undertake, which would include risk-of-life."

When he ran for governor in 1932, Brown ran as the apolitical outsider. He would "go through the statehouse and throw out every incompetent man and replace them with the best and most able men obtainable, irrespective of party affiliations." In a campaign biography, the writer described Brown with words that might fit another gubernatorial candidate from the Brooklyns—Jesse Ventura:

> Minnesota has something brand new this year in the way of a candidate for governor. Candidates for political office are pretty well standardized in this reporter's mind. His impression has always been that they are either young men consumed by a burning ambition to get some place or oldish men who have finally despaired of succeeding in business. As the years go by, they acquire all the little tricks and mannerisms of the experienced politician. They have acquired the ability to dodge gracefully any question that might prove embarrassing. There is not the slightest chance in the world of developing Earle Brown into a strutting, hand-shaking, slippery politician.[6]

Still, when the votes were counted, Floyd Olson carried Brown's home town with a vote of 300 for Olson and 246 for Brown.

There are hundreds of "Earle Brown" stories. Donald Weesner, a friend of the Brown family, remembered, "Earle Brown was not too talkative, but he was very interesting and liked to help people, but he wanted to be sure that it was doing some good. Quite often Brown would call on my father and we'd go out to Brooklyn Center in the winter time and take us for a ride in his bobsled."[7]

Earle Brown — farmer, businessman, sheriff, politician — became a legend in Brooklyn Center. This sketch comes from the Minneapolis Star.

Earle Brown's farm was a showcase. Willed to the University of Minnesota, the property was developed over the years.

Garrison Keillor remembered, "We'd hike down to Earle Brown's farm, a thousand-acre ranch that lay along Highway 100, whiteface cattle grazing on a treeless plain, with Mr. Brown's big house, barns, stables, and riding arena in the distance. Earle Brown had been sheriff of Hennepin County and apparently he had the same cowboy fantasies that we had, his farm looked for all the world like a piece of Texas."[8]

A Village

It seems fitting that the village of Brooklyn Center was organized at a meeting in Brown's garage in 1911. Concerned about annexation by Minneapolis, residents voted 69 to 14 to incorporate as a village. Its trustees managed road repair, traffic laws, and preservation of the peace from rambunctious youth and loose farm animals. In 1915, it authorized the General Electric Company to bring electricity into the village.

Baldwin "Baldy" Hartkopf was a common man who made a difference. He grew up in Brooklyn Park, the grandson of German immigrants. Like most of his neighbors, he was a farmer and often got up in the middle of the night to haul potatoes down to the Minneapolis Farmers' Market. His daughter recalled, "My father was sort of like Will Rogers—he never met a man he didn't like. He liked people. He wasn't a rich man—he never was—and that wasn't his goal in life."

Although he was a farmer, he also served his community in government. "I tell you," he said, "government was very important to me, though I couldn't really tell you just why. But there were things that, as a gardener and farmer, I might have a part in deciding." He was appointed to fill a vacancy on the Coulter School Board in 1928. Then, in 1934, Hartkopf was elected state representative, serving for two terms. Baldy remained a "citizen-politician," declaring, "I wasn't really so much of a politician. I was just a young potato picker."[9]

Among his accomplishments, he introduced a bill in the House that enabled Minnesota municipalities to organize planning commissions. In 1940, Brooklyn Township enacted an ordinance regulating land use. To guide its implementation, the board authorized a Planning Commission one year later.[10]

In Brooklyn Township, individuals could make a difference. No historical formula can predict a man like Earle Brown. No clear explanation tells us why a simple potato farmer such as Baldy Hartkopf led Minnesota into the era of community planning.

Garrison Keillor's Town

In 1947 John and Grace Keillor decided to move from south Minneapolis to Brooklyn Park. Their son, Garrison, recalled, "Dad had gotten a G. I. loan to build a house, and he'd found a plan for a Cape Cod bungalow in a magazine." Like many of the neighbors, the Keillors laid their foundation and moved into a "basement" home. He continued, "For five years while he was building the superstructure — it was to take him five years — we would live in the bunker below."[11]

The Keillors were part of a transformation of Brooklyn Township by a single generation — the men and women that grew up in the depression and entered adulthood during World War II. When peace came in August 1945, these young men and women were ready to live their dreams after an enforced interlude. And their dreams took them to the suburbs.

Several key government policies fueled the population shift to the suburbs. First, the Federal Housing Authority made buying a new home an attainable dream by backing long-term mortgages. Phil Cohen recalled, "I learned a lot about housing. Longer-term mortgages back then [during the Depression] were two-year contracts for deed. So every other year, Dad had to go down and negotiate the contract for deed and he'd come home and say, "Well, we've got a roof over our head for another year or two."

Benson School, 1953. Students include young Garrison Keillor
Mrs. G. L. Mattson

In the 1920s, a typical mortgage ran five to ten years, requiring a down payment of forty percent. The FHA payment guarantee, combined with VA benefits to World War II veterans, fueled a steady expansion of new housing. Both programs placed a cap on the dollar amount that a mortgage could be insured — a maximum of $7,500 in 1950 — encouraging the construction of small, mass-produced houses that cost just below the limit. This transformed the economy of the suburbs, placing a premium on open land near the highway system.

Glen Sonnenberg remembers, "All of these people who never had anything before now had just a bit of money from the government or from the Army and were going to buy a piece of property. My dad divided his farm into individual lots and he sold to five different fellows that had been in the service and came back and were going to build a house of their own."

Second, the Federal Highway Act of 1957 promised to pay ninety cents for every dollar spent on interstate highways. These new roads made it easier to commute for a long distance and broke the reliance on public transportation. The workplace might be several towns away from home. Highway construction changed the face of the Brooklyns. For example, the construction of i-94 made it a ten minute commute to downtown Minneapolis. As John Wingard recalled, "Roger Scherer and I worked diligently on getting i-94 through North Minneapolis. Our bottleneck was Camden Park, so Roger and I had some meetings with some fellows on the Park Board in Minneapolis and got a bill passed through the legislature for a land exchange. It has done a lot to help Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center because we have a major interstate that services the community."[12]

"The Other Side of the World"

Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park provided a new life for the postwar generation. Jack Vaughn remembered, "When I moved to Brooklyn Center, I bought my lot in 1946 and built in 1947. When I bought my lot, everybody said, "What are you going out there for? They don't have any street lights or paved roads or nothing."[13]

Phil Cohen had a similar story, saying, "We got married by a justice of the peace down in Iowa in November 1949. We had limited dollars. There was a house in Robbinsdale that was for sale that we could afford but somebody else out bid us. So we found this house in the back of a lot with a cesspool, septic tank, and well. We lived at 5353 Dupont until the house got too small when we had all three kids. We bought a house on 53rd and Humboldt."

Grace Arbogast came to the Brooklyns a decade later. Arbogast remembered, "We felt that we got more value for our money by buying in the northern suburbs than we would have gotten out south. We found a home at the corner of 63rd and Sumter, fell in love with it, purchased it in 1959. At that time, we just thought we were on the other side of world."

Rapid Growth

As more and more homes were built, cracks in the system began to develop. School were inadequate for the baby boom generation. The infrastructure of roads and utilities did not meet the demand. Individual septic systems threatened to overwhelm nature's ability to maintain ecological balance. Keith Caswell, an engineer, recalled, "Brooklyn Park was developing. They did have problems and there was pressure to further develop after World War II and the population explosion that took place in the metropolitan area. The city fathers recognized that and they worked very hard to do it. I was always impressed with the quality of the council people that we had and the leadership. We had Baldwin Hartkopf for instance. We had Red Anderson. We had councilmen that really had an interest in the community."

Threatened with encroachment from Osseo and Minneapolis, the remainder of Brooklyn Township voted to become a village in 1954. Baldy Hartkopf remembered the discussion about a name for the village. He said, "What shall we call this community?' We had to keep the 'Brooklyn' and it occurred to me that families would be coming and bringing children. Well, children need places to play, so we added the word 'Park'."

The new village government established some of Brooklyn Park's most important policies in those early years, notably the postponement of development north of 85th Avenue. "We called it a hop, skip and a jump and we didn't like it, Hartkopf said. "Rudy Peterson wanted to build homes up in the northwest area. But I told him, 'You'd be putting a storm sewer problem on everyone who lives up there." Keith Caswell recalled, "Brooklyn Park, I think, had 100-foot lots. There was a lot of pressure from the outside to go down to 75-foot lots, and so on, but they wanted to get their ducks in order prior to any development. It had a fair population—I think it was 10 to 12,000 people. The council met at least once a month, the planning commission once a month."

In addition, the planning board asked developers to donate parkland. Hartkopf backed up his position. When Orrin Thompson proposed a residential development next to the Hartkopf farm, Baldy said, "I told him I'd give two acres of my land if he'd give five of his." That property is now Baldwin Hartkopf Park.[14]

Building a Community

At the same time, these young men and women built a different kind of infrastructure — social, religious, and educational institutions to serve a growing population. Looking back on those years, Ed Theisen remembered, "Brooklyn Center was an exceptional community in which to raise a family. Burquest Lane was a block long and when our children were small, there must have been fifty little kids in that one or two block area. And the friendships they developed were great. Brooklyn Center really had this neighborhood spirit."

Local clubs and organizations fostered a sense of community. Many civic leaders fondly recall the influence of the Jaycees. Tony Kuefler said, "[The Jaycees] was a pretty good group. I learned a lot about organization and teamwork from them. If I had got into supervision at work before I had that training, I don't think I ever would have made it." Grace Arbogast agreed. "If you look back at the people that were involved in the Jaycees and the Mrs. Jaycees, they were people that went on to be on the council and went on to more political things," she said. "They were very active and committed and dedicated people. They were the real movers and shakers of that time that really made our community known and pulled together."[15]

This network extended to business affairs. Don Rosen, Pilgrim Cleaners, said, "In 1978 when we bought the Phillips 66 station, we needed funds. Jack Bell said to me, "I'm President of Rotary, we'd like to have you join." I thought it over and I said, "Okay, I'll join Rotary." He said, "Okay, then, you've got the money that you need for the station."[16]

Grace Arbogast recalls the camaraderie of those years. Her husband volunteered with the Fire Department. She said, "At that time, they interviewed the wife as well as the husband because it was a family thing. So we went and joined the Fire Department as a family. They had a women's auxiliary, which went to fires, and served food. We'd bring hot cocoa, coffee, sandwiches."

The Brooklyn Park Village Council meets in 1956. Left to right: Hilmer Guntzel, Harry Schreiber, Baldwin Hartkopf Sr., Abe Zimmerman, Al Joyner

Schools were very important. Phil Cohen first got involved in local politics when his children were ready for school. He noted,

> I started hearing a lot about the School Board. In 1960, I ran for the board and got elected. It was my first venture into politics. I remember the superintendent of the Minneapolis school system came out and talked to the school board about building a high school. He said, "You know, we have the room to take care of your kids in Minneapolis, get them a well rounded education, but you'll never have a school, you'll never have a community until you have a Brooklyn Center high school." His words of wisdom were what propelled the board and community to build a high school.

Local churches grew as well, adding to the community spirit. Phil Cohen said, "In the churches, you had ministers — the greatest group of ministers you ever had — who would preach from the pulpit about the responsibility of stewards of the community to get involved. St. Alphonsus was the greatest. We had members of the clergy who were members of the Rotary and the Lions."

A Critical Juncture

By the early 1960s, this post-war generation made important decisions. First, the community leaders made critical decisions about a seemingly mundane topic: waste disposal. Although the issue is literally below the surface, development requires a sound infrastructure of roads, water, electricity, and sanitation before construction begins. These long-term investments are expensive. Keith Caswell, the engineer, noted, "Brooklyn Park was going to limit their development to the area south of 85th Avenue. This was a big concern because there were many good successful farmers there. It was excellent land to farm. Brooklyn Park did not want to force those people on to the market."

The proposed plan created a North Suburban Sanitary Sewer District (NSSSD). There was strong opposition from the farmers, who feared higher assessments down the road. Bill Schreiber stated the case, "These supporters were simply stating that we do not want to be beholden to the city of Minneapolis in controlling our growth and development, because Minneapolis exclusively controlled the capacity for sanitary sewer. Downtown Minneapolis interests controlled suburban growth. The alternative was to form your own district, build your own waste treatment plant, and control your destiny." The catch? "You didn't have the downtown Minneapolis banker to help pay for it. That became the controversial part."

The postwar generation developed a leadership network, such as the Brooklyn Center Chamber of Commerce, organized in 1964. Left to right: Phil Cohen, Ed Hamernick, Jack Leary, Carl Anderson, Dallas Lawrence, Tom O'Hehir.

Lyn Joyner, whose brother was village clerk, recalled the bitterness of the debate. "I think several of the people who had honestly supported NSSD really in their hearts felt this was the best way to go." Bill Schreiber recollected, "After Nikita Khrushchev, the head of the Soviet Union, had come to the United Nations and taken his shoe off and pounded the table, [there] was one council member who thought he could do that at a Brooklyn Park council meeting as well."

One primary point of contention was that the sewer system was overbuilt—that it cost too much. Phil Cohen joked, "You could hold Volkswagen races in their sewer system. They greatly oversized it. The only way they could pay for it was by having higher density uses than what was planned, and that's why you have the apartments."

In addition, the relationship between developers and council members raised red flags for many citizens. Ted Willard remembered, "Most of the developers attempted to wine and dine the council members. I remember one of those turkeys delivered to my house. When I got home, there it was, and so what I did was take it to the church and donate it to them. No gratuities. Make that clear to all involved."

Second, Brooklyn Center had to decide what to do with Earle Brown's legacy. In 1949, he left his magnificent farm to the University of Minnesota, retaining the right to live there until his death. In 1954 Brown released some 200 acres of the farm to the University for a model development. With this windfall, the University sought to turn a handsome profit, and used the proceeds to build the Earle Brown Continuing Education Center on the Saint Paul campus.

The project was also an opportunity to set a model for suburban development. Called "Garden City," the University hired Winston Close, University of Minnesota advisory architect, to design the development. Working in partnership with his wife, Elizabeth, Close created plans for a residential community with educational,

shopping, housing and recreational facilities. Close said, "This is really something unique. In no similar urban area in American does there exist an undivided tract of this size." Although Winston Brothers, the developer, used the Closes' plans, it eventually became independent of the University.[17]

When he died in 1963, the University sold the 560-acre farm to James and John Sheehan and Deil Gustafson. Gustafson kept the farm buildings for his personal use and proceeded to develop the rest of the property—now the heart of Brooklyn Center. The use of this piece of land would shape the economic development of the city for decades. It spurred Phil Cohen into politics. He recalled, "In 1962, another seat became vacant on the council and I felt I wanted to get involved in that—in the growth, the planning and development of the Earle Brown's farm, so I decided to run for City Council and got elected. Brooklyn Center was the second community in the metropolitan area that had a comprehensive plan developed. This set the stage for the City Council to agree with the University to do a study on how the Earle Brown's farm should be developed. A few changes to the original plan were put in place, principally changing from industrial to commercial, the property below the freeway."

A Legacy

What is the enduring legacy of this generation? When asked, Phil Cohen said, "We had no used car lots. We do not have any corner bars. We have no billboards. We adopted the housing maintenance code and the apartment license. We were one of the first cities to put sidewalks in. We have a good city charter. The greatest sin is to know what's right and not do it."

Ed Theisen spoke proudly of the work of the Capital Improvements Review Board. As they looked into the growing needs of Brooklyn Center, they heard demands for a swimming pool, a civic center, a police station, a fire station, and a city garage. Theisen said, "All of that was put together in one package. A lot of people from Brooklyn Center became involved and became proponents of the facilities, so the Bond issue passed easily. When I look back, it was done at the right time and at the right price."

Jesse Ventura's City

Although he presided over hundreds of city council meetings during his years as Mayor of Brooklyn Park, Jim Krautkremer remembers one evening in particular. Several community residents were opposing the development of a tract of land, concerned especially with the potential damage to a wetlands area. Krautkremer said,

> We were holding this meeting and there was somebody who kept interrupting and finally I took the gavel and I banged down and told this person, I said, "You're going to have time to talk but you're going to have to wait your time. We're going to stay here all night if we need to listen, but we will listen to you." Jerry Marshall leaned over and said, "Do you know who that guy was with the red and green hair that you just gaveled down? You'd better be careful. He's a wrestler, Jesse Ventura."

Although Ventura had a high profile in a profession that rewarded flamboyance, in other ways, he reflected the citizens of the Brooklyns. Raised in Minneapolis, he had taken classes at North Hennepin Community College after his service in the Navy. Like other city residents, he responded to the allure of the suburbs with its new homes, its good schools, and its open space—a quiet community where he could raise his

two children. He wrote, "I'd never had any inkling of getting into politics. None. It had never crossed my mind. In a way, you could say that I didn't go into politics; politics came to me. It landed in my lap—or, to be more accurate, in my backyard. That made it impossible to ignore."

Echoing the descriptions of Earle Brown from the 1932 gubernatorial race, Ventura just wanted to clean up the mess in city hall. He recalled,

> In 1990, Terry, Tyrel, Jade and I were living in Brooklyn Park, an older, mostly developed neighborhood in the northern suburbs of Minneapolis. At the time, developers were coming into the area, looking to turn the few remaining potato fields into housing developments. This one particular developer came in and wanted to get the highest buck for what he was about to build, so he demanded that the neighborhood put in curbs, gutters, and storm sewers. We didn't need those things.
>
> The citizens of Brooklyn Park were playing second fiddle to developers. Now remember, the developers put up their projects, and then they're gone; they're on to something else. The citizens lived there year-round. Worst of all, though, was where they planned to put the runoff water: they couldn't drain off into the Mississippi because of pollution laws, so they decided to have a drain right into a local wetland nearby…about a block from my house.
>
> We took a petition up to City Hall and presented it at a City Council meeting. We were voted down seven to nothing. I thought, "Wait a minute. Don't we elect these people to represent us, the populace? It don't seem like they're doing that." And so I started getting more involved and paying more attention.[18]

Jerry Marshall had a different perspective. "All of us came from different walks of life, from different geographical areas certainly. And not knowing one another and coming on the council at relatively the same period of time, it brought together a unique group of people who had the ability to legislate honestly and who had a great sense of camaraderie. We became close friends." As an active member of the Jaycees and then councilman, he learned to work with other leaders—in his view, the seven to zero votes were simply the result of a shared vision. He said, "You [had] a group of people who did get along and wanted to do something for the community. Some people called it the good old boys but most of the people who call people in politics "good old boys" don't do anything. They just call them good old boys."[19]

Ventura challenged Krautkremer in the next election and won all twenty-one of the city's precincts with sixty-three percent of the vote.

The Limits of Growth

In the 1980s and 1990s, Brooklyn Park's growth was dramatic, radically transforming the rural landscape. In 1950, it had a population of 3,065. By 1970 it increased to 26,230. In the 1990s Brooklyn Park became the sixth largest city in Minnesota.[20]

The demand for new housing and commercial space grew unabated. What should be saved? Open space, taken for granted, was rapidly diminishing. As late as 1979, nearly forty percent of the land in Brooklyn Park was used for agriculture. One by one, though, farmers sold off their land to developers. The potato farms came under increased pressure. Finally, potato production ended when Calvin Gray gave up the crop in 1992. Gray said that property taxes were climbing and traffic was "ridiculous." Although some farmers were nostalgic, others recognized that the farms garnered top

dollar when sold to developers. Donald Tessman said, "We don't miss farming, we don't miss potatoes, we miss our youth."[21]

Although Eldon Tessman quit raising potatoes in 1976, selling off portions of his fields, he kept the family home and farm buildings. These were threatened in 1991, when Brooklyn Park proposed a widening of 85th Avenue to accommodate new development. Tessman sued to halt construction, and with the help of historian Norene Roberts, gained historic resource status for his farmstead—the first to be protected under the Minnesota Environmental Rights Act. This forced the city to place a curve in the road around his farmstead. His attorney, Mark Anfinson said, "He sees himself as the guardian of a four-generation farm and thought he had lost it all."[22]

The battle that Jesse Ventura joined over the wetlands was not the first intrusion of sprawl into local politics. In the late 1960s, development threatened Palmer Lake. Ted Willard recalled, "They were going to use it as a landfill—fill it up with dirt and trash in layers. I was opposed to it. I didn't want to have a dump under any name across the street from my house." The City Council intervened and bought the land. Even so, many considered it a folly, asking, "Why do you want to buy that swamp?"[23]

The Earle Brown farm raised a different preservation issue: what should we save from our history? Although the State Legislature designated the property as a state historic site in 1974, the honor did not guarantee preservation of the buildings. Indeed, several barns were demolished or moved in 1981. In 1985 the City of Brooklyn Center purchased the remaining farm buildings and authorized the sale of $5.25 million in bonds to develop and restore the Farm. The City, working with Winsor/Faricy Architects, Inc., developed a creative re-use plan that included new construction and modification of the old buildings for business use. In 1990 the Earle Brown Heritage Center hosted a grand opening celebration.

Historic preservation took a slightly different direction in Brooklyn Park. Concerned with the steady loss of farmland, the City purchased the Eidem Farm in 1976. It opened as a "living farm" museum in 1979. Dennis Palm, Recreation and Parks director, said, "I'm hopeful that in this Bicentennial year, we're preserving something of long lasting value for the community."[24]

The Jaycees began Tater Daze in 1964.

The Challenge of a Diverse Community

The Brooklyns continued to welcome new families during the 1990s. This included a large Asian population, plus increased numbers of African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans. (Read the moving accounts in *Chapter Five: Social Issues*)

In the late 1960s developers built scores of apartment buildings along the southern border of Brooklyn Park. The city had large tracts of land with all the necessary utilities available to accomodate higher density apartment buildings.

Developers responded to the huge housing demand of the post-war baby boomers as they moved from high school into the work force and began families. Even in the late 1970s, apartment buildings were typically one hundred percent occupied, with some complexes experiencing six-month waiting lists for new residents.

As the baby boomers moved out of the apartments into single family homes, suddenly, there was excess apartment capacity. The decline continued, and by the late 1980s, some apartment complexes experienced occupancy rates of less than sixty percent. These apartments became a magnet for low-income families looking for the piece of the American dream, called the "suburb." Brooklyn Park was the first suburb in the Metropolitan Area to build Section 236 subsidized units.

The new social, racial, and ethnic mix caused some community tension in Brooklyn Center. Howard Heck recalled one incident, saying, "There were a group of people that came to complain…that a black family was moving into their neighborhood and they came in unannounced during a council meeting. All of a sudden, they were out in the hallway and started making noise. Phil Cohen got on the phone and called Vi Kanatz (a member of the Humans Rights Commission) and Vi came down immediately." Ted Willard remembered the evening as well. he said, "She had the facts about housing. One of the rumors is that if these people move in, the value of the housing will go down. They don't maintain their property. Vi had statistics and she spoke very quietly, very calmly. She's standing on the step and they're kind of in a semi-circle, about 15-20 people and she just continued talking about the facts. And one by one, people drifted away and finally there wasn't anybody left."

"Come Home to the Park"

Left to Right: Police Chief Don Davis, Mayor Jesse Ventura, Governor Arne Carlson, Dan Ryan, Terry Troy, Dave Russ, John Herron, Public Safety Commissioner Michael Jordan

Looking back, Phil Cohen gives good marks to the people of Brooklyn Center. He said, "I think Brooklyn Center and Maplewood had the two largest black populations. I'm very proud of the community and its race relations." Still, just as the Yankee families were replaced by the Scandinavians and Germans, the changes continue. Ernee McArthur, community activist and former state representative, commented, "We're into this new diversity in the Brooklyns. It's kind of like back in 1852 when the first immigrants came. They came from all different countries. Today we have the same." Phil Cohen remarked, "We have Somalians, Russians, we have everything coming into the community faster than people can understand it. I think there needs to be work in the churches, the civic groups, and the schools."

Ventura's Legacy

Mayor Ventura's career came to a contentious conclusion. In his best-selling book, *Ain't Got Time To Bleed*, he wrote, "About three years into my term, my mother began to get somewhat frail, so she came to live with us. But our house in Brooklyn Park wasn't really equipped to handle that many people. I knew I had to look for another house." They found a larger home—with land for his wife's horses—in Maple Grove, setting off the controversy.

With only four months left in his term, the city council began to investigate whether Ventura needed to resign if he no longer lived in Brooklyn Park. Ventura recalled, "The good old boys saw this as an opportunity to disgrace me." Claiming that he still lived in the city, the Mayor responded: "It was ridiculous! There's no law that says you can't own two homes. The old boys hired a lawyer to try to find a way to oust me." The judge, after careful review, determined that there was no violation of the law, permitting Ventura to complete his four-year term.

What will be his legacy? More than any single policy, it is that he encouraged new people to enter politics. Grace Arbogast, who succeeded Ventura as mayor, said, "Here's one of the things I liked about Jesse Ventura. They wanted to put sidewalks on 63rd and I was violently opposed to sidewalks. I just could not see it. Jesse came out and walked the neighborhood. He came out with all the other council members and

walked. People came out of their houses and talked with him about the issues in our neighborhood. By the time they came to a vote, I wanted them to put a sidewalk in."

Hopes and Dreams

There have been incredible changes in the former Brooklyn Township in the past forty years. As Jesse Ventura said in a speech in 1992, "We're no longer a potato field."[25] The majority of residents have no ties to the community's past. Describing the differences between old and new in 1977, Carol Schreiber said, "We used to have a real sense of the pulse of the community. We, and the others who have been here a long time, knew what was going on. But we're a small percentage now."[26]

As Ventura's life suggests, the bonds to a single town, a single place, are loose — now we live in one town, shop in another, work in a third, and attend church elsewhere. Bill Fignar believes that this makes a difference. As he said, "If our city fathers and the business owners lived here as well as owned the business here, you'd be much better. It's hard for them to be committed."

What bind us now are our stories. As you read this book, you will read the stories of people inspired by hopes and dreams. Early settlers headed into a wilderness with hopes for a piece of land to farm. This land encouraged Earle Brown to dream of his showplace. The postwar generation migrated to the suburbs, looking away from the Depression and World War II to a new vision of community and family. In recent years, a new diverse population moved to Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park, searching for a place to call home. This is our common heritage.

Notes

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4. John Wingard, Oral History Interview with William Schreiber, ND.
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13. Jack Vaughn, Oral History Interview with Ernee McArthur, 28 February 2000.
14. Paula Hirschoff, "Baldwin Hartkopf," *Brooklyn Center Post*, 29 January 1976.
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25. "City facing up to challenges," *Brooklyn Park Sun Post*, 1 April 1992.
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