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BEMIS PARK: A STUDY OF NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE

BY

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Introduction

The 1970's have been marked by a rebirth of inner city neighborhoods for commerce and housing. Developers in Boston, Washington and other cities have begun to rehabilitate old structures rather than destroy them, and thus preserve the visual character of neighborhoods. Residents of older neighborhoods have also banded together into homeowner’s associations to lead the attempts to redevelop and rejuvenate their surroundings.1 The viability of older central city neighborhoods has come to be recognized as essential to the economic health of the city as a whole. Older neighborhoods also can provide a sense of continuity with the past.

Bemis Park is one of Omaha’s older residential neighborhoods. The area, north of Cuming between 33rd and 40th Streets, has known a rich past, but in recent years has also experienced deterioration. Bemis Park residents, however, have been unwilling to accept decline as inevitable, and have made strides to reverse the trend and to restore and preserve the qualities that made the area one of Omaha’s most pleasant places to live. The history of the Bemis Park neighborhood and current efforts to restore it, the concerns of this article, demonstrate the extent to which a neighborhood’s viability depends upon its residents.

Today as in the early decades of this century, the Bemis Park neighborhood contains approximately 200 households. The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association, organized in 1975, has been approved for Community Development Block Grant funds to repair public facilities and has recently discussed the possibilities of becoming a landmarks neighborhood with the Omaha Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission. Many area residents have been instrumental in establishing the nonprofit Bemis Park Improvement Corporation, which has purchased and rehabilitated vacant homes in the area for resale.

A History of the Bemis Park Neighborhood

Establishment of the Bemis Park Neighborhood

advent of the trolley car, a cheap, efficient method of transportation which allowed both white and blue collar workers to live farther away from their place of work than walking distance. In Omaha, the suburbanization process began in earnest in the prosperous decade of the 1880's.

Bemis Park was established at the end of the Cuming Street trolley car line in the late 1880's. The decade brought new wealth to Omaha. During those years new industries such as the Union Stockyards began and older businesses like the Omaha Smelting Company and the local lead works expanded. The industrial growth swelled Omaha’s population to 61,000 by 1886, almost double that of 1880.2 By 1890 the population surpassed 102,000. Building values rose from less than a million dollars annually in 1880 to almost eight million dollars by 1890. In 1880, 5,110 dwellings stood in Omaha; by 1882, contractors had erected 1,000 more houses. In 1884 alone, 1,174 homes went up, and 1887, the high point of the boom, saw the construction of 2,179 residences.3

The real estate partnership of Bemis and Bowers advertised 200 houses and 1,000 lots for sale among its property of one million acres.4 Among the firm’s holdings was a 60 acre tract of land originally named College Place (now Bemis Park), west of the new Creighton College. The Bemis Park Company organized and incorporated on October 4, 1889, with George P. Bemis serving as president. Bemis’ College Place development consisted of 48 1/2 acres owned by him, along with 11 ½ acres belonging to Dr. Samuel D. Mercer, who held adjoining property west of Bemis Park. Alfred D. Edgerton, a landscape architect from Syracuse, New York, platted part of the tract for residences, but left a narrow ravine about 200 feet wide from 33rd to 38th Streets for donation to the City as a park.5

Methodology. The Bemis Park neighborhood was defined as the area from Cuming to Hamilton Streets between 33rd and 38th for examination between 1913-1940. The neighborhood is bounded by Bemis Park to the south and Mercer Park and


4Ibid.

5James Woodford Savage and J. T. Bell, History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska, and South Omaha (New York and Chicago: Munsell and Co., 1894), pp. 439 and 525.
The history of a neighborhood is often difficult to trace. Any history of a city is more likely to concentrate on city politics or famous figures rather than on the portion of the city. Because so little is recorded, the history of a neighborhood must be examined through the people who lived there. History can provide one of the best ways to study neighborhood residents. Since city directories provided the primary source material in this study, the accuracy of the results in a study of persistence and mobility in the twentieth century city, Mobile Americans, Howard Chudacoff found the directories useful and valid.1

Omaha R. L. Polk directories began in 1913 to list residents by both name and street address. Bemis Park residents were listed through directories at 6-year intervals from 1915 through 1940. Names and occupations of residents at each address in the Bemis Park neighborhood listed in the 1913 directory were then consulted to determine which residents remained at the same addresses. New residents’ names and occupations were added. In addition, the residence of the residents who moved out of the area were checked in the alphabetical listing and new addresses recorded, if they could be located. Results for each year were tabulated among households under a variety of categories. A household remaining in the same house since the last check period was considered “persistent” and entered under the name when he was first recorded at that address. Both short-term persistence by 5 years intervals and long-term persistence from 1913 to 1940 were measured. This number did not only how many remained since the last check period, but how long people actually lived in the neighborhood. Because of time limitations, only the 1913 group was charted for long-term persistence.

An attempt was made to trace the destination of residents that moved out in the 1913 directory and to determine whether they relocated to other areas or were lost forever. Three methods were used to find or trace (in the case of an extremely rare name) or who had died in the previous year were designated as "lost." Where possible, they were subdivided into areas of the City to give a general idea of movement. Since in 1913 Omaha had not yet annexed any suburbs, the City boundary ran from Grover Street on the south to Redick on the north and west to 48th Street. Thus, 24th Street and Dodge Street partitioned the City into nine quadrants. Dundee, Benson, Florence and South Omaha were designated as suburbs from the beginning and residences within those areas remained listed as suburban through 1940. Providing the data to check persistence, the Bemis Park was a way station for the socially mobile on their way out of the central city.

The area Voted With Economic Conditions. The number of addresses recorded in the Bemis Park neighborhood between 1913 and 1940 totaled 213. This total varied from year to year. Although the innovations of some residents were listed in the 1913 list that had been torn down. In some cases, however, an address not listed in one directory might reappear in later directories. Thus, one family who moved out of the 1913 group was charted for 1940. The designation "no listings" from 1913 were not included in the 1913 list, so the base of homes for 1913 equaled 187. A small sample of who remained. Two physicians and teachers at the University of Nebraska, however, remained by 1920, so the ratio of 98 to 187 gave the persistence rate of 52.4% for 1920 (see Table A). Persistence Varied With Economic Conditions.

Long-term residents such as the Noble, Hastings, Zabriskie families who remained throughout the survey period in one block, other families scattered about the neighborhood also chose to stay. This study made no comparison between the city characteristics and mobility patterns but was small sample of persisting individuals provided some indication of who remained. Two physicians and teachers at the University of Nebraska, however, remained throughout the survey period. Their residence was probably on standing.

Each family of the Bemis Park Company formed in 1889. Although Edgar Zabriskie, founder of the Zabriskie estate board, on the board of directors of a real estate company was a former Zabriskie residence standing in one directory.

The high 1915 rate of 75% was made men. Frank Schmerhorn, a Union Pacific real estate officer of the company was an officer of the company was a former Zabriskie residence. Hawthorne Street, Gordon W. Noble, a general agent for New England Mutual Life Insurance Company, moved into his house in 1888. Durning the survey period in one directory, the Zabriskie residence standing in one directory.

LONG-TERM RESIDENCE, 1913-1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>128 (128)</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>74.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>88 (60)</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>88 (60)</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>19 (64)</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>15 (64)</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>14 (33)</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$The base number is the total of households in the previous check period, Thus, 171 was the total in 1913, 187 in 1915, etc.

Persistence rates varied in economic conditions. The 1913 rate of 75% was due to the fact that only 2 years had elapsed since the previous check point. However, a substantial drop in persistence occurred between 1913 and 1920, the years immediately preceding World War I. One student of mobility and its social significance, T. Earl Sullinger, remarked that great movement always preceded times of prosperity and ease, and that periods of depression and instability, while in periods of depression urban populations tend toward more inertia and permanence of residence.4

2$^a$The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association boundaries include residences west of Mercer Park to 44th Street which were outside the study area. Development of the area was limited to the boundaries for the section on the current neighborhood.


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determining the size of each business. But such errors would not account for an overall decline of 11.6 percentage points, which shows that the largest businessmen and company officers did move out, perhaps to newer, more modern homes on the outskirts of the City. Salesmen exhibited a similar decrease, falling from 23.7% to 12.5%. The percentages of small proprietors and clerical workers rose and then fell, but remained substantially the same over the 27 year period. The neighborhood never counted a large percentage of laborers among its inhabitants, although their numbers increased slightly.

**Householders Who Left Bemis Park, 1915-1940.** Table 3 shows the destination of Bemis Park householders who left the area between 1915 and 1940. Except for 1925 and 1931, the highest percentage of movement consisted of those who left Bemis Park but stayed within a few blocks of the neighborhood, designated as *vicinity* in Table 3. This indicated that the area was acceptable and perhaps not thought of as a way station on the trip out from the central city, but as a suitable location for making a home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vicinity</th>
<th>NE</th>
<th>NW</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>SW</th>
<th>Downtown</th>
<th>Suburban NW</th>
<th>SW</th>
<th>Not Listed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(45)</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(81)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(102)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(75)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(77)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(85)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Subarea Boundaries: Vicinity - bounded by California, Franklin, 30th and 42nd Streets; Northeast - east of 24th, north of Dodge; Northwest - 24th to 48th, north of Dodge; Southeast - east of 24th, south of Dodge; Southwest - 24th to 48th, south of Dodge; Downtown - Central Business District; Northwest Suburban - west of 48th (1913 City Limit), north of Dodge; Southwest Suburban - west of 48th, south of Dodge. Not Listed includes former residents who left the Omaha area and those who could not be traced for other reasons.

Of householders who moved beyond the immediate vicinity, the northwest suburbs in the Dundee and Benson area gained a higher percentage of former Bemis Park residents than older districts east of 24th Street, receiving a high of 14.7% of those who left in 1931. In comparison, the movement to downtown apartments fell from 17.8% in 1915 to 0 in 1935 and 1940, clearly showing the City's movement westward to new housing areas.

The largest percentage in each study year was found among former householders who left the City, were missed by the directory, or had a name too common to trace. The depression year of 1931 marked the high point of "no listings," when over half of the 1925 householders who left could not be traced. The depression caused many people to move in search of work, yet this neighborhood contained few laborers in that situation. The percentage could be high because of the 6 year interval between check periods, yet this would not account for the entire jump from 37.3% to 52.0%.

**Bemis Park in the 1930's and 1940's.** The information about Bemis Park householders and their occupations obtained from the survey of city directories relates clearly to other contemporary accounts of the district. The sociology department at the University of Omaha under the direction of T. Earl Sullenger in the early 1930's completed a number of mobility studies on the City. One survey investigated mobility over the entire City in 1927 through 1929. The average intra-urban mobility for the entire City over the 3 year period totaled 20%; in other words, one-fifth of the households moved in the 3 years. The percentage of mobility divided by wards showed an average of 8% change for Ward 10, which encompassed the Bemis Park neighborhood. Mobility in Ward 10 was lower than that found in 7 of the 12 wards.15 (This data must be viewed cautiously, because in 1927-29, Ward 10 covered an area that ran west of Bemis Park through Dundee and Fairacres. Bemis Park, on the eastern edge of the tract, was perhaps closer in makeup to the areas on its border than to the Dundee-Fairacres district.)

Sullenger's 1938 study, based on the 1930 census, examined an area only slightly larger than the Bemis Park neighborhood. Sullenger referred to the Bemis Park neighborhood as "one of Omaha's better districts," with Bemis Park and the Walnut Hill Reservoir adding to the vicinity's beauty. The area was not an ethnic neighborhood: Scandinavians, mostly Swedish, counted ten families, while there were five each of Russian and Dutch. Two black women provided the only racial difference in the section. In terms of neighborhood problems, the vicinity recorded more cases of suicide than adult crime. A comparison with other districts showed the Bemis suicide rate to be only slightly higher than neighborhoods in the surrounding area.16 The study also suggested the changing racial character of the area, as a few blacks were beginning to move into the section directly north of the Bemis Park neighborhood.

Magdalene Pickens completed a similar study for 1942-45. Pickens' identification of "better" and transitional areas in the City was the most valuable part of her study. The Bemis Park location was identified as neither a "better" nor a transitional zone, but again, the study areas were census tracts and any comments about the Bemis Park tract dealt with a region much larger than the neighborhood.

Her findings suggest, however, that Bemis Park was becoming less stable by the mid-1940's. The number of moves in the entire City per tract between 1942 and 1945 period averaged 345; the number of moves into the 2 tracts containing Bemis Park totaled 411 and 406. The 2 sections ranked 18th and 19th in terms of moves into 60 tracts. Neither half appeared to be growing very much; between 1942 and 1945, only 3 new houses went up in the eastern division of Bemis Park, while 11 were erected in the western part. Pickens classified the tract encompassing the eastern half of the park as an interstitial zone, one which composes the fringe along the outer edge of the zone in transition.17 This classification implied that the Bemis Park area would soon become a transition zone and face the problems of disorganization believed inherent in such a change.

**Bemis Park Today**

By the 1950's and 1960's the neighborhood changed as many of the old residents died and their homes were sold. During this period the neighborhood became racially integrated. The increased mobility contributed to a decline in the sense of neighborhood cohesiveness. Many larger dwellings were subdivided into apartments, which brought increased numbers of cars, more trash, and less concern with upkeep. Some dwellings deteriorated to the point that they were torn down, leaving vacant lots in the area. A neighborhood organization was formed in the 1960's, but dissolved as residents lost interest.18

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18 Interview with Arthur Schmad, long-time resident of the Bemis Park neighborhood, on July 12, 1978.
The 1970 Census revealed that the total population of the neighborhood had increased by 1.7% since 1960, and the number of housing units by 1.3%. There had been deterioration, but the residents were aware that houses in other North Omaha districts. Bemis Park is not immune to the problems of vacant lots, crime and apathy that face every inner city neighborhood. But the positive response of residents to these problems deserves evaluation.

Bemis Park has become a popular location for many young professional and technical workers. Residents in central city neighborhoods because of their character, or proximity to work. The Bemis Park neighborhood contains 231 units, 183 owner-occupied 40% of all homes in 1970, a percentage which has maintained through 1977. In one large block of the neighborhood, 50 to 36th, Lufkin and 36th, which 181 76.9% of all homes are owner occupied.

The 1970 Census indicates that the Bemis Park neighborhood was separated in this survey. The 1970 Census shows an increase in the number of families, and the number of family householders.

The greatest number of householders (25%) were categorized in professional, technical, managerial and clerical, 58% sales; 31% skilled and unskilled workers; and "other." The survey also indicates that the total population of the neighborhood, 36th to 38th, 1970.

The update survey also revealed that new residents occupied 98 dwelling units in Bemis Park in the 1970 directory. Of those new residents, 78% were moved into homes in the south side of the neighborhood. 

The Neighborhood Improvement Corporation has currently purchased a third property which it plans to rehabilitate. The Corporation also helps interested individuals in new construction on some of the vacant lots.

The Neighborhood Association also sought help from the City of Omaha, and the nonprofit Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) for the neighborhood, with $9,855 from City funds and $4,876 assessed from residents used for sidewalks and other public improvements. The remainder of the funds are to be utilized for rehabilitation of neighborhood. Residents who qualify are eligible to receive rehabilitation grants. Other residents may apply for HUD Section 312 loans for neighborhood revitalization.

Summary and Conclusion

The Bemis Park neighborhood was developed in the early 1980s by George Bemis as a 60 acre tract surrounded by three parks, 171 houses identified in Bemis Park in 1973, one-fifth were still in the area in 1940. Many residents moved in and out of Bemis Park during the 1920s but hard times in the neighborhood, which 40% of the families were owner occupied 25% were clerical workers, 20% sales personnel, 10% professionals and the remainder laborers. There were 700 households, 14% of which have increased to more than 20% respectively and the other occupation categories decreased correspondingly. Residents who left Bemis Park and continued to live in the area showed a loss of 15% of the residents of the neighborhood, which the mayor moved westward toward Benson and Dundee.

During the 1960s there was little change in the total population of the area, but some of the original residences were demolished or subdivided, and the increasingly transient population and growing number of vacant lots brought deterioration in the appearance of the neighborhood. Between 1960 and 1970, both population and number of housing units remained stable.

In 1978, Bemis Park has 205 households. Nearly 80% of the dwellings are single-family, but the 27 multi-family dwellings contain 104 households. As in early years, approximately one-fourth of households have professional-technical managerial occupations and another 10% are clerical workers.

The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association began working in 1975 to encourage cooperation among residents to improve conditions of the neighborhood. The problems of vacant lots, crime and child care services, the Neighborhood Association has been allocated Community Development funds to improve public facilities and to attract private funds to rehabilitate housing in the area.

The Bemis Park neighborhood is a prime candidate for revitalization. Current residents who desire to restore the area to its former condition provide the catalyst for rehabilitation. One example of this desire is the current interest in naming a portion of the area a landmarks neighborhood. If the Omaha Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission and the City Council both approve this designation, homeowners would qualify for additional funding in rehabilitating the historic structures. One home on Hawthorne Street, the former Zabriskie home, has already been nominated by the Park Improvement Rehabilitation Corporation has attracted private funds to rehabilitate housing in the area.

The problems of vacant lots, crime and deteriorating housing remain in many inner city neighborhoods, yet they will only increase unless residents attempt to deal with them in their neighborhood. As more residents of Bemis Park have attacked these concerns and achieved some success with housing revitalization. Residents of a neighborhood such as Bemis Park can halt the process of deterioration and bring the area to an attractive and viable housing location once again. Certainly neighborhood organizations are useful models for inner city areas to utilize as a catalyst for revitalization.

Although they cannot solve all problems, neighborhood organizations are one valuable method by which some cities have made progress, negotiating boundary agreements and decreasing land values which face inner city neighborhoods today.