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

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BEMIS PARK: A STUDY OF NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE

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The first difficulty lies in the definition of the term neighborhood. Sociologist Suzanne Keller listed four principal elements in the definition: an area (1) of people who tend to know each other; (2) of group boundaries, either real or imagined; (3) of geographical boundaries, ethnic or cultural characteristics of the inhabitants; and (4) of the psychological unity or strong feeling of identity with the group. 

The definition of the Bemis Park area as a neighborhood was based on the geographical boundaries of the original property area, the psychological unity of the currently active neighborhood group, and the focus provided by the area's parks. 

Bemis Park Neighborhood Association boundaries include residences west of Mercer Park to 42nd Street which were outside the original property area in the 1889 development of the city, bounded in the boundaries for the latter section on the current neighborhood. 

The history of a neighborhood is often difficult to trace. Any history of a city is more likely to concentrate on political events or famous figures than on changes in a neighborhood. The history of the Bemis Park neighborhood must be examined through the census data. 

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A small study of persistence rates in four quadrants of the neighborhood in 1913-1940 provides some indication of who remained. Two physicians and teachers at the University of Nebraska Medical College, Dr. E. A. Zabriskie resided at 3524 Hawthorne and Dr. Palmer Findley at 3506 Hawthorne. Community leaders of the Chamber of Commerce and Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben also lived in the neighborhood. Because of time limitations, only the 1913 group was charted for long-term persistence. 

A test was made to trace the destination of residents that left in 1913. In 1915, they had moved to another city or been traced. Data on names and occupations were added. New residents' names and occupations were added. Results of the test varied with economic conditions. The persistence rate of the 1913 group was then revised. Persistence rates varied in the neighborhood. 

The results of this study provide one of the best ways to study neighborhood residents. 

Since city directories provided the primary source material in this study, the results do not reflect the accuracy of the results. In a study of persistence and mobility in the twentieth century city, Mobile Americans, Howard Chudnow found the directories had errors of omission, reporting only 75 percent. 

Omaha R. L. Polk directories began in 1913 to list residences by 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 was then consulted to determine which residents remained at the same addresses. New residents' names and occupations were added. In addition, the designation of residents who had 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 calculated for householders under a variety of categories. A householder remaining in the same house in the last check period was listed under persistence and entered under the date when he was first recorded at that address. Both short-term persistence by 5 years and long-term persistence from 1913 to 1940 were measured. This study did not only count how many remained since the last check period, but how long people actually lived 

Persistence rates varied in relation to economic conditions. The persistence rate of 1913 residents was revised due to the fact that only 2 years had elapsed since the previous check period. However, a substantial drop in persistence occurred between 1915 and 1920, the years of World War I. One student of mobility and its social significance, T. Earl Sullinger, remarked that greater movement always preceded war time and was a test of the area's economic stability, and in periods of depression urban populations tend toward more inertia and permanence of residence. This study concentrated on men who remained in the neighborhood. Because of time limitations, the 1913 group was charted for long-term persistence. 

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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>
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<th>NW</th>
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<th>SW</th>
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<td>5.9</td>
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<td>1.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
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<td>5.2</td>
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<td>5.9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

/Indicates total number of moves for each year.

Table 3 shows the percentage of householders who moved from Bemis Park in the 1915-1940 period. 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.

For the Bemis Park neighborhood, on July 12, 1978, in the mid-1940's. Sullenger classified the tract encompassing the eastern half of the park as an intermediate zone, one which composes the fringe along the outer edge of the zone in transition. 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 1960's and 1970'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
demolished one house and cleaned, repaired and painted the second home. Lots cleared through Corporation actions have also been sold to adjoining property owners. The first neighborhood association was organized in 1974, and a second in 1976. Since that time, the Improvement Corporation has currently purchased a third property which it plans to rehabilitate. The Corporation also helped interest individuals in new construction on some of the vacant lots.

The Neighborhood Association also sought help from the City to promote crime prevention programs. In 1978, the City allocated Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to the Association, with $9,855 from City funds and $4,876 assessed from residents used for sidewalks and other public improvements. The remainder of the funding is expected to be utilized for crime prevention activities. Neighborhood residents who qualify are eligible to receive rehabilitation grants. Other residents may apply for HUD Section 310 funds for neighborhood revitalization.

Summary and Conclusion

The Bemis Park neighborhood was developed in the early 1910s by George Bemis as a 60 acre tract surrounded by three parks. The recent household identification was conducted in Bemis Park in 1973, one-fifth of which were single-family. Seventy-four percent of households, 14% of the remaining 23% of residents were students, retired and commuters. Of the 231 dwellings, 153 were occupied by owners, 24 by renters and 54 were residents moving into homes. The number of people moving in and vacating the neighborhood has not been determined. The trend in single-family occupancy, however, indicates that the neighborhood has been used by people who move into the community in search of a garden or environment.

The first Bemis Park Neighborhood Association was organized in 1975, the Bemis Park Neighborhood Association has expanded with new committees and activities. Projects have included the creation of the City's first public park in the area, the construction of a housing development, and the expansion of educational programs for children. The Association has organized neighborhood organizations and has provided a variety of programs to improve the neighborhood. The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association is currently concentrating on the three parks in the neighborhood, Bemis and Mercer Parks, which have been neglected by the City. The Association is working to improve the parks and surrounding area by increasing the number of vacant homes in the neighborhood. No-interest loans are available to residents who qualify to rehabilitate their homes. Additional funding from the Greater Omaha Area Housing Rehabilitation Corporation has attracted private funds to rehabilitate housing in the area.

The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association has been 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 in 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 for the Park Improvement. The Bemis Park Neighborhood Association 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 a constructive manner. The Neighborhood Association has attacked these concerns and achieved some success with housing rehabilitation. Residents of a neighborhood such as Bemis Park can help the process of urban renewal by guiding the area to an attractive and viable location once again. Certainly neighborhood organizations are useful models for inner-city areas to utilize as they move toward more effective programs and policies. Although they cannot solve all problems, neighborhood organizations are one valuable method by which some cities have moved against degrading housing stock and decreasing land values which face inner-city neighborhoods today.