

“Where the Twin Cities Meet”

The intersection of University and Prior Avenues has long been dubbed by the businesses operating there as the place “Where the Twin Cities Meet”. Because of its central location it proved to be the ideal site for the Minnesota Transfer rail yard which brought together nine railroads and spawned the development of a nationally significant industrial center. And because this intersection was reputed to be the exact center of the Twin Cities, it has long been fantasized as the perfect place for a new unified city, merging Minneapolis and St. Paul, and ending their interminable rivalry.

An historical look at this intersection reveals how technological, economic, social and political forces have shaped – and continue to shape - its development. A century ago, the introduction of the automobile resulted in the closing of Barrett and Zimmerman, one of the largest horse brokerages in the country. Changes in retailing have seen some businesses adapt and thrive, and others not. Brook’s Brothers Lumber, and Knox Lumber have disappeared, but the arrival of Menard’s has assured an uninterrupted offering of lumber and hardware. The original Twin City Hardware Company, dating back to 1883, is now in businesses on a national scale – but not on this corner. However, before departing, it spun off another business, the Twin City Saw and Service, which is still operating at this intersection. The ubiquitous White Castle hamburger chain opened one of its first restaurants here but has since moved elsewhere on the corridor.

Union Park was originally planned as an amusement park but in response to the changing market was very quickly converted to a successful suburban development. Some activities adapted in place. A YMCA facility was installed in an existing building at Prior and University owned by the Minnesota Transfer, and has moved twice since then, all within walking distance of the corner. And sometimes buildings constructed for one purpose can be adapted for another. A factory built for the American Radiator Company in the 1920s was converted during World War II to build military gliders. After the war, a number of former military cryptologists organized several technology companies that evolved into Remington Rand, Sperry Rand, Univac, and helped spawn Control Data. In addition, a landmark building that originally housed Krank’s Manufacturers, a cosmetics and toiletry company, was later the headquarters of Northwest Airlines. A new building type emerged in the 1950’s with the construction of the Mutual Service Insurance Company. Larger in scale, with concrete fireproof construction, this modern office building required its own off-street parking lots, resulting in the demolition of several adjacent older buildings.

It is noteworthy that so many of the businesses at this intersection have been in the same family for multiple generations. Even today, four companies can trace their origins back two and three generations, and one goes back four generations. Given modern social and economic trends it is unlikely that this tradition will continue long into the future.

Changes and adaptations occurred not only in the private sector but also in the public realm. In the 1890s a long viaduct was constructed to take University Avenue traffic over

the rail tracks of Minnesota Transfer. This was later replaced by two bridges that took the rail traffic over University Avenue, allowing for better north-south land use connections.

The planned Central Corridor Light Rail Project and other evolving market forces will continue to bring change to this corner. An understanding of how these forces shaped this intersection over the past century will help us better plan for the changes ahead.

This exhibit, undertaken by the University Avenue History Group, in collaboration with the Ramsey County Historical Society, is the first in a series highlighting the history of key intersections along University Avenue. The public is invited to join us in putting together these exhibits; historical pictures, memorabilia and memories would be much appreciated. For additional information visit www.universityavenuehistory.com or call (651) 647-6711.