Rich local heritage lives on in forgotten areas

Exploring the spirit of ethnic and religious traditions on the Southside

By John-Joseph Johansson January, 22, 2004 *The Southside Times* p. A1, A9

Traveling south of Washington Street has always been regarded by Indianapolis residents as a journey through a kind of cultural wasteland, according to Michael Cartwright, Dean for Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs, at University of Indianapolis.

"Now, it's not a wasteland, of course," he adds. "But there is a climate of invisibility in this area that makes it difficult to register the existence, the richness and the texture of the ethnic communities on the Southside."

Cartwright said that the widely held belief that the two sides of Indianapolis are fundamentally different has functioned to erase the ethnic and religious communities on the Southside.

"One of the issues about Indianapolis is: is do you categorize it as the southernmost northern city or the northernmost southern city? Many folks in Indianapolis don't really like to think of their city as culturally southern. Now, if you have an interest in denying the southern nature of Indianapolis, paradoxically, you want stories about the Southside to have really crude stereotypes of hillbillies--poor white trash who don't know how to keep their automobiles off the lawn and don't know to keep their couch inside--and you want the culturally significant stuff to be on the Northside. Never mind the fact that the burial ground for the Jewish community on the Southside. Never mind the fact that they're still doing polka dancing at the German-American club."

Losing a collective memory

Cartwright said that many local families are also losing the richness and texture of their own heritage. Looking out of his office on the second floor of the University's Schwitzer Hall, be noted that many of the street names in the surrounding University Heights neighborhood were originally intended to commemorate the area's early spiritual leaders. "Most people around here are living in a neighborhood for which the spiritual significance is unknown to them," he said. "There is more around them than they are inclined to see. There are about 280 homes in University Heights, but the living set of memories registered about the early founders of this neighborhood has shrunk to about five or six. So, 100 years later, what do you do if you know these stories, or know where to find them? Do you let the significance of Otterbein Street drift away and be consumed by the larger city?"

He explained that a solution to the continuing shrinking of local memories might be found in communities in which there are resources that connect strangers. Cartwright concludes, "There need to be ways that make it possible for people to say to each other, 'Look, the significance of Otterbein Street is not the only memory or story here, but it's a strata that needs to be remembered. '"

Southside shunned from beginning

Most of the immigrants that came to the Southside in the late 19th century worked in factories around the area where the RCA Dome and Eli Lilly offices now stand, Cartwright said. As immigrant families progressed up the socio-economic ladder, they also migrated northwards where suburbs became recognized and acknowledged as middle and upper class burbs.

Cartwright said that from the beginning, the Southside was not recognized as having a residential community with a unique culture. Continued on A9

"The socio-economic shifts seemed to have run out over and over again," Cartwright said. "That seems to be a commonality between people--if they made enough money to move, they didn't stay. If you're living in a city environment that says, 'This is not a vital area,' and you're being encouraged that this other place is where the right people live, you're going to want to live elsewhere."

Marion County historian David Vanderstel noted that the first generation of immigrants often looked to churches that would serve their particular cultural needs in religion. For instance, families from different European nations formed a number of ethnically distinct parishes throughout the city.

"But if one church was more folksy or rural in nature and didn't reflect your middle-class culture, you would then move up and out and go to another church," Vanderstel said.

In many cases, Vanderstel explained, the older churches simply died out, "As people move up and out, they might continue to have that affiliation with that congregation and then suddenly sever their relationship because its too far of a drive, its too far of a commute, you don't have that sense of community any longer, except just on Sunday morning.

He continued, noting that when that a congregation leaves a church loses power, loses its populations, loses its influence and ends up only appealing to a handful of people.

"The pastor might move on, it might end up selling its building, and suddenly a Methodist Church is a Pentecostal church," Vanderstel said,

"So you begin to see as the population move out, these church buildings actually becoming different denominations reflecting the influx of the new population." he concluded.

A street of division

Cartwright believes that one irony in the history of Indianapolis is US 40, the highway designed to link the country from east to west.

He explains, "It was built to unify--in Indianapolis history, however, it has served to divide the community."

He added that many of the stories of the Southside have to do with the way in which Indiana itself has been described. "The early ethnographies of Indiana called attention to a difference between people north of US 40 and those south of it--it was used as a dividing line for the whole state. You put the grid of the city on top of that grid and there is a double identification of difference between the Northside and Southside."

The loss of ethnic richness

The U of I professor noted that stories about the Southside--the kind of impressions that constitute a set of living memories—often confuse Greenwood, northern Johnson County and the near Southside, further diluting each area's specific ethnic heritage.

"In the process of collapsing the area, you lose the ethnic richness, you lose the sense that there were Russians and Poles and Slovenians and that they had their own rich cultures," Cartwright said. "There are definitely identifiable communities of ethnic and religious background" on the Southside that people around Indianapolis simply choose to overlook."

Poring over a poster of the Southside distributed by Hooks Drugstore, Cartwright points out the representation of distant gray sky-scrapers in Indianapolis, a vacant space under the title of Garfield Park, and the complete absence of the University of Indianapolis.

Pointing to the organizations that are represented, Cartwright said, "All these institutions on the Southside are trying to stick their head up in the midst of anonymity."

"Sacred Heart Parish on the near Southside says it's the best-kept secret on the Southside," he insists, pumping a fist in the air to emphasize each word. "But wait a minute. The University of Indianapolis has had a continual struggle to get its identity registered, so often you'll hear the president of the university speaking to a civic group and saying 'we're the best kept secret on the Southside. '"

In a circumstance in which the peoples of the Southside are known and identified as having a strong and visible existence, according to Cartwright, there wouldn't be best-kept secrets.

"You would have neighborhoods," he said. "You have identifiable communities."

A dumping ground (The Southside history of racism)

When asked about the Southside's history of racism, he explained that while definite examples of racism exist, some of that particular story has been the result of the way in which African Americans and poor Euro-Americans have been pitted against each other.

"I think it serves the purpose of some populations in the Indianapolis area to talk about the Southside as if it has always and everywhere been racist," Cartwright said.

"And that's simply not true. In the circumstance in which you are pitting people against each other, whose interest is being served by acting as if the only people who live on the Southside are hicks?"

He explains his fascination with the way that myth has worked. "I would never say that there's no racism on the Southside, but I think it's a really sharp overstatement to say that the only racism in Indianapolis is on the Southside. Indianapolis is one of the most segregated cities in the country, and you can see that on the Northside."

According to Cartwright, the Southside has become a kind of dumping ground for displaced stories about Indianapolis that that residents throughout the city no longer want to associate with. “When those stories start popping up, we have to ask the question, whose interest is being served by it?" Cartwright asked. "And because there's no strong, organized center to the Southside community, its not like somebody's going to stand up and counter that."

Continuing community

One place of meeting that Cartwright noted is Adrian’s Orchard. The women at the St. Paul Hermitage have been in Beech Grove since 1958. Each year, the sisters go to Adrian's Orchard to collect apples that the Adrian's family donates.

"Sister Norma comes back to the monastery, gets the sisters, all of them put the apples away, can them, freeze them, and Sister Norma makes wonderful apple pies."

He smiles at the memory of those apple pies and concludes, "It's an intricate example of relationships between that particular Catholic family and that particular Catholic institution. You can go to Adrian's orchard and see this wonderful specimen of life in Indianapolis in the '40s and '50s. Does that example provide any insights to the Southside's ethnic and religious history? "Well, it's hard to be sure," Cartwright cautions, "but here's a religious community that orders its life around getting apples and here is catholic family that is motivated to donate the apples. It is the case that some of the farmers on the Southside were related to German-Protestant and German-Catholic churches. And Adrian's Orchard has a surviving relationship with their local church. It's an example of a bit of the rural community that is still left and in the midst of the changes at that monastery, changes in Beech Grove, changes on the Southside, suburbanization, that transaction still takes place at the same time every year."

Cartwright concluded that to imagine the Southside as isolated, backward and culturally empty is simply false: it never has been any of those. This part of the city, he maintains, has been home for people and cultures and religions from all over the world.

"The best way for folks to preserve those living memories," he emphasized, "is to find something around them to care about, and then share it with others."

In the second part of this series, to be published next week, join the Southside Times as we further explore some of the ethnic and religious history of the genuine Southside and discover what some local pundits believe the Southside might look like.

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