



The Lakewood Historical Society

established 1952

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Birdtown: A Historic District!

The Lakewood Historical Society is pleased to announce that Birdtown has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This wonderful honor is well deserved for Lakewood's only "company town."

National Carbon Company

The National Carbon Company acquired property in the southeast corner of Lake wood in 1891 for its factory complex. National Carbon specialized in carbon-based research and manufacturing. Well-known for its batteries, National Carbon was also very involved in the creation of carbon-filtered gas masks for the soldiers of World War II. National Carbon eventually became Union Carbide, then UCAR and now Graffech.

In 1892, National Carbon purchased 155 acres of land, bounded by Highland (117th), Madison, Halstead and the railroad tracks and the factory buildings were up and running just one year later. At its peak production, over 2,600 people worked at the factory complex.

National Carbon hired many recent immigrants to work in its factory, especially people from Eastern Europe. Often, workers were encouraged to bring family members or friends to the job site. Most were hired on the spot to fill the many openings at the booming business. These men (and some women) lived in Cleveland, traveling long distances on foot or by wagon, often on muddy or icy dirt roads. When the factory first opened, there was no streetcar service nearby. Some woke at 5 a.m. in order to get to the factory on time for the 7 a.m. shift.

Neighborhood Development

In response to the limited transportation options for its workers, National Carbon created the Pleasant Hill Land Company to develop a new neighborhood near the factory. In 1894, Pleasant Hill Land Company platted eight narrow streets and 424 small lots on farm land just west of the factory. These lots were made available to National Carbon workers for small down payments.

The cheapest lots on Plover, nearest to the railroad tracks, were built on first. New landowners overcame limited resources, long work hours, low wages, uneven terrain and bad weather to build homes. Some hired builders, but most constructed their homes themselves with the help of family and friends.

Many people built single-family homes. But still more built doubles or multi-family units. Taking in boarders or renters supplemented daily wages and strengthened the Old World community feel of the neighborhood. Young families and recent immigrants were attracted to the low rents offered by these units. Most Birdtown homes featured small yards, open porches and no driveways.

The eight streets are Thrush, Quail, Robin, Lark, Plover, Magee, Halstead and Madison. Originally called the Carbon District, the neighborhood was also called Ducktown, Bird's Nest and Birdtown because of the street names. Some also referred to the neighborhood as The Village, harkening back to the Old World communities where many recent immigrants came from.

Although the Madison streetcar line was extended from downtown to W. 117th in 1893, many people chose homes in Birdtown because of the familiar heritage and close-knit community. The area grew modestly at first, but between 1900 and 1910 the population soared from 429 to 2,186 residents, reaching its peak density in 1910. During this time, 70% of the population was Slovak.

Community

Most of Birdtown's earliest residents hailed from Eastern European countries, including Slovakia, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Poland and Carpatho-Rusyn. People sponsored their friends and families, providing affidavits pledging a place to live and probable employment for the new immigrants. This heritage influenced churches, architecture, businesses and every day life.

Each of these ethnic groups wanted their own church to

remind them of home. Sts. Peter and Paul Evangelical Lutheran (1901), Sts. Cyril and Methodius Roman Catholic (1903) and Calvin Presbyterian served the Slovak community. St. Hedwig Roman Catholic (1905) offered services in Polish. St. Nicholas Ukrainian Orthodox (1916), St. Gregory the Theologian Byzantine Catholic Church (1905), Sts. Peter and Paul Orthodox Church (1917) and Pentecost Evangelical Lutheran reflected the other ethnic groups found in Birdtown.

Many of these churches began in private homes. When the congregations grew large enough and managed to save enough money, they created some of the most distinctive and beautiful churches in Lakewood.

Lakewood's oldest church structure in use continuously as a house of worship started as Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran in 1901, became Calvin Presbyterian, then Congregation of Yahweh and most recently as the NorthCoast Baptist Church.

Schools

Several schools supported the children of Birdtown. Most of the churches offered parochial schools. Harrison School, built as South School in 1896, is one of the oldest schools in Lakewood. At its peak density, the school educated 390 students. The old school building was torn down in 2006 and the new building is set to open soon. Adults could attend English and Americanization classes at Harrison in the evenings. Created to help working mothers, Lakewood Day Nursery was formed with help from National Carbon, the Lakewood PTA and funds from four Cleveland Orchestra concerts in Lakewood. It opened in 1921, charging 10 cents for first child and 5 cents for each sibling.

Businesses

Birdtown's original commercial district was on Plover Avenue, although most of these shops eventually moved to Madison Avenue. Interestingly, Birdtown's commercial enterprises were mixed in with the residential areas. Often these businesses were attached to the front of houses (where the porch might be) or located in small outbuildings in the back. Within the neighborhood, one could find bakeries, grocery stores, meat markets, funeral homes, banks, bowling alleys, dance halls, bars, restaurants, a movie theater, a gym and more. In addition, traveling vendors offered fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy products, ice or collected paper, rags and metal scraps.

Schermer Brothers was Lakewood's first department store. It opened on the corner of Madison and Magee in 1906 and continued to operate until it was burned down in a spectacular fire on August 16, 1962. Orol Federal Savings and Loan (Orol means eagle in Slovak) was Lakewood's first locally owned bank. Central to community life, the bank started on Plover and then moved to Madison. The bank building was rehabbed by Timothy Laskey and now houses his accounting firm.

Families commonly ran the store out front and lived behind. Andrew Havasi ran his cobbler business out of a commercial building on Madison. His extended family lived in a house that was attached to the rear of this building. Havasi, his wife and three children, their spouses, and many grandchildren lived together in this home.

Those residents who weren't running small family businesses in the neighborhood worked for one of the many factories in the industrial area that ran along the train tracks, including National Carbon, Templar Motors, Winton Motors and Empire Brass.

National Register Listing

While National Carbon has changed throughout the years and many of the original immigrants have moved away, Birdtown remains a vibrant community with a wonderful heritage. Five years ago, the City of Lakewood (spurred by the efforts of Marge Stopiak, Helen Pohorence and Rose Slavik) began the process of nominating Birdtown for the National Register of Historic Places with assistance from the Cleveland Restoration Society. Just last month, they were notified that Birdtown was accepted onto the National Register.

The National Register of Historic Places is the nation's official list of cultural resources worthy of preservation. Authorized under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Register is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts, to identify, evaluate, and protect our historic and archeological resources. Properties listed in the Register include districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that are significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture. The National Register is administered by the National Park Service, which is part of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

As a part of the National Register a property is given:

recognition and appreciation as a historic property, consideration in planning Federal and Federally assisted projects, eligibility of property owners for Federal tax benefits, and may qualify for Federal grant assistance.

The City of Lakewood administration states, "the Birdtown neighborhood has had a significant impact on the history and development of the City of Lakewood. The designation of Birdtown to the National Register of Historic Places will spark the continued revitalization currently taking place as well as garner recognition that the neighborhood is a unique and venerable place to live and work." And we agree!

Check out the Birdtown and Templar documentaries created by the Discovery Class at Grant Elementary with help from the Lakewood Historical Society at their website:

<http://www.lkwdpl.org/schools/elempath/discovery/>

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