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## Jim Crow in Central Minnesota: Restrictive Covenants in Stearns County

by Christopher P. Lehman

In 1930 the US Census listed the population of Stearns County at 62,131 and noted that twenty-three African Americans lived there—0.04% of the population. Four decades later the general population stood at 95,400, and the African American percentage had risen to 0.4. The growth in African American numbers from two to three digits during those years show that the ethnic group’s presence increased at a much faster rate than the boom of the county’s overall demographics. On the other hand, Stearns County had even more potential to diversify its population during those years, but ethnic restrictive covenants between 1920 and 1968 prohibited anyone but people of exclusively European heritage from living in at least four of the county’s subdivisions. Stearns County, city governments, real estate developers from inside and outside the county, and homeowners practiced systemic ethnic discrimination through housing segregation for nearly fifty years. People of European heritage—those accepted as “white”—collected social, political and economic advantages for themselves, and they locked ethnic minorities out of social networks, neighborhood perks, and property ownership.<sup>i</sup>

Stearns County was not unique in denying housing to ethnic minorities. Communities across the country used restrictive covenants to develop and preserve “whites only” neighborhoods. Many of them came from the North and the Midwest, where African Americans had started to migrate during World War I. They were refugees fleeing the violent segregation of the South, and they took jobs that European Americans had vacated to go to war overseas. They

still encountered segregation in their new locations, however, and housing discrimination was but one example.<sup>ii</sup>

The Minneapolis-based firm Dickinson and Gillespie expanded beyond the Twin Cities to develop the plat for Villa Park in St. Cloud in 1920. The new subdivision included houses numbered in the 800s on 17<sup>th</sup> through 20<sup>th</sup> Avenues North, houses in the 1000s on 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue North, and even-numbered houses in the 800s and 900s on 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue North. In each deed Dickinson and Gillespie dictated that “no person or persons other than the Caucasian race shall be permitted” in Villa Park for the next fifteen years after buying the land. However, the firm experienced financial troubles during the Great Depression in the 1930s, and the residents who remained did not renew the ethnic restrictions in deeds after the original expiration dates.<sup>iii</sup>

Another outsider—auctioneer Leonard Americus Fellows of Rochester, Minnesota—developed the subdivision Memorial Acres. He successfully presented it before St. Cloud’s city commission in its meeting of May 6, 1947, and two days later Stearns County’s Board of Commissioners approved the plat. Fellows immediately advertised the subdivision in the St. Cloud *Times*, announcing that he would auction thirty-nine of the forty “beautiful homesite tracts” on May 18. Memorial Acres was to appeal to “the homeseeker that wishes to avoid the confinement and congestion of the average city building lot,” and he promised “the privacy of an urban home, yet within the city, just three minutes from the main business section of town.” The advertisement did not mention its restrictive covenant but did refer to “reasonable building restrictions.” Therefore, he sought to bait people to the subdivision by providing residential distance from urban problems, and he only introduced the ethnic restrictions to serious buyers. Several people attended the auction and signed deeds with him during the following week.<sup>iv</sup>

Memorial Acres was part of a wave of post-World War II real estate development throughout the nation. In the first quarter-century after the war ended in 1945, the city of St. Cloud alone received over 150 designs of residential plats. Fellows designed Memorial Acres at the intersection of Washington Memorial Drive and Roosevelt Road, and the houses lay on the southern side of the intersection. Over the next twenty years, the subdivision included odd-numbered houses between 1303 and 1409 on Roosevelt Road, even-numbered houses between 1302 and 1414 on Cooper Avenue South, the 1700s and 1809 on 14<sup>th</sup> Street South, and houses 1421 and 1425 on Washington Memorial. Also, in 1947 Harold Bauerly bought lots that he later separated from Memorial Acres as his own plat of Glendale Addition in 1965, and it consists of houses 1305 through 1319 on 18<sup>th</sup> Avenue South.<sup>v</sup>

For twenty years the residents of Memorial Acres adhered to Fellows's rule that "each and all lots in said MEMORIAL ACRES until June 1, 1967 ... shall not be sold, conveyed or leased to, or occupied by any person of the Negro, Chinese or Japanese races." The covenant and its deadline first appeared in his first deed—to buyers John M. and Thea Olson on May 19, 1947, and it last appeared when resident Marion Reinert sold a lot to Mathew Ampe on September 28, 1966. Moreover, the restrictive covenant outlived its author, for Fellows died in October 1964. The residents remained committed to keeping minorities out of the subdivision over the next three years, but they did not include the ethnic restrictions in deeds after 1967.<sup>vi</sup>

Two more restrictive communities emerged in Stearns County in late 1956, and both came from residents of the county. William and Hilda Jewison transformed their farmland by Lake Zumwalde in Wakefield, Minnesota into a plat for the Cedar View Addition, and the county approved it on August 17. Steve and Elizabeth Sauer of Collegeville developed a similar lakeshore subdivision by Island Lake in St. Joseph and named it Islewood Beach, which the

county approved two months later. Each buyer of both subdivisions had to promise, according to the deeds, not to allow occupation of the property “by anyone not a member of the Caucasian race” for the next thirty years after acquiring the land. Thus, when Loyal and Eloise Keller bought their lot in Cedar View on November 8, 1956, they agreed to keep it among Caucasians until November 8, 1986.<sup>vii</sup>

These subdivisions provided several perks for the European Americans living there. By buying and selling only to one another, they kept the wealth from homeownership strictly among themselves. They were also able to pass their property down to successive European American generations, as when George and Frances Benoit of Memorial Acres transferred ownership of their lot to their son in 1948. Residents of Villa Park were the beneficiaries of a new park—Centennial Park—because the city placed it at the northern border of the subdivision.<sup>viii</sup>

Also, these areas attracted people of diverse vocations and generated a social network of professionals in multiple fields. A mechanic named Merle Nordquist lost a runoff election for city councilman in 1960 but became vice-president of the city’s Zoning Board of Appeals the following year, and insurance agent A. Richard “Dick” Johnson received 17% of the vote—1,246 votes—when running for mayor in 1964. Calvary Baptist Church built a new facility that bordered many Memorial Acres homes in 1963, while the ethnic restrictions remained in effect, and one official church activity—the “Calvary Baptist Circle”—was hosted at Johnson’s home in 1964. Meanwhile, Islewood Beach residents included a medical doctor named William D. Davidson and the College of Saint Benedict’s director of physical education Elaine Henke.<sup>ix</sup>

The practice of the restrictive covenant became illegal nationwide shortly after the assassination of civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. He had demonstrated against housing segregation in the last two years of his life, and President Lyndon Johnson signed the Fair

Housing Act days after King's death in April 1968. The ethnic restrictions at Cedar View and Islewood Beach were still in operation at that point, and many of them were at least two decades away from expiration. One of Stearns County's last deeds with a restrictive covenant was filed in April 1981, when Earl McGill—one of the original residents of Cedar View—sold his property. Although the prohibition was no longer legally enforceable, the stipulation's inclusion in the deed reflected the technicality that the covenant's expiration was still six years from then.<sup>x</sup>

Stearns County has evolved significantly since the signing of the Fair Housing Act. The formerly restrictive subdivisions have added houses since 1968, and none of the new residences have been subjected to documented ethnic prohibitions. The signers of the deeds between 1920 and 1968 have passed away, and the subdivisions have ethnically diversified. Nevertheless, the houses at Villa Park, Memorial Acres, Cedar View, and Islewood Beach serve as a collective visible reminder of how residential Jim Crow marked Stearns County for almost half a century.

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<sup>i</sup> *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population*, vol. III, part 1 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1932), 1255; *1970 Census of Population*, part 25 Minnesota (United States Department of Commerce, 1973), 25.

<sup>ii</sup> Taylor Branch, *At Cannan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 235-237; Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 177-179; James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: Touchstone, 2005), 257-258.

<sup>iii</sup> Deed, Dickinson and Gillespie to Nickolas Di Paolo, 17 May 1920, *Deeds Book 163*, 334-335, Stearns County Recorder's Office; deed, Dickinson and Gillespie to Henry J. Schefer, 15 June 1920, *Deeds Book 163*, 354-355, Stearns County Recorder's Office.

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<sup>iv</sup> *St. Cloud Times*, 7 May 1947, 2; *St. Cloud Times*, 13 May 1947, 17; *St. Cloud Times*, 20 May 1947, 11; *St. Cloud Times*, 9 May 1947, 2; Deed, L. A. Fellows to John M. Olson, 19 May 1947, *Deeds Book 249*, 632; deed, L. A. Fellows to Robert P. Golembeck, 20 May 1947, *Deeds Book 249*, 639, Stearns County Recorder's Office; deed, L. A. Fellows to Merle Nordquist, 22 May 1947, *Deeds Book 253*, 406, Stearns County Recorder's Office; deed, L. A. Fellows to Harold Bauerly, 24 May 1947, *Deeds Book 253*, 412, Stearns County Recorder's Office.

<sup>v</sup> John J. Dominik, Jr., *Three Towns Into One City: St. Cloud, Minnesota* (St. Cloud: Stearns County Historical Society, 1988), 158; Deed, L. A. Fellows to Harold Bauerly, 412; *St. Cloud Times*, 15 September 1965, 6.

<sup>vi</sup> Deed, L. A. Fellows to John M. Olson, 632; deed, Marion Reinert to Mathew Ampe, 28 September 1966, *Deeds Book 348*, 489, Stearns County Recorder Office.

<sup>vii</sup> *St. Cloud Times*, 17 August 1965, 15; *St. Cloud Times*, 10 October 1956, 15; deed, John F. and Cecelia Gable and Steve and Elizabeth Sauer to Walter J. and Katherine Hastings, 8 November 1956, *Deeds Book 295*, 321, Stearns County Recorder's Office; deed, William H. and Hilda Jewison to Loyal and Eloise Keller, 3 July 1957, *Deeds Book 381*, 77, Stearns County Recorder's Office.

<sup>viii</sup> Deed, George and Frances Benoit to Louis Benoit, 17 June 1848, *Deeds Book 262*, 465, Stearns County Recorder's Office.

<sup>ix</sup> *St. Cloud Times*, 20 June 1960, 23; *St. Cloud Times*, 8 March 1961, 8; *St. Cloud Times*, 4 May 1963, 3; *St. Cloud Times*, 2 May 1964, 13; *St. Cloud Times*, 13 June 1964, 7; deed, John F. and Cecelia Gable to William D. Davidson, 27 November 1957, *Deeds Book 313*, 427; deed, John F. and Margaret Lundquist to Elaine Henke and Mary Dufner, 19 September 1966, *Deeds Book 348*, 281.

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<sup>x</sup> Branch, *At Cannan's Edge*, 506-511; deed, Earl McGill to Catherine and Harrison Wells, 7 April 1981, *Deeds Book 494*, 467, Stearns County Recorder's Office.