

Constructing

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Suburbanization fundamentally changed the American landscape in the years after 1945. There is a rich and abundant secondary literature on this transformation and its larger social, economic and political impacts. But what was life like for the women, men, and children who moved to, and formed, these new commu-

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nities? How do they remember daily life, their neighborhoods, their schools? What challenges faced people and businesses in the postwar years? Oral history evidence can help us explore suburban development and search for answers to these questions.¹

After World War II, the growing U.S. population began to move from core cities into surrounding residential communities. Between 1950 and 1970, as historian Lizabeth Cohen has written, “suburbia mushroomed in territorial size and in the number of Americans it harbored.” During these decades, the suburban population doubled—to 74 million—and fully 83 percent of the nation’s growth took place in these communities.²

Minnesota was part of this trend, with a growing population—from 2,982,483 in 1950 to 3,804,971 in 1970—that shifted away from urban areas. After decades of increase, for example, the population of Minneapolis declined by nearly 40,000 during the 1950s, to 482,872;



Suburbia

Richfield in the Postwar Era

this trend accelerated through the 1960s, as the city dropped to 434,400 by 1970.³ And it was to suburbia that people moved after 1945, to growing communities like Brooklyn Center, St. Louis Park, and Richfield.

Located on the southern border of Minneapolis, Richfield in many ways exemplified American postwar growth and relocation. It shares the five common characteristics of suburbs identified by Kenneth T. Jackson in his seminal study, *Crabgrass Frontier*: peripheral location, relatively low density, architectural similarity, relatively low cost, and economic and racial homogeneity.⁴

By 1960, Richfield was a bustling bedroom community of tree-lined streets and neat little houses, home to 42,523 men, women and children. But what a transformation—before the war, here was a sleepy village of truck farms and dirt roads, with approximately 3,500 people. Only occasional houses dotted the landscape.⁵

When Larry Molsather was born in 1939, his parents lived in a small one-bedroom house without indoor plumbing in west Richfield, near 69th Street and Knox Avenue.

The streets were cut in at the time, although they were sand and gravel. . . . There was so little traffic. Actually, when my grandparents came out to visit us, my grandfather had an old Model A Ford, and it was so quiet out there I could hear him about the time they turned off of 66th Street onto Knox, which was three blocks away. The streets were cut in, but only up to 70th Street. There was a farm on the south side of 70th Street that was basically a pasture. That was all farmland, going all the way over to what is now Humboldt Avenue and Donaldson Park. . . .

Basically that whole area going up to Penn Avenue and a little further west was a nice stand of woods. . . . Lots of vacant lots still had trees and brush on them.

As you went east toward Wood Lake, it was a lot of open fields. There were very sparse houses. . . . distributed through these blocks, and a good share of them were just these tiny little houses like my parents had built.



The story of Richfield's postwar years: the Tierney farm, Penn Avenue and 62nd Street, makes way for housing developments, 1954. FACING PAGE: Shoppers flock to the Hub Grand Opening, February 1954.

Marian and Paul Maxson were married in 1939. They lived in Minneapolis with Marian's parents until late 1940, when they decided to construct their own house.

[Paul] drove me out to Richfield and he said, "We're building a house here." It was a lot 110 by 220 feet. . . . Fairwood Park was on the west side, and there was a swamp on the east side.

There was one house down the block, and then in our little block there was a cottage on Lakeview Avenue and then one house, the Scott house. Of course we got acquainted with them. There was one lot in between the Scotts and us.

There was one other house that we could see from our yard. They had chickens and animals, but no cows or anything. We called that the farmhouse. . . . And that's all I could see. There was nothing west of us. No houses at all. Just vacant land.

When the war ended in 1945, millions of demobilized servicemen joined Americans on the home front in starting and restarting civilian lives. For many, this meant marriage and family and the search for jobs and housing. Developers nationwide were poised to assist young families acquire a dream: their own house.

Strong demand, together with FHA and VA financing and abundant materials—thanks to the end of wartime rationing—led to unprecedented numbers of new houses in a very short time. The 1950s saw the construction of fully one-fourth of the entire U.S. housing stock that existed in 1960. Here, too, Richfield provides a prime example: the city's housing units mushroomed from 4,074 in 1950 to 11,116 by the end of the decade. Forty-four percent of its housing stock was built during these years.⁶

Emily and A. Whittier Day bought their house in 1949. Built by the previous owner and completed before 1945, the home at 73rd Street and Clinton Avenue in southeast Richfield stood alone when they moved in: “There wasn’t anything around here,” Emily says. “The street itself only went as far as what would be 73rd Street. But it was a dead end. There *wasn’t* any 73rd Street. And the other side of the dead end there was a farm, and . . . on the south side of our house . . . there was another farm.”

But development, she recalls, quickly changed the surrounding landscape. “Very soon 73rd Street was cut through. I mean within a few years. And then the lots on the 74th Street side began selling. Here, on Clinton Avenue in this block, they sold *so* fast. Within a few years. By maybe 1950 or ’51 most of the lots along this block were already sold. . . . As soon as [the lot] was sold, there was a house there. It came immediately.”

What Emily Day describes was no isolated case. During this first postwar decade, housing developments sprouted from the ground across Richfield. Bill Davis remembers the area around his parents’ house in south-central Richfield. The family had moved there in 1951 from Minneapolis.



At the end of our block on 71st Street, going south, was a farm and on the farm they raised crops. There was actually an apple orchard there, also. The streets were dirt. There were no curbs. In fact there was no sewer and water. Each home had its own individual septic tank and well. That's the way it was for the next year or two. By the time I started junior high school in 1954 . . . the homes to the south of us were starting to fill in and the farm was gone and there were homes in its place.

“We did not know at the time that this was not Minneapolis.”

In Richfield, as across the nation, men and women relocated to suburban communities for a myriad of reasons. Many shared the desire to move away from the crowded city; Richfield was simply one of various destinations considered. Air Corps veteran Sherm Booen and his wife, Mavis, for example. Booen returned to the Twin Cities in 1945 from Italy. “I suppose the basic reason was that I didn't see any reason to go to Minneapolis, and Richfield was a new area and I liked it here. I liked to be out as far as I could get from a big city . . . and that was Richfield at that time. That's for sure.”

Gertrude Ulrich and her husband Jerome, a new dentist, moved to Richfield in 1953.

My husband needed to develop a dental practice. There were various practices that he could have assumed, but the one that we liked best was here in Richfield. So that's why we picked Richfield. . . . We did not know at the time that this was not Minneapolis. And the first time we went to vote we didn't find the right names on the ballot and we came out and looked at each other. . . . Why couldn't we vote for Humphrey for mayor of Minneapolis? Most of the people in Richfield, at least in our part, had moved from Minneapolis. They grew up in Minneapolis and came home, had their GI Bill benefits, and bought a home in Richfield. It was just a logical thing to do.

A U.S. Navy veteran of the Korean War era, Minneapolis native Marvin Iverson and his wife, Helen, moved to Richfield in 1956. “Some of it was that people in the construction trade . . . were offering a deal on houses. I could get a house partially built and then I could finish the rest of it. Then I could afford it. That's how we swung

it. . . . The interest was cheaper and everything. You could get qualified right away being a GI.”

John Hamilton, during the 1980s mayor of Richfield, made his choice for a different set of reasons. Hamilton was in sales when he was transferred to Minnesota. For him, living in Richfield was all about convenience. “I came in the summer of 1958, in July. I didn't know anyone. I'd never been in this state before in my life. Somebody referred me to . . . [a] real estate company. He told me where I should live, because Southdale [Mall in Edina] had just opened. The airport was over here. He showed me houses. . . . Bloomington I looked at, maybe Edina or Hopkins, but not very much. Everything was here. . . . So that's why I came here.”



Momentum built quickly as developers put up house after house. This typical streetscape, about 1955, shows finished homes in the back, appliance installers in the middle, and a house under construction in the front.

In 1952 Florence and Curtis Simon lived with their three small children in an apartment in Minneapolis. It was time, recalls Florence, to search for something bigger. “On Sunday afternoons, we would go out looking in the suburbs, and the two that we felt we could afford were Richfield and St. Louis Park. My husband went out one Sunday afternoon—I had not gone with him—he came home and he said, ‘I think I have found the house. In Richfield.’”

The Simons found a ranch-style house that fit their needs.

We liked the house in Richfield because it had three bedrooms, and already we had two boys and one girl. So we needed that extra bedroom, and we didn't think we had enough money to finish off an upstairs.

I thought it was huge. (*chuckles*) Having lived in a one-bedroom apartment with three children, this seemed gigantic to me. . . . Of course in retrospect now, it is *not* a large house.

It was very plain. There were no trees. It was just a very ordinary house. . . . But I did enjoy the bedrooms.

Families with children flocked to America's new suburbs during the Baby Boom years. Living in a new, rapidly developing residential suburb like Richfield brought new experiences.

Marvin Iverson was typical of the new Richfield resident: he and his wife, Helen, sought space for their growing family, and they wanted to leave the central city—in this case, Minneapolis. In 1956 the Iversons moved to east Richfield's New Ford Town area, a neighborhood originally planned to accommodate workers at the Ford assembly plant in neighboring St Paul.

New Ford Town was a very unique place, and being we were separated [from the rest of Richfield] you become very close with the neighbors and everybody living there. Some three hundred and thirty-three homes. All our kids went to school [together] and we had street parties, and everybody would come.

Friendly neighborhood. Very good people. School just down the block. We felt it was a good location. We weren't out in the sticks really with it either.



Summer fun: turtle races on a Richfield school playground, 1955

For young people, growing up in this suburban environment meant lots of other kids just like them. Bill Davis was nine when his family moved in 1951 from Minneapolis to Richfield.

After being there for a short period of time it became very comfortable because there were so many children on our block. It seemed like every house had one, two, or three children. There were plenty of kids my age and my sister's age, and we just kind of fit in. We got there when the school year had already started, so I was the new kid on the block, literally. The assimilation went very smoothly. . . .

“We were all new to Richfield and you just got to know one another.”

Everybody was in the same boat. We were all new to Richfield and you just got to know one another. Not only the kids on the block, but in the surrounding areas and in the schools. In those days the Richfield Recreation Department had very active park programs in the summer. . . . They had park leaders and planned activities and that's where everybody went from morning till night. So you got to know a lot of people. We were looking for new friends and new experiences.

Florence Simon remembers her block as one of young families, with much in common.

Most all of them were returned veterans. . . . There had been one that was a POW. My husband had been in the Navy. The fellow next door had been in the submarines.

I mean we knew everybody in the whole block. . . . Because our backyards were joining, it made it just so inviting for the children.

We had nothing but a big back play yard [in our block]. There was not a fence there. Children would just go back and forth. . . . We counted up once . . . 37 to 40 kids.

Families interacted with each other, Florence remembers.

So we all had our lawns in the back, and then they needed to mow it. Of course we were all strapped for money. So five of the men decided that they would go in on a lawn mower, and I think we used that lawn mower for about four years. We would take turns.

Not only that, but every New Year's Eve we had a party, and at one time there were seven couples that took dancing lessons. . . . I have talked to other people in

their own neighborhoods, but it's not probably as close as our neighborhood was.

For many women, Florence confided, life revolved around the home.

We got so that we had coffee many, many times . . . during the week. . . . There were probably about five or six of us that would get together, and of course . . . the toys would be all over.

A lot of children, but at the same time, I think that that was the best therapy we had. Because we could sit and visit with adults, and . . . if the children had been sick we would talk . . . if somebody had a strep throat or an earache, whatever it might be, we could discuss that and we'd sit maybe and discuss the electric light bill. (*chuckles*)

Suburban domesticity, though, "often promised more than it delivered," as historian Elaine Tyler May has pointed out. Some women complained of "feeling trapped and isolated, facing endless chores of housekeeping and tending to children."⁷ Betty Carr, for example, had earned a college degree in chemistry and worked in a university lab before she married and started a family: "An old neighborhood custom was that the women got together in the morning. Hardly any women worked. We were all at home and they would get together for coffee." Housework and children, she says with a chuckle, were the leading topics of conversation. "That's *all* they talked about, and I was pretty bored with that. Very quickly. There wasn't one other college graduate in the block. So I tended to have wider interests than the other folks. I didn't feel superior, but I just was bored. I joined the League of Women Voters. It must have been about 1951. It was a big step up, because I didn't want to talk about raising children anymore."

Betty then found a part-time job with the weekly *Richfield News*, first selling subscriptions.

But then I was interested in what went into the paper, because if you're going to sell the paper, you've got to have interesting things *in* the paper. . . . One day [the publisher] turned to me and said, "I need somebody to go up to the City Council and report on the budget meeting, and I don't have anybody." And I said, "Well, you have me." (*chuckles*) So that's where I went. Eventually I became what you would call the school reporter. . . . When the high school opened in 1954 I wrote

a history of the school district, and so I did a lot of research. I really knew the system.

Postwar American society presented women with limited opportunities outside of traditional roles. For women not entirely satisfied with the duties of full-time mother and homemaker, then, there existed a real challenge: to add a different sense of personal fulfillment and purpose. Some, like Betty Carr, found an outlet, while others did not. Only the 1960s introduced real change to this situation.⁸

Visually, Richfield of the 1950s resembled the towns in the 1998 films *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville*, with its picture-perfect setting of picket fences and flowerbeds. As in these films, the closer one looks at Richfield during these years, the more apparent are certain cracks in the Rockwellian façade. This growing suburban community faced important challenges.

One challenge affected virtually every household: the lack of infrastructure. "The postwar suburbs were constructed at great speed," writes historian Dolores Hayden, "but they were deliberately planned to . . . minimize the responsibility of the developers to create public space and public services. . . . [Developers] left the job of creating physical infrastructure and social fabric to the federal, state, and local governments, and the new homeowners."⁹



The postwar building boom quickly transformed a village of scattered houses into a fully developed suburb.

In Richfield, home construction quickly outpaced the provision of services. Wayne Burggraaff, city manager from 1968 to 1979, offers a candid assessment of post-1945 development: "You're looking at a community that de-

veloped very rapidly . . . without very much planning. It totally followed the grid street system, which was kind of flowing south from Minneapolis. But unlike other communities, Richfield did not have a city planner at that time.”

The results: Into the mid-1950s homes were built with septic tanks, and drinking water came from individual wells, as the village had no water and sewer services. Perhaps surprising for a community so reliant on automobiles, residential streets remained unpaved until the late 1960s; full street lighting didn’t arrive until the 1980s.

Richfield residents wanted their own solutions.

Addressing issues related to services and development took much time and energy. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s there were legendary battles over numerous infrastructure questions, including the creation of a municipal water system, construction of a swimming pool and ice rink, retention of a municipal fire department, and the permanent street program. But for all of these challenges, Wayne concludes, Richfield residents wanted their own solutions.

A lot of them had lived in Minneapolis earlier, and I think the idea was they were coming to a smaller place. They were coming to a new place. They were going to be able to more fully control their destinies. . . . So I think in the years before I arrived [in 1968], there was certainly a strong feeling on the part of the council members and the mayors that they did want to take care of themselves . . . to provide their own services. And they were very proud of that. Even though there were disagreements, perhaps, on a number of issues, they were also very proud of the police department, the fire department and the other services that the city provided.

There were something like a hundred and twenty miles of streets in Richfield and except for the county roads, like Portland Avenue or Penn Avenue, all of the other streets were temporary street surfaces, which was an unusual thing in those days. . . . When we went through the process of building new [permanent] streets, a sizable portion was financed with special assessments, and so we had to have special-assessment hearings. I recall very clearly at one, a woman stood up and she said, “I don’t want to pay for curb and gutter in front of my house. I used to live in Minneapolis and

I’ve moved out here to the country, and I don’t *want* any more curb and gutter.”

Perhaps the major challenge throughout the first postwar decades was the school system, specifically, providing buildings to accommodate Richfield’s burgeoning school-age population. Public school enrollment leapt from 2,506 in 1950 to 10,055 just ten years later; indeed, by 1960 nearly one Richfield resident in four was a public school student.¹⁰

Public or private—classrooms simply were bursting at the seams. Shirley Boeser attended Assumption Catholic School in south Richfield from 1932 to 1940. After graduating from college in 1948 she returned to the area to raise a family.

There were 20 in my class, and that was large. . . . That school grew from being very small to almost 1200 students in the 1960s.

My husband had graduated from St. John’s in 1952, and they hired him at Assumption Church. He was actually the first male lay teacher in the school. The first year he taught in the basement of the church, which was a dingy hole full of mice. He had 29 boys and 5 girls.

And that was nothing compared with years later, when my children went to that school. There were three first grades, three second grades, three third grades. And there were 52 in some classes.



Students head for their cars in the new high school’s ample parking lot, 1958

Bob Elsen attended Assumption School during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

When I went to grade school, the first year, first grade, we had so many kids that we only went half a day. So I was in the morning first-grade class. The school just couldn't handle the number of kids. . . . So they added onto the school probably one or two times while I was there.

The whole time I was there I don't think we had under 35 and sometimes as many as 50. In one class. Yes, there were a lot of us.

Public elementary schools looked much the same, as Bill Davis recalls. New to Richfield in Fall 1951, he was in fourth grade.

I mean, they couldn't build the schools fast enough, and the ones that they had built were overcrowded.

I went to Central Elementary which . . . is adjacent to where the Senior High School is now. . . . And then they built a new school on the east side of Richfield called Elliot, and I went there for my fifth-grade class. Then for sixth grade we had so many kids in Elliot School that my sixth-grade class and one fourth-grade class actually had our classes in Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, over on 66th Street. . . . It was basically an unfinished basement of a church that they put up dividing walls so we had two different classrooms. For our noon lunches, the cooks from Elliot would bring over hot meals.

Richfield worked hard to keep up with a relentless annual increase in students. Bond issues passed in 1942 and 1946 started a trend of funding the increasing needs. Richfield's four school districts consolidated by 1946 and began appeals to add needed elementary schools and build a high school. (Students traveled to Minneapolis to attend either Roosevelt or Washburn high school.) From the early 1950s through the mid-1960s, the district averaged nearly one new facility per year. Changes in school-bonding allowances passed by the 1949 legislature allowed Richfield to ask for \$1.95 million to fund a high school and another elementary school. The public backed the bond.¹¹

The high school welcomed its first students in Fall 1954. Larry Molsather, president of the Richfield High School class of 1957, remembers how students and teachers worked together to create an identity at the modern-looking facility. Part of being "modern" was the

construction of a large parking area—the school's location meant that virtually all faculty and staff would need their own transportation. Before the decade was out, some students also drove to school.

It's kind of nice to move into a modern, clean building. All new teachers. A lot of them young. So it was a pretty upbeat place. But there was no tradition. I mean, there were no things like school name, school song, those things. That was all part of that first year. There were a couple of teachers that wrote the school song. The words and music.

But it was voting on the school name. Everybody was involved. They'd take all these suggestions, go through them, and pick one. "Spartans" was what they came up with. So there were a lot of new things going on.



Richfield High School's Spartan, emblazoned on a band jacket

The new high school and its sports programs had a larger significance, too, as Gertrude Ulrich explains.

I think that Richfield really did not become Richfield—it was a legal determination of course—but the *citizens* did not become part of Richfield as a community until the high school was built. Then Richfield became Richfield.

For example, [in 1953] when my husband printed his stationery, his address was not Richfield, it was . . . on West 76th Street, Minneapolis. But then the high school was built in 1954, and . . . there were athletic teams. . . . When the first football team trotted out on the field, that was such a big deal. (*chuckles*) It was *community*.

This convergence of sports programs and community identity reached a high point in Spring 1960, with the Richfield boys basketball team's run to the semifinals of

and 1950s continued to depend on the city for major purchases, making do with the small, locally owned commercial outlets . . . only for minor needs.” Whether downtown or down the street, much of this shopping in the immediate postwar years was done by way of public transit (when available), riding with a neighbor, or on foot. Having a car was not yet the norm.¹³

But the 1950s witnessed an explosion of automobile production and ownership—a fact not lost on merchandisers, who built accordingly. As Cohen puts it, they “realized that postwar suburbanites were finally living the motorized existence that had been predicted for American society since the 1920s. Consumers became depen-

dent on, virtually inseparable from, their cars.”

The suburban shopping center, with its broad expanses of asphalt, was tailor made for this new, more mobile population.¹⁴ The HUB Center, opened in 1954 at 66th Street and Nicollet Avenue, exemplifies this new, postwar retail.

But not all Richfield businesses were new. The village in 1945 had several established firms, which served the needs of the population at that time. With radical change after the war, the challenge for them was clear: they would need to adapt to new residents, who brought new expectations. In this, some were successful, while others fell by the wayside.

The HUB: “Doorway to New Shopping Comfort”

Shopping centers had traditionally been just that—centrally located city areas for doing business. The ever-increasing number of people choosing to live in suburbs needed and wanted nearby shops, too. That trend, combined with the growth of automobile culture, led to a new model: the shopping center.

Richfield’s population exploded in the 1950s, increasing from 17,502 in 1950 to 31,756 in 1954. Developers Henry and Donald Shanedling jumped on this phenomenon and began planning the HUB Shopping Center. They believed that people would prefer the new “Free Air” centers for obvious reasons: no downtown crowds, traffic, or pollution. “The HUB and centers like it were merely a modern-day adaptation of the door-to-door peddler, bringing the store to the customer’s door,” they maintained. In 1954 the Shanedlings predicted that within ten years every city of 100,000 or more would have at least one suburban shopping center.

At 66th Street and Nicollet Avenue, their \$5 million project was located in north-central Richfield. Opened in February 1954, the HUB featured both national and local stores. It claimed to be “The first complete shopping center in the Twin Cities area especially

designed to provide every need for the entire family.” Its 32 businesses included a florist, optometrist, grocery, pet store, camera shop, several clothing stores, Walgreen’s drug store, HUB jewelers, Kinney Shoes, and J. C. Penney.

The HUB exemplified the suburban shopping center model: a group of stores linked together, forming a one-stop shopping destination. Parking lots provided shoppers the convenience of arriving directly in front of their destination. Center promoters claimed, “No matter what district you live in, it actually takes less time to drive to ‘The Hub’ than to find parking in other parts of town.” And, furthermore, “Shopping at the Hub means more than just extra values for your dollar. It means only one stop to serve all your shopping needs.”

At the time, the fresh-air model seemed forward thinking and sure to succeed. Indeed, shoppers flocked to the new center. But an even newer model was just about to emerge that would again change the way people shopped. In October 1956 Southdale, an indoor mall with seemingly limitless parking, provided more stores and a shopping experience free of cold, heat, and wet weather. Outdoor centers such as the HUB were quickly forced



Richfield News, February 25, 1954, proclaiming the HUB to be “The Center of the Wheel of Richfield-Bloomington Progress”

into a secondary role to this enduring new concept.

Sources: “Richfield General Information,” 3, Richfield Historical Society; *Richfield News*, Feb. 25, 1954, p. 14, and second sec., p. 3.

Located at the Richfield—Bloomington line on 78th Street, Scholz Mercantile was a traditional country store with a wide variety of goods. It had been in business since the late-nineteenth century. Shirley Boeser's father, Peter Scholz, owned and operated the store as she was growing up in the 1930s and 1940s. Family life revolved around the store.

There were a lot of steps, and a large kind of front porch. As you entered the store you had a candy case on the left and a cash register, and then groceries all over the front part of the store. There was a butcher shop in the back, and to the east of the store was a dry goods department. They sold fabric, handkerchiefs, blouses. . . . Next to the dry goods department was a hardware department, and we had bins for nails. Every size. We sold small tools, like hammers and pliers and things like that. Upstairs was a whole shoe department. We sold Red Wing shoes, and my dad handled work clothes, like overalls and work shirts.

In the outbuildings—and these were farm buildings that my grandfather had had—my dad stored seed. I especially remember him selling corn. In the spring, he sold all kinds of garden seeds, too. Beets, carrots, peas. Vegetables. He sold a lot of fertilizer, too.



Scholz Mercantile, shown here in the early-twentieth century, served Richfielders for generations before falling victim to highway expansion.

As a young person, Shirley worked in the store. “I waited on people. When I was in high school and later, I worked on the books, helped with accounts receivable, accounts payable. I knew all the wholesalers that my dad did business with.”

Many customers were local farmers. “Most of them charged the groceries. They ran a tab. They paid maybe once a month. Most people were very honest and if they had the money, they paid. They probably would have to wait until the harvest came in. . . . One time my dad got a horse for payment.”

As new residents had displaced the farmers, so too did new retailers like large grocery chains and the HUB Center squeeze out traditional stores like Scholz Mercantile. The final blow came in 1955, when the state of Minnesota took the Scholz property as part of the Interstate 494 road-expansion project. “I don’t think Dad could cope very well with that. It forced his retirement. I think it just took years and years off of his life. That was his whole life, the store.”

Other family businesses found ways to adapt and survive. Jeanette Lofstrom’s parents grew vegetables and flowers for wholesale and retail sale at the farmers’ market and from a stand at their 12-acre farm on the southern border of Richfield. Jeanette recalls the pre-1945 years.

My dad would get up early and go to the farmers’ market in Minneapolis. He went down there every morning when he had the produce—and we had a lot of different things. We started out with strawberries in the spring, like in June. . . . Then there was maybe a little space in there, a few weeks. Then the cabbage would start. Then after that it would be things like the green peppers, and he even grew okra. And we had carrots. We never grew potatoes, but we always had potatoes [to sell].

When he went to the farmers’ market . . . he would also buy things. So if we needed something that we didn’t grow, like maybe apples or maybe we didn’t have enough cucumbers, or not the right size or whatever, then he would bring that stuff back.

The stand had . . . a dirt basement. Things had to be carried down there at night and put away. Then you would just take out what you needed during the day. . . . And it was kind of cool down there all the time, a little damp. So it was nice for just keeping everything fresh.

During the 1950s, large grocery chains with produce departments forced Jeanette’s parents to change: the fruit and vegetable business was no longer profitable.

*Still other Richfield businesses
faced the postwar challenge
of change—and prospered.*

They gradually went into the greenhouse business . . . more like perennials and mostly annuals. A lot of geraniums, and then vegetable plants. A lot of tomato plants and cabbage plants. They'd have some bushes and trees as they . . . stopped doing the vegetable farming. I think they rented out some land, and then they lost some of their land when Interstate 494 went through in 1957. So they moved the stand back, and they bought a house on 17th Avenue [in Richfield], and they kept on going with the greenhouse and the stand for several years after that.

Still other Richfield businesses faced the postwar challenge of change—and prospered. Elsen Auto Repair is an excellent example. Dating back to the 1890s, the business has passed through generations of the Elsen family. Bob (born in 1950) talks about the beginnings: "The first building was strictly a blacksmith shop, which my great-grandfather had. My great-grandfather started that business. Then my grandfather [Eugene Sr.], and my dad and my uncles."

Eugene Jr. (born in 1935) recalls the 1930s and 1940s.

We had three pumps. Always in front of the station. You had dirt driveways on both sides. No canopies. No nothing. Just the building, with a little office in the front.

[Dad] shod horses and he did plowshares and he did disc sharpening and made stuff for [farmers]. And welding and repair. . . . We did a lot of things, like make truck bodies. Small dairy farmers, they hauled malt from St. Paul to feed the cows. They [Elsen's] would . . . build these things . . . [to] haul malt. That means they had to be pretty tight, the flooring and stuff. Yes, the custom-built boxes were made at Elsen's Garage.

After 1945 there was no future in catering to the farmer, but the family business was ideally suited to take advantage of the motorized life of the postwar suburb. Eugene explains: "As the population grew, of course the demand came for more and more stuff. Then we moved up into . . . service work. Built on a little extra building to do that. We did everything but automatic transmission and body work. . . . Trucks, cars. Didn't make any difference."

His brother Donald (born in 1926) describes another adaptation in the 1950s: "That's when the houses started booming. . . . We started doing a lot of work for different contractors. I built a lot of water trailers, because they go into an area where there's no water, they have to bring in their own water for the cement work. . . . So the business left the farmer stuff [and] went into more or less serving the contractor and the plumber and all that."

By the mid-1960s, Bob says, Elsen Auto Repair had expanded and diversified, and at peak had more than 20 employees.



Vestige of the rural past: Eugene Elsen Sr. and son Don, early 1960s, in Elsen's blacksmith shop

We did a lot of work on bigger trucks, garbage trucks, and we had a large number of small companies that we did fleet work for. Plumbing companies, transfer companies, the garbage trucks, of course.

There were a lot of small companies that brought us their vehicles for repair. They were bringing them in every day for gasoline in some cases. . . . And if you noticed something wrong while you were putting gas in their vehicle, then you'd just mention it to them and sooner or later they were going to come back and have you repair it.

Being anchored in Richfield proved an advantage. “Being part of the Assumption community we had probably within a six, seven block radius of the garage, just about everybody stopping in that was a member of that parish. They would come in and have their cars repaired,” Bob relates. Elsen Auto Repair is still thriving at its original location in south Richfield.

Richfield’s challenges did not end with the completion of neighborhoods, the construction of new schools, or the appearance of “modern” retail. The decades after the boom years simply brought new challenges. In this respect, Richfield is not unique, either among Twin Cities suburbs—Brooklyn Center and West St. Paul are other examples—or inner-ring suburbs across the nation. As these communities and their initial residents age, reassessment and readjustment are necessary.

One challenge was population: Richfield’s declined after the early 1970s, as the original residents aged and

their children moved away. Schools closed as the number of students fell sharply—from nearly 11,000 in 1970 to just 4,253 in 2000.¹⁵

By the 1980s several highways sliced through Richfield; dozens of homes fell victim to this construction. And these roads also made it convenient for people to live farther out from the core city—and thus leave Richfield for quieter communities with newer, bigger houses. Ironically then, the technology that enabled Richfield to grow and prosper—the automobile—turned out to be a double-edged sword. Perhaps rising gasoline prices will turn growth back toward inner-ring suburbs; it is still too early to tell.

The HUB Center, launched with fanfare, faced an immediate challenge. Less than three years later, in late 1956, Southdale Mall in neighboring Edina welcomed its first customers. Malls have transformed American retail and left shopping centers like the HUB scrambling to hold tenants and customers. The threat of failure is real: empty and abandoned shopping centers and malls litter the American landscape.¹⁶



For more on Minnesota mall culture, specifically Southdale, see www.mnhs.org/library/tips/history_topics/72southdale.html. For Minnesota’s Greatest Generation in general, visit www.mnhs.org/people/mngg/index.htm



Edina’s climate-controlled Southdale Mall, about 1960, a challenge to nearby Richfield’s HUB shopping center

Looking at the bigger picture, suburbia itself is a final, important challenge. Construction of these communities continues to transform the countryside. In his important book, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*, journalist Joel Garreau examines suburbanization during the past decades and the accompanying benefits and costs to our society of ever-expanding communities, which he labels Edge Cities. “The raging debate over what we have lost and what we have gained,” Garreau writes, “as we flee the old urban patterns of the nineteenth century for the new ones of the twenty-first, is constant. Are we satisfying our deepest yearnings for the good life with Edge City? Or are we poisoning everything across which we sprawl?” We believe there are no easy answers to his question.¹⁷

In responding to challenges, recent developments are encouraging. The newest Richfield Community Profile projects an increase in population by 2010—for the first time since the 1970s—helped, in part, by hun-

dreds of units of new senior-citizen housing occupied, in many cases, by Richfield residents wanting to stay in the community. The number of students shows signs of reversing a decades-long decline, bolstered by immigrant groups and young families attracted to the city for its affordable housing and services. Business redevelopment has led to Best Buy locating its corporate headquarters in Richfield, a welcome addition to the city’s tax base. And so, Richfield remakes itself, continuing a process of change inaugurated with the first housing developments nearly 60 years ago.

Many Richfielders retain a strong identification with the city and wish to remain there—even if they could move away. Lifelong resident Bob Elsen has the last word: “You know, I just think that living in Richfield . . . it always has been a good experience. To this day. I know a lot of people in Richfield. . . . Some of my friends that I grew up with in Richfield still live here.” Sure, some have moved away from the community, Bob says, “but those of us that do live here, you know, we live here for a reason. We like it.” ☐

Notes

1. Samples from a voluminous literature: Norman L. Rosenberg and Emily S. Rosenberg, *In Our Times: America Since World War II*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), ch. 4 and suggested reading, 114–17; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992); Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

Narrator voices in this article are drawn from 25 oral history interviews conducted in 2007, part of the Minnesota Historical Society’s Minnesota’s Greatest Generation project. Transcripts are available at both MHS and the Richfield Historical Society.

2. Cohen, *Consumers’ Republic*, 202; May, *Homeward Bound*, 152.

3. For population statistics, see www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/hiscendata.html (accessed Feb. 1, 2008).

4. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 238–43.

5. “Looking at Richfield: Community Profile” (City of Richfield: Community Development Dept., 2006), 2; “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow: Richfield Comprehensive Plan” (City of Richfield, 1992), 2.

6. For U.S. housing statistics, see Rosenberg and Rosenberg, *In Our Times*, 86; “Looking at Richfield,” 2.

7. May, *Homeward Bound*, 155.

8. Rosenberg and Rosenberg, *In Our Times*, 196–200.

9. Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 128, 132.

10. “Looking at Richfield,” 2. In 2007, target classroom size in Richfield public schools was 24 students.

11. Frederick L. Johnson, *Richfield: Minnesota’s Oldest Suburb* (Richfield: Richfield Historical Society, 2008), 72–75.

12. Wayne Burggraaff, conversation with Thomas Saylor, Apr. 28, 2007. For the larger context, see Lizabeth Cohen, “From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America,” *American Historical Review* 101 (Oct. 1996): 1050–81.

13. Here and below, Cohen, “From Town Center to Shopping Center,” 1052; Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 161.

14. Kenneth T. Jackson, “All the World’s a Mall: Reflections on the Social and Economic Consequences of the American Shopping Center,” *American Historical Review* 101 (Oct. 1996): 1111–21.

15. Frederick Johnson, research notes for *Richfield*, in Richfield Historical Society.

16. Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 179.

17. Garreau, *Edge City*, 12–13.

The photos on p. 48, 49, 52 (by Gopher Studio), p. 56, 57, and 60 are from MHS collections; all others, including p. 59 (by the Minneapolis Star), are courtesy the Richfield Historical Society. Map by Percolator Graphic Design.



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