

Seven Corners, St. Paul



DOWNTOWN ST. PAUL has changed so dramatically over the years that many historic views, such as this photograph of Seven Corners, taken in about 1934, seem improbable. Is it really possible that such a place once existed and was then wiped away so completely that few traces of the past remain? Alas, the answer is yes. Today, Seven Corners is a misnomer (only five corners remain) and, aside from a few historic buildings along its Seventh Street side, the intersection—dominated by the hulking presence of Xcel Energy Center—has been utterly transformed.

This 1934 photograph, one of the liveliest ever taken of Seven Corners, looks east down Fourth Street toward the Rice Park area. Kellogg Boulevard (originally Third Street) is to the right, while the angled street with a streetcar passing at lower right is Seventh. The car at the lower left corner is heading north toward Main Street, which along with Eagle Street (not visible) completed the intersection.

The wonderful towered Victorian at the center of the action, wedged between Fourth and Kellogg, is the Defiel Block. It was built in 1889 for Michael Defiel, proprietor of People's Ice Company in St. Paul. Ice was a big



Bustling Seven Corners, St. Paul, 1934 (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

business before the dawn of mechanical refrigeration, and Defiel's firm cut vast amounts of it every winter from White Bear and other nearby lakes. Surrounding the Defiel Block are small two- to four-story brick buildings of the kind that once constituted much of downtown St. Paul's architectural ensemble. These buildings in 1934 housed everything from residential hotels to auto dealerships to small manufacturing and wholesaling firms.

Except for a few large structures like the St. Paul Public Library–Hill Reference Library (visible far down Fourth Street), all of the buildings shown here are gone. The Defiel

Block was among the first to vanish. It was demolished in 1936 as the city finished its massive Kellogg Mall and Boulevard project. Many of the other old buildings hung on until the early 1970s, when the St. Paul Civic Center (later replaced by RiverCentre and Xcel Energy Center) swallowed up much of the neighborhood.

As part of the Civic Center project, Fourth Street was lopped off, so it no longer reaches Seven Corners, while Seventh Street was moved a bit to the north. Later, Main Street was also severed from the intersection, which remains a busy place today, even though much of its rich history has been lost.

—Larry Millett

LARRY MILLETT is a St. Paul historian and mystery novelist. Among his recent books are *Minnesota's Own: Preserving Our Grand Homes* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2014) and *Minnesota Modern: Architecture and Life at Midcentury* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).



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