

The History Corner
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Community Celebration

As a kid growing up in St. Louis Park my brother and I didn't have to go far to find someone to play with. Houses lined all sides of our block, most of them not more than 30 feet from each other. To the east of us were the Jenkins with their four kids. To the west, lived my second cousin Ruth Ann, just a year younger than me. Adding all the numbers together in just those three houses produced enough participants for just about any backyard game. When you included the Rogne and Woullet clan at the end of the block it brought the total number of kids to 16, just about what you needed for a good afternoon game of baseball. Most summer days, from morning until night, we gathered in one yard or another and played, only retreating back home when our mothers called us for noon dinner (it was never known as "lunch" in our family) or for the evening supper meal.

As much as the day belonged to us, evenings were pretty much our parents time. Once dishes were washed and the evening paper looked through it was time for most adults to gather out on the lawn and talk. Normally most neighborhood folks would migrate down to our end of the block, aluminum lawn chair in hand, and prepare to settle into an hour or two of conversation. Most of the time the talk centered on sports or the weather, how the day at work had gone, the latest operation someone's aunt was recovering from, or a discussion concerning whether the latest model Ford, Chevy or Plymouth was the car to buy.

Whenever the community would gather for bigger celebrations we would head about a mile away to Oak Hill Park. The park was an oasis of trees, trails and fields sandwiched between blocks of neatly built post WW II houses and the biggest industry our town had, the creosote plant. Even today, if I close my eyes I can still sense those huge oak trees outlined against cloudless blue skies and smell the pungent odor of creosote that was always in the air. It was there at Oak Hill that I first remember watching a fireworks display. I must have been about three years old then, lying there, looking up into the twilight as I waited for the blackness to come. Scattered around me on a patchwork of spread blankets, like little geometric islands in a sea of grass were the people who made up my life; aunts, uncles, cousins, schoolmates, neighbors, all waiting as was I for the first burst of color to fall from the sky.

I doubt, back then, if I ever gave a thought to how important those days of summer would someday be to me. Now, nearly a half-century later they fill me with memories of family and friends, of neighbors and neighborhoods, and of a place we all gathered to celebrate what it meant to be a community.

A few weeks ago we too had a gathering that brought many of us together, the picnic fundraiser at North Shore. As important as the event was for our community in its efforts to retain our school I think what was most hopeful to me was watching the children that had come. I'm sure as they ran and played from afternoon into night their thoughts did not drift much beyond the joys and excitement of the day. But let us hope, as years pass, their memories will come to reflect upon soccer games, summer picnics, hot days spent at the creek, walks in the woods, and maybe, for a moment, settle on an August day that celebrated the importance of community.