Aaron Isaacs, author & historian

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Landmark Center
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Q What are your earliest memories of University Avenue?

A I think really the first time I encountered University was when I was in college and I was driving taxicab. I was a Minneapolis cab driver. I'm not a St. Paul kid, although I lived in Roseville. But I'm in Minneapolis and every once in a while you get a fare to St. Paul. And when you got a fare to St. Paul – this was before I-94 was built, in the late '60's – what I remember is dreading going to St. Paul because the drive on University Avenue, which at the time was Highway 12, was just so onerous. It was stop and go and congestion the whole way over and you felt like you'd spend the entire afternoon going to and from St. Paul on University Avenue. So it wasn't so much a fond memory as kind of a…it was sort of irritating. Then in college – I was in the Geography Department, geography student at the U of M in Urban Studies – and the late professor John Borchert, the eminent John Borchert, was my adviser. And I remember going to his class on Twin Cities Geography and he said, he talked about University Avenue and Lake Street. And he said University Avenue and Lake Street are the incubators of capitalism. That was his term. He said if somebody wants to start a business, this is where they're going to come and start it. You've got low rents, you've got accessibility; this is where they're going to do it.

Q What kind of impressions did you get about particular parts of the street?

A There's a geographical reason why University Avenue was so terribly crowded and it continues to this day. When you get west of Prior Avenue – between Prior and about 280 – there are no alternate routes. Everything funnels through either University Avenue or, now, I-94. If I-94 gets blocked in that area, just try to get through the traffic. There are no alternatives. So its kind of an accident of geography that it's like you have the St. Paul neighborhoods that all funnel down to Prior and the Minneapolis neighborhoods that all funnel down to about 280 and that stretch in between you can't get through any other way.

Q How has University Avenue changed over the past 50-60 years?

A Well of course you've had the South Asians who've moved in and colonized that area. Frogtown kind of went through a little bit of a boom. The Frogtown Diner came and went and I always thought the Frogtown Diner gave some identity to it. I guess if you moved west, first you saw the intersection of Rice and University, which had a drugstore on the corner and some other stuff, kind of fall on hard times. I believe the Cities Building was built, then later the bus depot moved in, moved up from downtown St. Paul. It was down at 8th and St. Peter and it moved up there. Of course the car dealerships have gone away. You know, there were 3, 4, 5 car dealerships and various used car lots along there. Brown and Bigelow left and was replaced by the Target store, which is really a step down aesthetically, because the Brown and Bigelow building was quite a building. Wards went away. The Blue Horse restaurant went away. So you had a lot of stuff that was pretty nice that kind of disappeared. Now the Old Home Creamery is gone, in that wonderful Art Deco building at Western. The Raymond and University intersection has kind of come back. When you get west of 280, you saw the industry go

away in the sense that the International Harvester building stopped being International Harvester – became Court International. There was the big US Steel metal yard that was across University at 280. That's gone now, replaced by an office park. There was the streetcar barn, the Snelling garage just behind Midway Shopping Center is now gone. So you had a lot of clearing out and for the most part it hasn't really rebounded yet. Oh, Midway Hospital is no longer a hospital. It's something else. The Embers went under because all the Embers went under. You've had some fast food places come in that weren't there before. So there's been a lot of transition; most of it negative and certainly away from industry and sort of towards other uses.

Q How did the opening of I-94 change University Avenue?

A University Avenue, the primary thing was that the traffic got a whole lot better. Suddenly it became fluid, with the exception of the intersection of Snelling and University, which remains extremely busy to this very day. But all the rest of University Avenue moves right along. So I think that's the single biggest change. But of course that same time period – from the late '60s, when 94 was completed, until now – also saw all those other changes: the clearing out of industry. The other thing that changed along there on the Minneapolis side is you had the construction; the replacement of industry on University Avenue SE, the Minneapolis side was student housing. 27th and University Avenue SE was the Onan plant, where they made generating sets. My dad worked there. He was in the engineering department. There was a little engineering building right next to the factory. Now that's all gone. It's all replaced by student apartments.

Q Talk about the early horse-drawn streetcars.

A The origins of streetcars in the two cities were as horse-drawn streetcars in the 1870's – 1873 in St. Paul, 1875 in Minneapolis. By 1889, which was pretty much the end, 1890 was about the end of the horse care era when electricity became practical. Between the start and that time, the horse car systems expanded out a couple of miles - maybe three miles from each of the downtowns. In the case of University Avenue coming out of St. Paul, it went out as far as Dale Street. And there was a cable line on Selby out as far as Lexington. That was really as far as things got. In Minneapolis there was no University Avenue line yet. That came later. Now in 1888 electric streetcars became practical. There had been a bunch of inventors that were trying to do it. There were a number of technological dead ends, but it was finally perfected in 1888 and in what I'm convinced was the fastest adoption of a technology in the history of this country. I think there's no comparison to the adoption of the electric streetcar. They wanted something to replace horses because horses were so expensive. It took 7 or 8 horses to keep one streetcar running. Horses got sick. There was a horse epidemic in the 1880's that was a big problem. Horses created mountains of manure, which everybody felt was a pollution problem even in that day of heavy pollution. So everyone was looking for a replacement. And they knew electricity was going to be it, but the question was how to harness the electricity and get it so that it would actually power the thing. There were a number of inventors working on it. In 1885 there was a test in Minneapolis. Finally a guy named Frank Sprague was able to go and put it together in late 1887. They put a streetcar system in Richmond, VA, in late 1887 and in what I think was really the fastest adoption of any technology in the history of the United States this caught on and by 1892 – four years – essentially the whole country had converted. All the horse cars with the exception of a very few were all gone. All the cable cars, which

was another interim solution – San Francisco-type cable cars – were almost all gone. They had all been replaced. So this happened in St. Paul. In St. Paul they put in the first line on Grand Avenue in 1889, in Minneapolis they put in their first line in 1889. Well, once those two starter lines had been approved by the city council and everybody felt that it worked, the next line that they built was University Avenue to Minneapolis – between Minneapolis and St. Paul in 1890. And they called it the Interurban. The term is lost today but for many, many years the University Avenue line was the Interurban. And they built it in one year all the way between the two cities. Now this included tearing up the old horse car tracks because the old horse car tracks were too light in Minneapolis with the wrong gauge – they were narrow gauge – and building the generating facilities and it went in right away. Now, one of the proofs of how successful it was, was that prior to the coming of the electric line the way you got between downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul was over one of three steam railroads – the Milwaukee Road, which was the most southerly of them; the Great Northern, which ran north of University Avenue, parallel to it; and the Northern Pacific, which ran kind of on the south edge of Como Park. And each of those three railroads had hourly trains between the Twin Cities that served a series of intermediate stations about every mile between the cities. Streetcar lines went in, in 1890. By 1892 all those trains were gone and it's because it was cheaper, it was more convenient. They instituted mail service on the streetcar right away. Back then – I don't think many people know it now and I didn't know it until I looked into it – back then it was expected that there would be multiple mail deliveries in each city, each day, usually about twice a day. And it was also expected that there would be same-day delivery between Minneapolis and St. Paul, of mail and with the streetcar running every ten minutes or so, that made that particularly easy. The streetcar would go past the post office in each downtown and on certain assigned runs during the day postal employees would come out, put a sack of mail on the car, take the sack of mail off, another postal employee would meet them in the other downtown and that's how the mail got delivered. As a matter of fact they even put in mailboxes so you could mail a letter on the streetcar and the University Avenue line was the first line that that happened.

Q Talk about the frequency during midday and rush hour.

A The Interurban ran frequently. It was generally at least every ten minutes and as the city grew and the fact that basically everyone was riding the streetcars, the demand grew and grew and grew. Eventually they got down to about three minute frequency on University Avenue and during the rush hour it would be one-minute frequency. There would essentially be a streetcar almost every block. As a matter of fact there's an old term that once again doesn't exist anymore, it's not used anymore, called "running like streetcars." Running like streetcars really means you walk out and here comes one. In the early days, the streetcars were really just kind of little four-wheel things that were like overgrown horse cars. The horse cars were quite small. They took the same model and kind of built it up a little bit. But, and those were built by commercial car builders. But they weren't very fast; they had a tendency to not be very stable to ride. People were lined up in rows facing the aisle, so you sat sideways and faced the aisle. They weren't very comfortable. They converted a lot of the horse cars because these little cars really couldn't handle the loads. They converted the horse cars to trailers and they would tow one, sometimes two trailers behind one of these single truck streetcars – truck referring to the wheel assembly. That's how they did it in the 1890's. However, every time they had a separate car, they had to have a separate conductor. They'd have a motorman who ran it and then a conductor to collect the fares. Well if you have another one of

those little cars, you had another conductor. So starting in about 1892 or 3, they bought for the University Avenue line their first what they called double truck streetcars, which are the ones with two sets of wheels – eight wheels in all – and a body that's essentially twice as long. They bought some of them from a commercial car builder and they were assigned to the University Avenue line because it was the heaviest line in the system. By the way, University was always the heaviest line in the system. There might be other lines that segments of them would be about as heavy, but even to this day on Metro Transit, the Route 16 University Avenue is always number 1 or 2 in patronage and the number of people served. So they bought these double truck streetcars, liked the design, and Thomas Lowery, who ran the streetcar system basically decided that the commercial products that were out there were not up to Minnesota winter conditions. So he decided that they would build their own. And he built a streetcar factory in 1898 over at 31st and Nicollet in south Minneapolis, and they designed their own streetcars and starting in 1898 they built 1200 streetcars. Now the first 500 were built over at 31st and Nicollet, the last 700 he decided he needed a bigger, better shop and that shop was the Snelling shops located on Snelling Avenue just a block south of University. I'll talk a little bit about that more but these cars were much bigger and much heavier and the Twin Cities streetcar system alone – among all North American streetcar systems – built all its own streetcars. There were other systems that built some but none built all of their own and none built as many. They built, I think, two, three times as many as any other streetcar system in America. And they were bigger, heavier, more powerful than streetcars in other systems. So once they started building those cars, they ran as single units. There weren't any trailers anymore. So there was always a motorman and a conductor and they would simply add more cars as they needed them.

Q How many people could a streetcar accommodate?

A The new cars had a capacity of about 51, 52 seated and then you could almost double that number with standees if you wanted to really crush. The standard in the transit business is usually about 50% of seated capacity standing. So it would be another 25 or so to have a comfortable standing load. After that you can squeeze more in but it starts to get difficult.

Q Describe what went on at the Snelling Avenue streetcar shops.

A In the Snelling shops, first they built the cars. And they not only built the 1,200 streetcars, they built, oh, several dozen work cars – cars that would haul things around, snowplows that could clear the streets, were responsible for clearing all the streets, sprinkler cars to sprinkle the dirt streets, sand cars to distribute sand for traction in slippery weather, wire cars for handling, repairing the overhead wire that had platforms that would go up and down. So they built all those. As they got to the 1920's, a company called the Lightweight Noiseless Electric Streetcar Company, was created to have Twin City lines build under license lightweight streetcars because they came, Twin City Lines came up with their own lightweight designs. Lightweight was something that kind of swept the industry to try to reduce power use in the 1920's. So Twin City Lines – like they did everywhere – they did their own. They came up with their own design, built 35 cars for themselves but this company Lightweight Noiseless said, hey we could probably take those and sell them to other systems. And they built some 60, 70 cars for about four or five other cities. That took them through to 1925 or so and then that particular phase was over. Now in addition to building the cars they designed their cars to be repaired. So every five years every single car was brought in, completely torn

down, everything that needed replacing or fixing was fixed and the car was sent out. And they did that all the way up until about 1950. So even though these streetcars were 45, 50 years old by that time, they had been rehabbed sometime in the last five years. Now actually I can add an item. All along all of the overhead wire was suspended from cast iron poles that were on either side of the street and were suspended between them. And if you look at any picture of any street with a streetcar line you'll see these distinctive black poles, tapered poles with a rounded cap on the top. They had a foundry at Snelling Shops and they made all their own overhead wire poles. They had a track department on the east end of the property was where track and overhead wire supplies were kept. So they could kind of do anything there. It was a factory.

Q Are there any portions of the old shops still in existence?

A There's one other remnant. Snelling Shops are gone now, of course. They were torn down. They survived as Snelling Garage for Metro Transit for quite few years and was torn down a few years ago. However, the predecessor to Snelling Station was Midway Station, which was not a horse car facility but it was an early 1890 streetcar, electric car facility. And that building still stands and it's just east of Raymond Avenue on the south side of University. It's kind of a long, narrow two-story building. It used to have big doors in the front. Those were replaced after it was converted. It's now an office building. But that survived. None of the horse car facilities are still around.

Q Talk about some of the major businesses and entertainment places.

A In the first half of the century, of course, the Prom Ballroom which disappeared a number of years ago, was a little bit west of Lexington Avenue and just east of that was Lexington ballpark. One of the features of the rivalry between the St. Paul Saints and Minneapolis Millers was what came to be referred to as streetcar double headers, where they would play about a noon game or a late morning game in one of the two cities and then everyone would pile on the streetcars and a couple hours later they would get to the other ballpark and they'd play late afternoon or an evening double header. So Lexington ballpark. Brown and Bigelow, of course was huge, producing all sorts of calendars and printed material. The artist Maxfield Parrish was kind of their in-house calendar guy; they used him a great deal. Just west of Prior Avenue was the bridges that go over University Avenue today – there's actually only one; there used to be two – was for the Minnesota Transfer Railway. Now the Minnesota Transfer Railway was a terminal and switching railroad that was owned in common by all the big railroads that came into the Twin Cities. I think it had nine owners and it was the place where they interchanged the freight cars between each other. They originally didn't interchange the freight cars. They would actually go and they had these huge unloading sheds that were just north of University Avenue, where they'd pull the cars in from one railroad, off-load all the stuff, load it into the freight car for the next railroad. Well, that was pretty inefficient so they simply started exchanging the cars. On the north side of University, just east of the tracks where the Menards is now, was the office building for the Minnesota Transfer. That lasted I suppose until about the 1960s or so. There's an interesting artifact of the Transfer that is just south of University Avenue two blocks and that's the roundhouse. This is the last working railroad roundhouse in the Twin Cities and portions of it date back to about 1887 or so, when the Transfer was completed. When you look at that roundhouse there were pieces built in like the 80s, the 90s, the 20s and the 50s. And it's still there and its still being used. And of course the Transfer switched all kinds of heavy industry and warehouses. So just north of University Avenue

by a block and just west of the tracks was Central Warehouse, which the buildings are still there. I don't know if it's still called Central Warehouse but it's just this enormous trans-shipping complex.

Q How was University viewed by the community back in the first half of the 20th century?

A University, I think, is perceived much differently today than it was back then. And I think for University Avenue and Lake Street, which are very comparable, or West Broadway or Central Avenue NE – the big streetcar strips of that era – back then they were mainstream. That's where everybody meant to go. You have not had the flight to the suburbs yet. You have not had sort of the social economic stratification that you have today, where these neighborhoods became low income and the wealth had gone somewhere else. I would say back in the streetcar era everybody expected to go along the University Avenue and then today I think they're viewed as not the most desirable places, although I'm one of those people who believe that there's a lot of sort of suburban paranoia about the city that is completely undeserved and that there's a few little bad places, but for the most part there's nothing wrong with the city at all. I mean the fact that Montgomery Ward was built in the 20s as the premier shopping destination that it was, says something about how University Avenue was held in high regard. Same thing with Lake Street and Sears. By the way the reason that they were sited that way as opposed to being in the downtown's is that both those stores, besides being a retail store, were also shipping centers, distribution centers for Montgomery Ward and for Sears and they featured first-class streetcar service at the front door so that the customers could get to it but they had direct railroad service at the back door so they could get the goods in for a low cost. You couldn't' actually do that in the downtown's. There wasn't any way to get a railroad boxcar up to the back end of a store, but you could do it at Lake and Chicago and you could do it on University Avenue where Wards was.

Q Talk about the importance of the railroad spurs.

A Well the railroad spur that served Wards, a stub end of it still exists just south of 94 between Snelling and Hamline. That same spur went up into the streetcar shops too, to deliver things and actually fanned out to a whole series of plants including Brown and Bigelow and a bunch of other industrial stuff where there is now all that strip mall stuff that is just west of Hamline, just across from Target. As a matter of fact there's a funny geographical remnant: if you go in on that stub just west of Hamline – I think there's a big Border's bookstore and all – and you notice that building's at an angle in the parking lot. It's at an angle because the property line for the railroad spur cut diagonally through the property and was headed for Brown & Bigelow. There's a piece of trivia for you.

Q There is one part of University where the buildings are set way back from the street. Why do you think that happened?

A The area you're talking about on the north side of University, just east of Fairview – now I only got this second-hand - I didn't know about this until I was in a meeting where this came up. But you'll notice that all the buildings which date from about 1910 to about 1920, and they're kind of big either industrial or office-type buildings, are set back quite a ways. And the reason is that their front yards are a city park. And it goes for a couple, three blocks east of Fairview. And it doesn't look like a city park. Apparently the

land was owned by the city but they had an arrangement with these property owners to maintain it as grassy natural land. And about five years ago or so I was in a meeting where apparently the city parks department wanted to go and sort of take back control of that and put some facilities in for kids to play on and such, and I think this may have been happening. I haven't followed it. But it's a very unusual situation to have essentially public parkland but under the stewardship of a private commercial landowner that was right next-door.

Q Some of our earliest "suburbs" were located along University Avenue where the old steam railway lines had stations. Where were those?

A I've got one that I can talk about. Back in that era of the commuter trains that I was telling you about, there were a series of real estate developments that happened on those two lines between Minneapolis and St. Paul. They were viewed as suburban developments even though technically they weren't suburbs; they were in the city limits but they were away from where the street grid had built out to. They were characterized by curving streets and all that. These were railroad suburbs where you would be accessible to the city via the commuter train but you didn't have to be in the city. It was much more peaceful. St. Anthony Park is one of those, Macalester Park is one. Well, Merriam Park, which is on University Avenue, is another one. So if you look at the neighborhood that's just east of Prior on the south side of University, it has curving streets, there's that little park, that oval shaped park – that was originally called Union Park and it became Merriam Park and it was all built around the railroad station on the Milwaukee Road on Prior. If you go south on Prior about two blocks, the tracks cross over Prior. That's where the station was. So here you were. There were a lot of these parks – Prospect Park is actually another one. Prospect Park was built because on the Northern Pacific between the cities, they built a station right at about 29th Avenue SE or so and that was the Prospect Park Station and land developers sold lots in Prospect Park because that station was there in 1886 that preceded the streetcars. So you've got two of those developments located right on University Avenue. And right now, I don't think anyone thinks about them at all, but they were really suburbs within the city.

Q Streetcar use began to decline after WWII when more people were buying cars. And in the 1950s, Twin Cities Rapid Transit officials were persuaded that buses were the future, so they abandoned the streetcars. Do you know how the public and the media responded to that change?

A Following World War II, ridership dropped dramatically. During the war there had been a tremendous resurgence of ridership because you had rationing of gasoline, new automobiles were not available for sale, rationing of rubber. So everyone got on the streetcars. After the war all that pent up demand for automobiles asserted itself, people started moving to the suburbs, ridership plummeted. The streetcar company was a profit-making enterprise. The only way they could stay in business was to carry enough people at enough fares so that they could cover their costs. They quickly - by about the time 1949 came around - they were starting to lose money. All across the country, streetcar systems were being abandoned because streetcars cost more to run than buses and the reason is really fairly simple: the streetcar company had to build and maintain all those tracks and they owned 400-some miles of tracks. They had to own and build and maintain a power system. The power plant that's on the east end of the Stone Arch Bridge is the power plant that ran the streetcar system, plus they had two

hydroplants at St. Anthony Falls. So they had that and all the wire and everything. The streetcar company was required under their city franchises to plow every street they ran on for no compensation. They were required under the city franchises to pave the track area on every street. So the city would pave the outside of the tracks but the two lane strip in the center the streetcar company had to pay for; no compensation. Well, if you run buses, you don't have to maintain the track or the overhead wire, you don't have to plow the street and the city maintains the road for you. So there were some cost reasons. They were really confronted with a situation where if they wanted to stay in business they had to get rid of streetcars and convert to buses. They couldn't get the costs down any other way. There were other factors: their electric generating plant was obsolete and would have had to be replaced; most of their streetcar fleet was 40+ years old and really it was getting time. Twin Cities were the only streetcar system in the country that never bought a steel streetcar; they were all made out of wood. And they didn't have the capital to make those replacements. On top of that the streetcars were viewed as very out of date, not modern and were an irritation to a lot of motorists. Now there was suddenly more competing auto traffic than ever, which not only slowed them down and increased their operating costs but suddenly they were having more streetcar accidents, collisions with automobiles and more payout there. It was illegal to pass a streetcar because you might go through a crowd of people getting on and off. Now on most of University Avenue they solved that problem by putting islands that people could stand on. However, on most streets including the Minneapolis portion of University, if you were on the streetcar and the streetcar stopped it was like a school bus: you stopped. Well, that wasn't viewed very well by auto drivers. In the wintertime before plowing really got good the streetcars would go and leave quite a rut where the snow was and automobiles had narrow tires back then and they'd get trapped in there and they'd feel they didn't have control of the car and they didn't like that. So you had a whole series of reasons – both people wanting to be modern and the economy – that said they had to get rid of streetcars. And General Motors Acceptance Corp said, we'll finance buses for you. The other thing that happened was that after WWII for the first time General Motors and to a lesser degree MAC, built buses that could equal the passenger hauling capacity of the streetcar. Before that they were smaller. So now they suddenly built a bus that could haul 50 people. And when you put all of those things together, the streetcars were going to go.

Q How would you describe University Avenue today?

A To someone who had never seen it before? University Avenue is a classic center city business thoroughfare. In so many cities we now have the freeway and it's taken all the traffic. But what did it replace? It replaced a big old straight road that had all the businesses along it. University Avenue is the Highway 66 of the Twin Cities. The freeway has taken the traffic, but its still there.

Q The Central Corridor is essentially a 21st century version of the streetcar. It's the largest public infrastructure investment in MN history. How do you think it will change the avenue?

A How will University look different five years from today because of the Central Corridor? Well, one thing that we know from years of experience is that bus service will not positively impact development. Bus service just doesn't move development one way or the other. But we know that rail does. Rail can attract development, which clusters around the stations. And this has been proven over and over again. In terms of five

years from today, the issue is when do we really come out of this recession? If we were not in the recession I would be predicting very visible results within five years. With the recession I think that probably tamps it down some, but nonetheless it sets the table for it to happen. And boy there's a lot of re-developable land along University. There's land that's vacant, land that has buildings that are really substandard or worn out, or could have a better or higher use. I think there's going to be a lot of residential come in because if you take a look at how redevelopment is happening now, it's mixed use. It's got retail or commercial on the ground floor, it's got residential above. And I really expect to see a lot of that sort of multi-story commercial/residential go in. I think you're definitely going to see a further increase of student housing on the Minneapolis end. I'm really quite sure that's going to happen. The U of M has a lot of plans that are in the works to do the technology park that's an old grain elevator area that's just across from Prospect Park. That will be well served by the Prospect Park station, so I really expect to see that happen. The term that urban planners love is "in-fill." You're going to see in-fill happen just because this is a trend that's happening all over. As energy prices go up you're seeing people look for opportunities in the city that they had ignored before. And of course there's this lawsuit that's out there of people essentially suing to not gentrify their neighborhood, which implies that people feel that there is going to be some gentrification. I don't think it will be gentrification. I think that it will be redevelopment that is healthy but will not displace those people. That's my personal feeling.