

Betts Zerby, Prospect Park resident

Interviewed by Laurie Stern in Prospect Park, June 3, 2011

Q I hear you know something about this neighborhood.

A Well, we've lived here for a very long time and both my husband and I went to the University of Minnesota undergraduate. So even before we lived here, we hung around here, being university folks. So it's a long, long relationship.

Q What attracted you to this neighborhood in the first place?

A Well my husband was teaching at the University of Minnesota law school at the time that we moved here in '72, so that was one big draw. And another big draw was Marshall University High School. And my children, who were quite young at that time – I had one that was in the 2nd grade, they were from the 2nd grade to senior in high school – and they loved the city. They loved moving out of the 'burbs, where they couldn't go anyplace on their own without a parent driving them. And here they could ride a bus and we were walking distance from the grade school right here – we lived up the hill just a block and a half. So we love the city.

Q What makes this neighborhood special?

A Well one of the things that makes the neighborhood special is the University of Minnesota. People in the neighborhood - more so in the past than now - were faculty, staff at the University of Minnesota. The entire math department at the U of M has lived in this neighborhood, one after another of people in the math department settled here. Many of the doctors at the hospital lived in this neighborhood. I think probably later in the 60s and 70s more of them went out to the suburbs. But many of the people that were at the U from say the 30s – even earlier than that – through the 60s lived in this neighborhood.

Q So you're suggesting that maybe it's changed and that it's different now than it used to be.

A Well I think it's different now than it used to be because perhaps people have been reluctant to send their kids to Minneapolis Public Schools. They prefer Edina public schools. We have the best school in the Minneapolis public school system right here. It's a very small school. We have small classes. The community just rallies around the school. We pay for the music teacher. We supplement the Minneapolis public school budget any way we can, to provide the kids with what they need going to school here.

Q Is that what this event is about?

A Well this event has been going on...nobody knows for sure what year it started, but it's been going on all the time that I have lived here which is close to 40 years. It was started, I believe, by the school and now it's sponsored by an organization called the Pratt Council, which is a supportive 501c3 that raises money, supports the school and its community education program because this school was closed down for a number of years and this, the school became a community education site and then we - the neighborhood - got together and convinced the school board to reopen the school

and....we just have a real activist kind of neighborhood. For instance, our Neighborhood Improvement Association is the oldest one in Minneapolis. It was founded in 1901 and has been active continuously ever since. The kind of people that live here, I'd say for the most part, the neighborhood is over-educated and over-opinionated and they have something to say about everything that goes on in their neighborhood. Just like they saved the water tower with the little bluebirds....

Q I was just going to ask you to tell us the story of saving the water tower.

A Well sometime - I believe it was in the 40s, maybe it was in the 50s but - the city was going to tear this water tower down. It hasn't been a functioning water tower for a very long time. It was built in 1913, I believe, and I think it operated maybe through the late 40s, early 50s. When they wanted to tear it down the local Bluebird troop gathered together, made a big fuss about it, and saved the water tower from the city who wanted to do away with it. There's a little article about that in the book, which is called "Under the Witch's Hat," which is named after the water tower, which is sort of the symbol of this neighborhood. We couldn't deal with life without our water tower. So every year at the ice cream social, the water tower is opened to the public and people have an opportunity to climb up there and see the city from up above. Now there has been a dispute as to what's the highest point in Minneapolis. I think we're probably wrong that we are. There's someplace over by Lowry that is higher, but we're at least the second highest spot in Minneapolis. And it's a great view from up there.

Q What do you mean you couldn't live without your witch's hat?

A Well, it's just symbolic of this neighborhood. The park at one time was scheduled to be...the hill was scheduled to be demolished, used as a gravel pit. Over just a little bit that way is Luxton Park and there was a hill over there called North Hill and they mined the gravel from that hill, lowered it, and they were intending to do that here. But this community assessed itself and raised the money to buy this parkland and kept the hill and the tower as an integral part of the hill.

Q You mean this community literally assessed itself. Not like it took its own measure. It taxed itself.

A It taxed itself, yes. I think it was \$19,000 or something that they made a special assessment to buy the parkland.

Q And what was your involvement with that?

A Oh this was long before my time.

Q But you wrote about it?

A It's part of the story of this neighborhood that is in the book called, "Under the Witch's Hat."

Q And you had to do what with the book?

A Well, the book was written by a committee, essentially. I was the chair of that committee and we hired a professor from the University named Dean Abramson to be

our editor. He just happened to live across the street from me up the hill here. And between the two of us we put the book together using software...we did the whole thing ourselves and we had it printed professionally. We now have a thousand copies sitting in a warehouse someplace. We did a second printing of it, but we've sold a little over a thousand copies.

Q What's your personal relationship with University Avenue?

A Well of course, University Avenue is the connection between Minneapolis and St. Paul. I remember as a little girl the big adventure from where I lived which was out in White Bear Lake where I grew up, was going to Montgomery Wards on University Avenue. And a little later going from St. Paul to Minneapolis to go to Dayton's. But it's the connection between the two cities. It's the connection with the U of M.

Q And light rail's going to make that more robust or worse or how?

A Well I think light rail is going to be great. It's going to be difficult to live through getting it here because the traffic is horrendous. Well, we're hoping to have great things after light rail. We're hoping to have some increased density on the north side of University Avenue – there's a lot of land up there that's available for development and we want them to stay over there because on this side of University Avenue it's all full. It's full of people who have lived here. There's room over there.