

MEMORIES OF EKEN PARK

By Connie (Graham) Roden and Marsha (Graham) Gregg

Oh, to be a kid in the 1950s in the Eken Park neighborhood! Our family lived at 2309 Myrtle Street from 1948 to 1958. This was Mom and Dad's first home, which they were able to purchase because, at the time, Myrtle Street houses were built and sold only to veterans. The Eken Park neighborhood's affordable homes were a perfect place to raise a young family. The neighborhood was full of children, and the park, nestled between North, Coolidge, and Dahle streets, was where we played every day.

In the winter, a portion of the park was flooded to create an ice rink, used by kids and families after school and on weekends for skating and pick-up hockey games. When summer rolled around, activity in the park increased ten-fold. The playground equipment was simple then -- one tall, skinny metal slide (very hot in the sun!), wooden-seated swings, monkey bars, and teeter-totters. Since the equipment was located on blacktop, summer often brought plenty of skinned knees and elbows. A couple of days a week, teens hired by the Parks Department would arrive to unlock a little wooden shed and wheel out craft materials for kids to have fun with. Children could learn how to weave reed baskets or buy yards of colorful plastic gimp to create bracelets and lanyards. It was always hard to decide on exactly which two colors we would choose for our gimp projects. The gimp was arrayed on large spools suspended above the table on wooden rods and cost just a penny per yard. Add a little metal clip and we were ready to braid!

The park was a safe place for even the youngest of kids to play all day every day. With skate keys suspended on a string around our necks, we would attach roller skates to our saddle shoes and skate around the block to spend the morning in the park. At noon, everyone would go back to their houses for lunch and then return to the park again, only heading home when Harvey Held, who lived across from the park on Coolidge Street, would whistle for his kids to come in for dinner. Mr. Held had the loudest whistle in the neighborhood and when we heard it, we knew that meant it was time for all of us to go home as well.

Every once in a while throughout the summer, the Stagecoach Theater would appear at the park to entertain children and families. These outdoor live performances would draw an appreciative crowd of children. And though occasionally the words of the performers would be drowned out by the deafening sounds of the jets flying overhead from Truax, we were so used to ignoring those sounds that no one really minded. A bit more noticeable was the aroma that occasionally wafted over the area from the Oscar Mayer plant at the end of the block. On days when certain products were being produced and the wind was blowing just right, the scent could be pretty strong. But since many people in the neighborhood supported their families by working in that plant, everyone in this middle-class community was glad to have Oscar Mayer as part of the neighborhood.

Children in this area attended Emerson Elementary School on Johnson Street and everyone walked to school each day. For us, that meant cutting through our backyard onto Coolidge Street, walking across the park, and then heading five blocks up North Street where we turned at the Stevens Grocery Store to walk a few blocks toward Emerson. It was a long walk for little kids and we did it four times a day, to school in the

morning, then home once again for lunch, then back to school for the afternoon and home again at the end of the day. Occasionally, if we were lucky, we would take the city bus toward school in the morning. We could catch the bus at a stop just a few houses away at the end of our block where Myrtle Street meets Packers Avenue, and with the fare only a nickel, it was a rare but real treat for us when we could convince our Mom to let us ride it. Sometimes, on the walk home from school, if we had a penny or two in our pocket, we would stop at the little corner shop kitty-corner across from the Tip Top Tavern for a piece of penny candy. That shop is now the Ogden North Street Diner, but back then, it was a great place to get a sweet treat after a long day at school.

All in all, our memories from our time on Myrtle Street are such good ones. The Eken Park neighborhood was most definitely a wonderful place to grow up.



Harold and Virginia Graham with their daughters, Connie, Marilyn and Marsha, Easter morning, 1953.



Twin sisters, Marilyn and Marsha Graham, December, 1955, in front of their home on Myrtle Street.