

George Latimer, Mayor of St. Paul, 1976-1990

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Landmark Center, St. Paul
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Q What are your earliest memories of University Ave.?

A When I visited University Avenue for the first time, it was probably in 1962 when I was a law clerk here, I thought it might compete for the ugliest avenue in America. During the period that I observed that it was a pretty dead looking, frankly ugly-looking place. A lot of people I met said, well you should have been here in the 40s. The trolleys where here. Or you should have been here in the 50s when we used to have drag and up and down the University Avenue and you'd go into the carhop places and all of that. It was quite wonderful. But that wasn't true in the 60's. It had a couple of really nice places like the Blue Horse and the Criterion, but by and large it wasn't much to look at. Montgomery Wards fortunately was still thriving. Yeah, Monkey Wards.

Q The intersection of Dale and University became notorious for prostitution and porn theaters. How did you, as the Mayor, deal with that problem?

A University/Dale was a depressing, offending element in the community, in the neighborhood, so that oftentimes people with families would not want to walk by there because they had the infamous Faust and of course the other liquor movie house. So it was very offensive to people. And Bill Wilson, a city councilman – might have been president at that time – led the way. And there were also some picketers who were clergy, several nuns in the area, because a number of parishes really abut University Avenue. St. Bernard's from over on Rice St, St. Agnes, St. Columba. And so it was very offensive to people that it was functioning there. I was not anywhere near in the front of doing away with those theaters because I had a hard time if it was legal to have those shops, the porn shops there than if we got rid of it, then what would keep them from buying a lot somewhere else and repeating it? So I was not at the front of that parade at all. I got dragged into being a leader right near the end. The city did something quite rare. They contracted with a private realtor to make a deal with the owners of those theaters and they did a brilliant job. They got earnest money down. I can't tell you what the valuation difference was but they tell me they got it for a pretty good deal. It still struck me at the time that nearly a half million dollars was an awful lot of public money just to wipe out a couple of corners. But there's no question that it made a difference to the neighborhood, even though it took many years before the market really changed sufficiently so that it could start getting revived for a better and higher use as it is now. The Rondo Library is just a...I had no part in the building of it but the administration – Randy Kelly administration – put that together. And to have housing there, and the library itself and the Friends of the Library have many meetings in the Rondo Library. I've visited there many, many times – the number of kids there from every walk of life, using the computers, learning, having workshops. It's the most wonderful...to think of the people activity and the learning, the human development and the interaction occurring in the very corner that was a deadening, really ugly place before.

Q Do you recall what happened to the Faust site after it was torn down?

A I do remember. I remember very well there was a wonderful community organizer whose name was Ron Pauline. He has since gone south, back where he grew up. And Ron Pauline and the neighborhood wanted to put a farmers market there. So with the City's help they put up a few sheds and a few stands that made it inviting for a farmer's market. But to be very candid, during my administration I don't think it ever really caught on as a commercial enterprise. It was a long time. Everything, I have learned, takes longer than you think it will.

Q Why do you think University Ave. attracted so many immigrants who wanted to start businesses?

A The immigrant population is like all immigrant populations throughout our history. They're willing to take a risk, they know what they love and what their ethnic group loves and so they...whether it's a food or tapestry or whatever it is, they start there and they know how to operate on a shoestring. My mother and father had a mom and pop store, so I can tell you what a shoestring is. So they get by using family to start it up, often barely making ends meet. But if the product is good, if the food is tasty, they introduce the Midwesterner to a whole new taste whether it be Hmong or Vietnamese or Somali or Latino, we have been converted. University Avenue and St. Paul is no longer just white bread. It's much more interesting than that.

Q How do you see the avenue changing today?

A The Avenue is already flourishing. Whether some of that is anticipating the LRT, I really don't know. But you can see the real estate values increasing on the western end of the Avenue as you head into University – a lot of great housing developments, several good senior housing developments – they're going to be right on that line. It's going to be wonderful. I think that Mayor Coleman's vision of a dense economic development growing out of that transit corridor is absolutely right on and it's going to happen. The key, of course, is to preserve the opportunities for the small businesses, which now are flourishing there. And I think the city is trying to do things that will achieve that.

Q How do you think University Ave. will change after the light rail is done?

A Well, it's getting very interesting, University Avenue, because the State Capitol is always the focal point right opposite one of the great cathedrals of America, the starting point for the activity of University Avenue, running from the State Capitol for maybe 4, 5, 6 miles to one of the great universities in the country and indeed the world. So with those two poles, an awful lot of activity is flourishing that's going to be supportive of both state government and the University. And for students it's a wonderful place to be because of the ethnic variety, because of the architectural variety, because of the access to colleges – we have 5 colleges in St. Paul, most of them along the corridor or nearby the corridor, leading up to the University of Minnesota. So it's growing in its vitality. But as Al Jolson once said, you ain't seen nothin' yet, because when that corridor is completed those of you who are around 20 years from now, I think it's going to be one of the great cosmopolitan centers of the country.

Q The story about citizens protesting the Faust and other pornography businesses says something about the power of individuals and neighborhoods to bring about change.

A Citizen groups are a pain in the neck. And they're absolutely essential to a great city. The citizen groups know one thing that you should never forget in a free country and that is: they own this place. It is theirs. It doesn't belong to someone else; it belongs to them, their kids, their older people, and the kids yet to come. And so they're always vigilant and fighting for that territory being either preserved in a quality way or growing in a way that's mindful of the people there. It makes it difficult to get things done, but that's the humanity of it and the democracy of it and it just is essential to making things work. We learn so much from community groups that alert us to maybe these great schemes that we have in mind may be not so great, either in the short term or in the nearby places.

Q How important were the residents, businesses and other institutions in bringing about change?

A I think its fair to say that without the neighborhoods and the church-based organizations and the sense of the history of that neighborhood – the old railroad workers who used to live in Frogtown, Summit-University and Rondo with its rich tradition, the oldest African American church in Minnesota, one of the first Baptists churches in Minnesota – Pilgrim Baptist, right in the middle of Rondo and Summit-University – without people from those places pressing upon mayors and city council people, we would not be where we are today looking ahead with hope but rather we would have been ignored and people would have left. But they haven't left. They've stayed and made it better.

Q What would you like to see five or ten years from now?

A I think it will continue to be a great place for people who are new arrivals, people who want access to the whole Twin Cities are going to have better access than ever. I think it's going to be a place where people who have the means can live in great places and have rapid transit at their doorstep. And people perhaps without great means are going to have an affordable place to live, which can also have access to jobs. We will have a quarter of a million or more jobs along that corridor. And those jobs can be held by people who right now do not make a lot of money but will be ready to work hard, just as all the immigrants and the people who came before them have. So I think it's going to be a place of opportunity, a place of variety, a place of fun, a place that contributes to the economy and a learning place for all the community.

Q Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

I want to go back and talk about something that isn't so happy, but it's historical. When I was struck by activities by the so-called johns along Dale and Selby, south of University. And I complained to the police chief and said, you know that's really very offensive to many women and their kids walking along there. And he said, you know Mayor, if we come down and drive it out of Dale Selby, it's going to go to University. He was absolutely a prophet. And so we had a period there in the '70's and early '80's, and Chief Finney would be able to recall it well, in which the activity – unwanted activity – moved northward onto University and nearby. And now as a result of community work, teen policing and everything else, I think we're getting rid of that activity in the University Avenue as well.

Q Councilman Bill Wilson played a major role in driving out the pornography, didn't he?

A Yes. Bill Wilson was absolutely fixated on that issue and his leadership and responding to the community really made the difference.