

Kimberly Nightingale, Saint Paul Almanac

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Olivet Congregational Church, St. Paul, January 2012

Q How long have you lived in the Twin Cities?

A I was born in St. Paul at Midway Hospital, right on University Ave and grew up in the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood, mostly on Jefferson and Cretin. My grandfather owned the Goodyear Tire Company store right there on University and Snelling. I lived there until I was about 6-1/2 and then we moved to Japan and I lived in Tokyo for eight years and I lived in Taipei for two years. My father worked for NW Airlines. Then we moved to Los Angeles. I finished high school in LA, went up to Northern California University and moved back to St. Paul when I already was married with one child and started teaching here.

Q Do you live in St. Paul now?

A Yes.

Q Before we talk about the Almanac, since you moved around growing up, what are your first memories of University Ave.?

A Well, my strongest memories are visiting my grandfather at his Goodyear Tire Company shop. He had a real big, it felt like a very big office and there were lots of men and there were lots of cars and tires and it was all very important. And we would go and I'd be all dressed up usually and we'd go out to lunch and my grandfather would come with us.

Q Roughly when would that have been?

A That would have been in the 1960s. We moved to Tokyo in 1970.

Q Then when you came back and settled in Minnesota, where did you end up living?

A When we first moved back, for twelve years we owned a home, a duplex in the Hamline-Midway neighborhood, right on Van Buren Avenue. We were just about ten blocks from University

A There was a lot of bustle around University Avenue when my grandfather owned his tire shop and there continued to be a lot of bustle when I lived in Hamline-Midway neighborhood. It was just a different kind of bustle, especially Snelling around Minnehaha in that area had kind of a slower vibe to it. A Korean restaurant moved in and grocery stores and some other restaurants that were Asian, mostly Korean at the time. And then you started seeing, there was still a lot of activity around University and Snelling as far as the grocery stores, etc., and lots of bus activity too.

A I have another memory of my grandfather on University Avenue. So my grandfather, Frank Smith, owned that Goodyear tire shop and he loved to exercise. So almost every day, right after work, he'd go to the YMCA on University and do his

exercising. And that was really important to him. I'm not sure if he always did it in the evening or in the morning, but it was a big part of his routine was to go to the Midway YMCA.

Q Talk about the St. Paul Almanac.

A The St. Paul Almanac is all about people, regular people telling the stories of their city and of their lives within that context of a geographic area. And we also like combining those regular stories with very famous writers like Garrison Keillor, Gordon Parks, so that you get this intertwining of local artists, who have national personalities, with local people. And part of my reason for doing this is I was reading the papers, I was looking at the typical business magazines about the area – they tend to be very Minneapolis-centered, except for some newspapers of course. But many of the magazines were very Minneapolis-centric and I thought we needed something that was St. Paul-centric and I also thought, I didn't want it to come from a business perspective but really as a community perspective.

Q I know you work with a variety of writers; do people come to you with ideas, or do you go out and find people to cover topics you identify?

A We do that in lots of different ways. One is we put a call out by email and through posters that we're looking for writing. And really it can be anything as long as it has some connection to St. Paul. The other thing we do is we have, this year we have 24 community editors. They're everyday people and also professional writers, even two professors, that get together once a week for fourteen weeks. They read all the stories that are submitted to the almanac but they're also required to go into their own personal communities and gather stories that are important to their families and friends. So they might gather an oral history from their grandmother or a written history. They might write it; their grandmother might write it. But that's part of the requirement. So we get very interesting stories that I would call undocumented narratives. These are the stories that you might not find anywhere else, except that this was a story that was given maybe from a grandmother to a daughter.

Q Do you recall any stories that offer reflections on the University Avenue experience?

A We've gotten many stories – not all of them have been published in the almanac – but many stories about Montgomery Wards and how mammoth Montgomery Wards was and how the, especially the young girls would look up to the teenage girls who'd be flying on their roller skates in the Montgomery Ward building. We've gotten several stories of girls imagining that they wanted to be on those roller skates zooming around this huge building. We also got a story about one young woman who got a job at Montgomery Wards but didn't get the roller skating job and had a really boring job doing work with the telephones. So a lot of people have fantasies around Montgomery Ward and what it meant for them. Another story about Montgomery Wards that was part of that same story is a girl who went to buy an item at Montgomery Wards and didn't have enough money. And the person working at the cash register put in the extra so that she could get that item. So there's some love and care and concern from a neighborhood perspective that this young woman felt for the Montgomery Wards building. We also had a story from Joanne Englund who was in the Hamline-University neighborhood and she talked about going, how safe she felt going to the butcher and getting meat for mom,

going to the grocery store – this is like in the 1940s – and she could get almost anywhere that she wanted to on her bike or on her skates. And the freedom of that; a lot of freedom in that.

Q I'm going to ask Joanne about that.....if you were to describe University Avenue today to somebody who'd never been here, what would you say?

A University is going through major transition at this time, but it is definitely a land that is full of new opportunity and many new immigrants have settled around University Avenue. It's a place of people of many colors, many ethnicities, many traditions. It's really where the excitement of the city, I think, has taken off. You could go to other neighborhoods that may be more established, more expensive and they're more homogenous, there isn't a lot of change. But the change around University Avenue, even without the light rail coming through, is dramatic because of the people and what they bring to University Avenue.

Q What are some of your favorite places on University?

A I have two favorite restaurants – can I say the name? One of my favorite restaurants is Bangkok Deli. This is a tremendous restaurant and anyone who's ever been to Thailand tells me that this is the most authentic Thai restaurant in St. Paul. The sign is so small you probably won't see it, but near Western Avenue, there is a tall chimney with fractured glass on it. That's where Bangkok Deli is and it's packed all the time. They don't even need a sign. My other favorite place – and they actually provided the food at our wedding – is Flamingo. Flamingo is near Hamline University and it's run by Fre and Shegitu and they do fabulous Ethiopian Food.

Q We talked to Shegitu last March.....what a life story she has....

A Yes, yes. I have her book. She published it last year.

Q As you think about the bigger changes that are coming on University Avenue, what do you think will change?

A I think it will be dramatic. I think there will be some pain with this change. I think there also may be some real positives. I think because I come from living in Tokyo for eight years, the freedom for young people and older people to be able to get on a train and to zoom into other neighborhoods they might not get to very easily, is very exciting. And there's something about the romance of trains that I never felt with a bus. And in Tokyo they have a very good bus system and I never took it. I think it was the fumes, the non-romance of a bus. And you get on a train and you really feel like you're connecting to the past and to history and that you're going for the ride. You're going on an adventure. I've just never felt that way on a bus. So I think, especially for young people, there will be some freedom that they will feel – and I'm saying young like ten years old – that you could get on a train and you could go for an adventure like I used to in Tokyo. And I'm hoping that that's very freeing for especially young people.

Q That's a great observation. Nobody else has put it in those terms...the romance of the rails.

A Well I moved to Japan when I was seven and I wasn't allowed to be on the train at seven, but at eight I went to school every day, by myself, on the train and there is a wild freedom that you give children when you let them travel on their own. And it was very positive.

Q Anything else that you want to say?

A There's something I'd like to say about my in-laws. My in-laws, Rachel Tilson and Ken Tilson, met at the Prom Ballroom in the 1940s and they didn't meet at a dance. They met protesting that African Americans in the 40s were not allowed – in the early 40s – were not allowed to dance at the Prom Ballroom. And they were protesting for integration. And that's the day they met and fell in love. And they were activists ever since.