

Tom Owens, former St. Paul police officer

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Aug. 18, 2011

Q What are your earliest memories of University Avenue?

A University Avenue was an interesting place when I was growing up and it held lots of fascinating stories for me. Back when all the car dealers were on University Avenue it was a favorite place to cruise up and down and look at all the new cars. But even before that, when I was in high school I used to walk from my home up on Wheelock Parkway down to Thorpe Music Company on Rice Street and take a guitar lesson on Saturday mornings. And then the neighbor and I would walk all the way up to University and Dale Street to the Faust Theater. We would pay 15 cents and watch Laurel and Hardy cartoons all afternoon. And then we'd walk all the way back to the Como Park/Wheelock Parkway area. And then later on, when I was 15 and I got a driver's license, I actually cruised University Avenue in my grandfather's 1954 Ford to look at all the wonderful cars. You could almost set your calendar to when the new cars would be coming out in fall. That was the time to go look at the dealers and see the new cars. So University Avenue was the center of the universe for car buyer's back then.

Q Apart from the car dealers, what other major buildings, institutions do you remember from that time period?

A I particularly remember Montgomery Wards because my father worked there right after the war. Actually, before my parents built the home on Wheelock Parkway I actually lived on Edmund, just a couple blocks off of University Avenue and just a little bit west of Lexington. So Montgomery Wards was the place to go to buy clothing, to buy paint, to buy anything you needed. Actually they sold automobiles back then. So that was one of the major buildings on University Avenue on our side of the river was Montgomery Wards.

Q Can you think of how did the street feel back then.. 1960's mostly...was it busy, was it gritty? How would you describe it....?

A Well back in the 60s there were fewer people and fewer cars and University Avenue still had the streetcar tracks and cobblestone. We felt safe going anywhere back then. I actually attended high school not far from University Avenue – St. Agnes High School on Thomas and Edmund, Thomas and Dale. So we used to go over to Steichen's to pick up sporting goods for the sports that we played at St. Agnes and we didn't think anything of walking. I hitch hiked home from school every day after high school – up Dale Street and up Wheelock Parkway – and we didn't think a thing of it back then. The thing that I noticed was back in the 60s when my parents said we're going to go visit our friends over in Edina, that was a road trip. That was a long way to go. Wow, we're going all the way to Edina? And I always wanted to sit – of course my sister and I always sat in the backseat – but I always wanted to get the seat behind my dad on the way home because we'd go over the old Hennepin Avenue bridge, with the steel grate, and from that position I could actually watch the Grain Belt Beer sign light up one letter at a time, on Nicollet Island just upstream from the Hennepin Avenue bridge. And I remember driving up and down University Avenue in my parents '51 Mercury and looking at all the buildings and all the businesses and of course there were bars on almost every corner as well.

Q Fast forward to the time on the police force from '68 to '86 – during that time I can imagine you covered University Avenue at least periodically on your beat. Talk about your life on the force.....

A Back in the late 60s, matter of fact April of 1968, I went on the St. Paul Police Department and my first assignment was what we called the Hill District – the Summit University area. And our boundary line, our northern boundary, was University Avenue and we got down to University Avenue quite often. There was a bar on the corner of Dale and University that we would get to probably twice a night on fight calls of some nature. University was...it was almost a magical boundary between the Frogtown area and the Summit-University area and while it was really busy up on Selby Avenue, University was almost a...I don't want to say a no fly zone or an area... you didn't mess with stuff on University Avenue. It was kind of sacred, in a way. I worked third man on the squad with two great police officers – Artie Renteria and Joe Emer – and both of those guys made me look like a midget. I mean, they were huge. And it was kind of our mission, besides keeping the peace and serving the public, to make sure that the restaurants in the area were serving fresh food. So we'd feel obliged to sample the food. Often. So it was quite fun and that's how....well Clark's Submarine started on University Avenue, north side of University. And that's how I ended up getting to know Porky's. I had a double life back then. I liked cars even back when I was younger and I had a '68 Camaro Super Sport. And when I wasn't on duty, in uniform, I was cruising with my Camaro. And there were three places: the White Castle downtown on the west side of the loop, Roadside Drive-In out on north Snelling, and Porky's. Those were the places to go and they were the old kind of drive-ins where you'd pull in, you'd circle two or three times to check out who was there, you'd find a spot to back in, you'd order your hamburger and your malt and you'd sit there for an hour and watch all the cars. It was great fun.

Q Talk more about Porky's. Were there a lot of hot rods and custom cars....what was it like at Porky's.....?

A As I mentioned, Porky's was one of the three places, at least that I knew of, that were neat hangouts for car people and up until the time I went on the police department, I was driving my grandfather's '54 Ford. I think a lot of the guys that were hanging around the drive-ins at that time had their parent's car – older car – or their grandfather's car and slightly modified. We had taken off the hood ornaments and put spinner hubcaps on them and of course when I got three blocks from home I'd take the top of the air cleaner off so the old 239 would actually sound a little more awesome. As I remember it wasn't quite the market for heavily modified cars as it is today, so anything that would roll dependably, you'd see it at Porky's. It was busy. I remember going in there on the weekend evenings and having to circle three or four times and maybe go around the block a few times before you could find a place to park. During the week it wasn't quite as bad, but...it was good, clean fun back then. I mean, nobody was getting in fights. Maybe there was a little drag racing on University Avenue once in a while but it was just very simple, good, clean fun. We came there to enjoy the food and enjoy each others company and look at cars.

Q Were there any other places you would go like movie theaters or any other establishments aside from Porky's.....?

A Well I didn't have as much free time as some of my other friends back then. Besides putting in my time, my 8 hours a day on the police department, I was also singing in a church choir and I was playing in the St. Paul Police Band. I was on the Pistol Team. And not long after I got on the job we started the St. Paul Police Chorus so I didn't have a lot of time. So when I did get to go to Porky's on my off-duty time it was a real treat. I actually, in the late 60s through the 70s, I spent more time at Porky's in a squad car than I did in my personal car. And we didn't cruise around three times to find a parking spot, but we always tried to make it out to Porky's for a Twinburger at the beginning of the shift and the perfect way to end a shift was that Hot Fudge Cake that was just incredible. And back then it was 39 cents. It was incredible.

Q Going back to your comments – when you were on duty now you mentioned the bar at Dale and University where you often got calls. What other....calls you would get or incidents you would see over the years....?

A University Avenue had quite a variety of businesses back then and occasionally we would get called to pick up a shoplifter, but actually not very often. It wasn't until, it wasn't until some of the bigger chain superstores got on University that we had much trouble with shoplifters. But as I mentioned before, University Avenue is kind of a safe haven. The businesses pretty much policed themselves and we were there as a presence, probably to keep the drag racing down to a minimum. Because between Snelling Avenue, from the Fairgrounds north, and University Avenue – those were the two places where you got to try out the car. But I don't remember being involved in a lot of incidents on University Avenue other than bar fights and as I mentioned there were a lot of bars on University Avenue and sometimes people would have a little bit too much of an adult beverage and get out of line. I remember going to lots of bars on University Avenue to haul somebody out. And back then a lot of times we just took them home. By the time we got them outside they realized that they were in trouble and we tried to put the fear of the Lord in them and...a lot of times it was more effective to just take them home. Scare them a little bit and take them home.

Q You mentioned that when you were a kid you'd go see Laurel & Hardy at the Faust Theater back in the days when it was a legitimate theater. At some point it became a porn theater....do you have any recollection....of prostitution....taking over that corner?

A I remember getting calls to the Faust Theater when I was on duty, but it was usually to take out somebody that was disorderly and I never got past the lobby. Usually they had a couple of guys that worked there that were...I think one of them was named Guido...and they pretty much took care of stuff in the theater but we once in a while had to arrest somebody in the lobby for disorderly conduct. I never got involved in prostitution. I went on the force when I was 20 years old and actually had to work in the communications center until my 21st birthday. I guess I was fortunate that I looked younger than my age most of the time so the Vice Unit was not interested in using me for prostitution; they wanted the older guys. But I did get involved with some of the after-hours establishments where we'd have to go in and raid them. And that was exciting. And again, it was a different world back then. When we'd raid an after-hours joint, we'd come up and kick the door in and we'd come in say, all right everybody's going to jail. And they'd all just line up against the wall and, OK here we go, because we knew that what they were doing was technically against the law but they weren't really hurting anybody else. And they knew the same thing. So why end up with a bloody nose or

worse over something like that? And I think back then people respected the law a lot more and...

Q What do you think of University Avenue today...how would you say University Avenue...has changed since your time on the force?

A If you could bring back somebody from the 60s to St. Paul and put them on University Avenue, they wouldn't recognize it. All the car dealers are gone. The last one, I think, to leave...well it was a toss-up between Saxon Ford and Whitaker Buick, but all the car dealers are gone. The whole east end of University Avenue is pretty much Asian restaurants and (good food, by the way, very good food) and Montgomery Wards is long gone. It's changed dramatically and a lot of the old family businesses are gone which is, I think, sad. I'm very conservative and I like tradition and I like history so when Steichen's moved out to Roseville and when a lot of these other family companies just left, it changed the whole character of University Avenue. And now it's being changed dramatically again. Here we tore up the streetcar tracks and now we're putting down light rail. It's like déjà vu all over again.

Q Any predictions on what it will be like 5 years from now when the light rail is done and the dust has settled.....?

A I tend to be an eternal optimist. I think that while I don't think the light rail is a good idea, I think that the neighborhood will rebound because I think the core of our whole economy is small business. And I think that the family businesses will survive somehow or new ones will become established and I think it will recover. Like I say, I like to be optimistic about things and it has a lot of history and a lot of memories for me and I'm hoping that it will be the same way for future generations.

Q Anything else....

A I do have to share one thought. I was mentioning working with Art and with Joe as third man on the car. When they had days off I'd be on that car and then on the opposite days I'd be on 311, which was the squad just west of Lexington. We did things back then to help out business owners and I don't know if you're even allowed to do it nowadays. But we'd do things like when Sandy's Drive-In, the burger shop on Lexington just south of University – we knew what time they closed at night and we would go and get their cash bag and take it up to Midway Bank and deposit it for them so that the owner wouldn't have to drive down the street with who knows how many hundreds or thousands of dollars worth of cash. And we did that for several businesses and for instance Sandy's – when we came back with the deposit slip, he'd give us a bag of hamburgers that were left on the grill when they closed and we'd take them down to the communications center for the fire department and the police department and share them with the guys down there. Things were done like that and it's not part of the job description but if you're preventing a robbery, it was easily justifiable. I remember when Clark's Submarine...we'd go in there and that was a treat. That was way before Subway's. And to get a Clark's Submarine and to watch Art or Joe put down one of those and then say, well we've got to get out to Porky's now so that we can get our dessert. And I'm going, how can you guys eat that much? I guess I tend to remember the fun things and the happy things and helping people while I was on the police department more than some of the darker stuff. But that's just a way to keep sane, too.

As it turns out, University Avenue also has kind of a presence in my blood that I didn't realize until I was in my teens. My grandfather owned the first Ford dealership on University Avenue, from 1915 until 1943 - my dad's father. And he, unfortunately passed away four years before I was born, but it was Owens Motor Sales and the building is still there - 709 to 713 University - and it was a very successful dealership. So now the fact that my wife and I own three Model A's, I think it must be just in my blood. And probably the fascination of University Avenue and the car dealers was always in the genes and I never realized it until my dad started telling me the stories, because my dad and my two uncles were overseas fighting the war when my grandfather actually passed away and the dealership passed out of the family hands.

Q 709, that's what cross street? Grotto?

A East of Victoria, yeah about Grotto. And it's Life something building now. But I've got pictures of it where it said...he started out the dealership - Owens Motor Sales - with arches over the windows and it was so successful he added a second story and an elevator and actually used to store cars up on the roof of the building.