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**In This Issue:**

**Jefferson Park's Volga Germans • Milwaukee Avenue**

As we launch into the year 2009, the Jefferson Park Historical Society looks forward to disseminating more local history at societal events. In 2008, we joined together with the community to learn more about the past at several different local venues. We had multiple guest speakers throughout the year, with topics covered such as Chicago Cemeteries and Ghostlore, the Chicago Portage, and the History of Germans from Russia in Jefferson Park. We toured the Passionist Monastery on Harlem Avenue, we participated in Jeff Fest, and we celebrated the publishing of a new book, "Portage Park," authored by JPHS executive board members Dan Pogorzelski and John Maloof.

As Jefferson Park evolves, we will continue to examine our own neighborhood history but also start to contextualize it more within Chicago's history. Jefferson Park is located in a strategic position on the Northwest Side, where it continues to serve as an anchor for transportation and a haven for new immigrants. While we revel in watching history unfold in the proximate streets, we plan to become more involved in the preservation of the history and historic character of the neighborhoods that surround us.

In this edition, Dan Pogorzelski examines the history of Volga Germans and their role in early Jefferson Park lore. Additionally, we explore the expansion of Milwaukee Avenue from the turn of the century. As usual, we bring these stories to life pictorially through photos provided by generous local residents. Also, throughout this edition, see all of those sponsors who help to make this publication possible. We are grateful for their support and we hope that you will in turn, *support these local businesses*. Without them, this newsletter would not be possible.

We continue to look for more members and volunteers. We need assistance with our many tasks throughout the year. If you are interested, please see our contact information on the inside of the front cover. We look forward to seeing you in 2009! - *Susanna Ernst*

**Mission Statement:**

**As the Jefferson Park Historical Society, our mission is to educate others about the history of Jefferson Park and the surrounding areas of Chicago. We will accomplish this through discussion at meetings, public tours and events, and dissemination of historical documents and photos through publications. Additionally, we desire to collaborate with others in the community to continue to maintain and preserve the history of our neighborhood. By linking the past with the present and the future, we will provide an awareness and create an appreciation for our place in Chicago's and Illinois' history.**

# The Jefferson Park Historical Society

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# Letters

*Letters have been edited for clarity and space.*

I just found out from your website the old John V. May Funeral Home was torn down, may I ask if you know why this was? I practically lived at that place when I was a kid; my mom's family had all their funerals there. This was a grand building inside too, that women's lounge as they called it upstairs was so beautiful. I have to ask also; did they remove the brass drinking fountain that was in the lobby before they tore it down? As kids, we always thought it was so neat to drink from it. I would appreciate anything you can tell me. Also, why did the John V. May name end up at Kolbus Funeral Home?

Jeff Neis - Huntley, IL

*The owners of the John V. May Funeral Home, Service Corporation International, closed down the funeral home in April 2005. Surely the Corporation felt the property, parking lot and building, were worth more than the money they were making on the funeral business. The new owner, who was not in the funeral home business, tore down the building with much dismay of the area residents, in December 2005. A vacate lot is all that remains of the building.*

*The drinking fountain in the lobby was a solid brass casting and was made by a company on the west coast that manufactures steamship bells. Surely it was savaged along with other fixtures. The walls of the arrangement room on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor were beautifully covered with knotty pine. - JPHS*

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## Jefferson Park's Volga Germans

By Daniel Pogorzelski

Chicago has long been a magnet for peoples from all over the world coming here to have their chance at making a better life for themselves and their families. While Jefferson Park is indeed the "Gateway to Chicago," it has not been one of the traditional areas where people first settled after their arrival from their native land until more recent times. These "neighborhoods of initial settlement," closer to the city center and the plentiful jobs in their industrial environs, gave rise to the famous ethnic enclaves like Greektown, Little Italy, Polish Downtown and Maxwell Street that are so deeply embedded in the social and historical fabric of the city. There is, however, a notable exception to this general state of affairs which makes Jefferson Park unique in the Chicagoland area: The Volga Germans.

Fear not reader, this is not a typo. Even today there are Germans in Russia, and there once were many more. Spread out in a number of clusters throughout the Russian Empire from Volhynia to the Black Sea, there were estimated to be 1.8 million Germans in Russia according to the 1897 Russian census. They were first brought in by Catherine the Great to tame the vast expanses of underpopulated lands in Russia from 1762 onwards. Bringing with them sophisticated agricultural techniques and free of the feudal obligations of the local Russian who still served their lords as serfs, these German living in the Russian Empire prospered.

One of these clusters of German settlement was along the Volga River, which from the time settlement began in 1764 eventually flourished into over 100 colonies between Saratov and Kamyshin. These people came to be known as the "Volga Germans" (*Nyemtsy Povolzhe*), most of whose origins were in southwestern Germany.

This rustic idyll was not to last. The privileges used to lure in German settlers into the less than welcoming Russian environment such as self-government, exemption from the military, as well as the right to cultivate their language and culture were curtailed and rescinded under the reigns of Czars Alexander II and III towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, policies encouraging "Russification" which were aimed at depriving all the peoples of the Empire of their native culture by insisting that they only speak Russian and pressuring them to convert to the Russian Orthodox faith began to be enacted. All of this was going on in the background while the Russian state was heading towards harder times that would eventually lead to its collapse.

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4.

This rustic idyll was not to last. The privileges used to lure in German settlers into the less than welcoming Russian environment such as self-government, exemption from the military, as well as the right to cultivate their language and culture were curtailed and rescinded under the reigns of Czars Alexander II and III towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, policies encouraging "Russification" which were aimed at depriving all the peoples of the Empire of their native culture by insisting that they only speak Russian and pressuring them to convert to the Russian Orthodox faith began to be enacted. All of this was going on in the background while the Russian state was heading towards harder times that would eventually lead to its collapse.

In the face of such pressures, it's small wonder that folks would start to look for greener pastures elsewhere. Over 100,000 Germans from Russia immigrated to the United States alone at this time. Many of them headed for Chicago, which would become the largest urban Volga German establishment in America, with well over 1000 families finding a new home here. The beginnings were small enough, with the first colonists coming to Chicago directly from Enders, Russia, in 1891, where they found employment at a farm near Dunning working for a German-American association. Here is where we go from the history of the Old World and enter the New World as most of Chicago's Volga Germans did- in Jefferson Park.

According to research done by members of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, the first known Volga Germans in Jefferson Park came to the area in 1894. It would be another two decades, however, before the flood of Volga Germans hit the Jefferson Park area, typical of other groups immigrating to the Americas from Eastern Europe. Most of these "Jefferson Parkers," as they are often referred to, came from the area of Volga German settlement called "Weisenseite."

Laverne Athletic Club  
Jefferson Park, Chicago, Illinois c.1935-1939



Top Row: Hank ZEITLER, Dave *Tootsie* HOPPE, Dave *Dugan* SCHWEIGERT, *Goff* HERZOG, Henry *Schtumma* HOPPE, Dave *Schwatza* CHRIST, Chris *Gabby* ALTERGOTT and Pete RIEB.  
Middle Row: Hank EIRICH, Alex *Schtribber* WIEGEL, Fred *Fob* HOPPE, Fred LAUBACH, *Chick* JACOBY and Fred *Schwatza* CHRIST.  
Front Row: SCOTTY SAUER, *Shorty* ALTERGOTT, Fred *Steigy* STEIGERWALDT, HANK *Fat* DEGRAF, and Dave *Ratch* SCHWEIGERT.

5.

*Photo courtesy Lydia DeGraf Jesse.*

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The Chicago Genealogist in its Fall 1998 issue writes that “*Their previous home had been on the eastern steppes of Russia near the provincial cities of Saratov and Engels along the Volga and Bolshoi-Karaman rivers... the majority of them came from the villages of Schwed, Krasnojar, Enders, Stahl, Reinwald, Rosenheim, Katherinenstadt, Paulskoye and Nieder-Monjou Russia. All of these villages were in close proximity to one another in Russia and the people were either friends, relatives, or acquaintances. They came to Jefferson Park through word-of-mouth, by letters sent home telling of jobs and because other Volga Germans, already in the neighborhood, spoke the same dialect of German.*”

Purportedly a colonist from Schwedt in Russia who came to Chicago in 1903 had made a big impression on his countrymen when he came back home a short 4 years later with a savings of 4,000 dollars! No surprise that within the next few years 150 families from Schwedt would leave the Russian steppe to trek to Chicago.

The Volga Germans established themselves in a number of spots in different areas of Chicagoland. Other locales settled by these Russian Germans included Humboldt Park, the area around Roosevelt and Pulaski Avenue, as well as the Chicago suburbs of Riverdale, Dolton, Calumet City, Lansing and Thornton. Offshoots off of the Jefferson Park settlement would also spring up in nearby Bellwood and Maywood from Jefferson Park where people left the bustle of the city for more suburban surroundings.

However, Jefferson Park stood out by virtue of its size among all the other enclaves of Volga Germans. By the time the 1930’s rolled around, we find that **450 Volga German families now lived in the vicinity of Jefferson Park and nearby Mayfair.** The environs of Jefferson Park thus not surprisingly were a prominent center of the cultural life of Volga Germans from all over Chicagoland.



**Sewing Circle of the Calvary United Brethren Church was a group of mothers who contributed to the church thousands of dollars by the sale of their needlework. The Church was located at 5001 W. Gunnison.**

*Photo Courtesy of George Valko*

While most Volga Germans settling in Jefferson Park were Protestant Lutherans, a number of churches served the community: Our Lady of Victory for Roman Catholics, while others in the neighborhood would attend Eden’s Church, Calvary Methodist, two distinct Lutheran churches named St. John as well as the nearby Jefferson Park Congregational Church. Additionally many Volga Germans would attend meetings of the “Bruderschaft,” a nondenominational religious brotherhood which held spirited prayer meetings three times a week where attendees would burst into song brimming “with beautiful harmonies” as one person recounted.

The combination of strictness and piety that members of the Bruderschaft practiced drew attention to them and resulted in their turning up in many recollections of Volga German life in Jefferson Park. Most poignant perhaps are David Aul’s recollections he shared with the Russian German newsletter of the Northern Illinois AHSGR:

*“The women would wear black shawls, the men would have no ties. That was a sin. Theater or anything like that was a no-no. They would “admonish” on that.*

*In 1932,33 they had a convention, the Bruderschaft over in Jeff. Groups coming in from Flint Michigan, Sheboygan and Racine Wisconsin, Riverdale Illinois. They had musicians called the “Michigan Blowers”. They were a Brass Band. The kids were just crazy over that band. By hook or crook we wanted to sit on their lap. They knew there was no room in Calvary Church, it was going to be packed. The kids had to go home. They had a speaker. Escaped what was going on in Russia, he made a circuit around the cities over the United States. He was telling of the atrocities. Lots of crying. They knelt down on their hands and knees and prayed. And it was like a bunch of Bumble Bees. Everybody had an individual prayer. It was the most moving thing. I never forgot it. It left an impression. They were that pious.”*

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Volga German rites and traditions were once common sights in Jefferson Park. During the Christmas holiday Belzenickel (St. Nicholas) and Christkindl (The Christ child) would visit Volga German homes bringing gifts for good children while plenty of halvah (a Turkish desert popular in Eastern Europe) was sure to be on every table. Wakes and funerals, many of which passed through the recently gone John V. May funeral home, were replete with antique customs brought over from the Old World. Weddings, always an occasion for a festive gathering, would gather after the ceremony at Cadola's Hall on the corner of Lavergne and Lawrence. Lydia De Graff Jesse recalled how

*"The food was prepared by the mothers who were invited to the wedding and everybody brought their great big roaster along. The women would prepare the potatoes the night before- they just peeled potatoes till they came out of you know, whatever. And the next morning they go together and put all of this together with the meat. Somebody had a truck- they put all this food on the truck and took it over to Kinness' Bakery, just down the street. And they baked all of the broda in the bakery ovens. When it was done they would bring it back to Cadola's Hall and the wedding carried on."*

One of the distinguishing traits of the "Jefferson Parkers" from other Volga Germans was the fact that the late date of their arrival from Russia had exposed them to a more intense "Russification" than those who'd arrived in the United States earlier. This meant that they had faced intense pressure to assimilate and give up their native culture and become Russian, one of the reasons for their trip to the New World. Those arriving in Jefferson Park in the first two decades of the twentieth century had been taught Russian in school, and evading the dreaded twenty year draft of those chosen to serve in the army of the Russian empire was reason enough for many to leave. T h i s Russian aspect of their heritage often lead to difficulties for the Volga Germans living in the United States at a time when the country was gripped by the "Red Scare" that broke out with Lenin's Communist revolution. Jerry Amen, president of the Northern Illinois Chapter of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia recounts the prejudice his family experienced because of their Russian-German background. When looking for work on the railroad during the Great Railroad Strike of 1922, his great grandfather George Amen like many other Germans from Russia would hide their heritage and regularly pass themselves off as Poles so that they wouldn't be denied jobs as subversive 'Bolsheviks.'

# B U L L E T I N



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**Some of the names of the people that stayed in the Russian Hotel are Reddinger, Gorr, Fluch, Borgardt and Veller. The two little girls in the photo, sitting in the park, are Lorraine and Marlene Hinsch.** Photo Courtesy of Ed Hinsch

**The Russian Hotel can be seen in the background of this 1933 photo. The hotel was located at 5440 W. Higgins Avenue in Jefferson Park, across from the park. It was called the Russian Hotel, but it was not really a hotel but an apartment building. It consisted of about 10 to 12 apartments in two large frame structure. The tenants were German-speaking people who came from Russia. These German-Russians would stay in the "hotel" for a few years, get jobs and earn some money and travel back to Russia. Of course, most would in-seminate into American culture and stay here.**

**Some tenants remember having to bathe at the Jefferson Park Fieldhouse because of lack of facilities in some of the apartments. Others remember the one light bulb that hung from two wires from the middle of the ceiling; their only source of electrical illumination.**



**This house, across the street from the Beaubien elementary school, on the southwest corner of Laramie and Argyle, once operated as the Bruderschaft Church where many Volga Germans attended services.**

*Photo Courtesy of Frank Suerth*

One of Jefferson Park's most hallowed pieces of neighborhood lore owes its existence to transient Volga Germans who came here for some hard work to make a quick buck with plans to go back home and live like a king. The "Russian Hotel" near the intersection of Higgins and Milwaukee consisted of two tenement buildings with room for about 10-12 apartments where these newly arrived immigrants would live while saving up for the money they were going to bring back with them to the old country. Located just opposite the park which lent its name to Jefferson Park, 5440 W. Higgins Road, these two structures are still fondly remembered spinning yarns about old times in these parts of the Northwest Side. The "Russian Hotel," like many other buildings chosen by folks looking to save as much money as they could to bring back with them, was known as a place with less than four star accommodations. In fact the older building located in the front of the lot had no running water at all!

**Download all the past issues of the Jefferson Park Historical Society Newsletter at:**  
[www.jeffersonparkhistory.org](http://www.jeffersonparkhistory.org)

The legacy of Jefferson Park's Volga German heritage is still visible in the neighborhood's landscape today, whether it's at Eden's church, much of whose congregation is still made up of Russian Germans, or in structures like the old Bruderschaft building opposite Beaubien school. For Chicago's Volga German community, the importance of the memories of life in Jefferson Park are an important part in the tale of how they acclimated themselves in this new land and became American. Whereas Gottlieb's famous store might now long be closed, one need only open up the pages of any Northern Illinois Russian German newsletter to reminisce about the one of a kind taste that you could only find at his Jeff Park store with "Gotchie's Killer" sausage.

*We would like to give our thanks to the Northern Illinois Chapter of the American Historical Society of Germans From Russia, which lent their helping hand in crafting this article, particularly Keith Weigel, Jerry Amen and Maggie Hein. We'd also like to thank Mr. George Valko for the pictures and resources he has shared with our society. This piece would not have been possible without the meticulous research done by Mr. George Valko in his three-volume E-Book on the History of the Volga Germans that goes in-depth on the Volga German saga from the Russian Steppe to Jefferson Park and beyond.*

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**This is a photo of the Calvary Church Sunday School. This church, also known as United Brethren Church, is located at 5001 W. Gunnison (southwest corner of Gunnison & Lavergne). In the brickwork above the door it reads, "Zion Kirche" "Der Vereinigten Brueder in Christo". Many Volga Germans attended this church and are in the photo.**

# Milwaukee Avenue

The following article about the history of Milwaukee Avenue appeared in the Chicago Daily Tribune on Wednesday, October 29, 1913. Henry M. Hyde, who had the advantage of looking at its history from such an early timeframe, penned this story. The Jefferson Park Historical Society added the photos.

## Milwaukee Trail Becomes a City within Few Years

### Old Settlers Can Remember When Avenue Was Route of U.S. Mail Coaches

#### Now Lined With Shops

#### People from All Countries Help to Make it Place of Business Activity

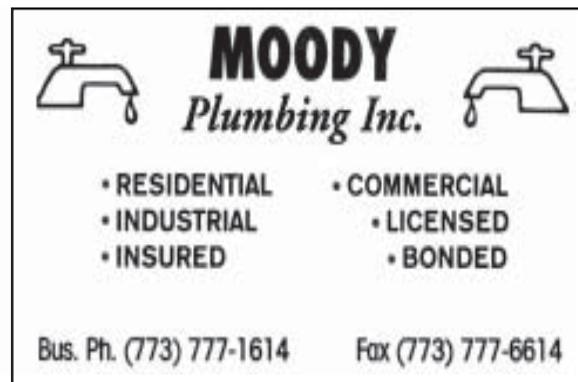
Nine miles out from the loop at the end of the car line on the old Indian trail (Milwaukee Avenue). Over in that trim two story flat building lives an old, white bearded man of eighty who saw more than one moccasined hunting party swing by across the prairie. Half a dozen blocks down the avenue stands a low square brick house, with something of old time dignity and reserve about it.

Indian trail and post road; then the big city spreading out. Wave after wave of immigrants sweeping out the long avenue to submerge the old farms and market gardens. Now in the old village of Jefferson Park, where one takes the street car running downtown, stands a brick building with the legend in Polish printed in big letters against its side: Farmerska Gospeda – Farmers’ Rest House.

Less than a hundred years ago an Indian war trail; today a ten mile cross section of the whole civilized world; layer after layer of young, the enterprising people of a dozen nations who have dared the great adventure, crossed the black water and a thousand miles of land and set up their home-keeping in a new country.

Cut off from downtown district by two huge railroad walls, by a wide canon filled with freight cars, by a bridge and a tunnel, Milwaukee Avenue has prospered mightily in spite of it all, like a sturdy son cast off by his family and left to depend on himself. It is self-reliant, almost self-sufficient, full of life, changing from day to day, an epitome of all that is most puzzling, most promising, and most characteristic of Chicago.

14.



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In Jefferson Park the big frame houses still stand back in the lots with oak and maple trees about them, though flat buildings are fast going up. To one side stands the big brick building of a Catholic school, and the story goes that the old Irish market gardener who presented the land on which it stands to the church woke up one morning to find that the city had overtaken him in his sleep and a real estate speculator was on hand to offer him \$90,000 for eighteen acres of his vegetable garden. It is a great neighborhood for retired farmers and market gardeners.



**These are two examples of big frame houses in Jefferson Park. The house shown above was located at 4572 N. Milwaukee and the other house was the old Clarke Robert's home located at 4564 N. Milwaukee, both are just south of Wilson Park. Both houses are now gone, replaced by condos.**

*Photos Courtesy of the Frank Suerth*

15.



**Dedicated on May 28, 1911, Our Lady of Victory 3 story school building, located at 4444 N. Laramie, could be seen from Milwaukee Avenue in those early years.**

The car starts southeast down the avenue. Here on the left is the old brick building which once served as the town hall. Now that Jefferson has been swallowed by the monster the town hall has become a police station.

For a long way the tall poplar trees line the avenue, past the huge gas tank, the lumberyards, and the Grayland station of the St. Paul Road. On either side the street is hemmed in with shops, most of them two story buildings, the thrifty owners living above their stores in the old way.

Northwest of Lawrence avenue for a good stretch there are no saloons. It is prohibition territory. But shops are of all kinds, ready to supply the needs of a self-contained community, and the names over the doors would indicate that out here the melting pot has already done its work.

**Edward Fox**  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
SINCE 1902

Edward Fox

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**Built in 1862, the Jefferson Town hall became a police station in 1889 after Jefferson Township became part of Chicago. It was located at six corners, south of Irving and northeast of Milwaukee.**

*Photo Courtesy of the Irving Park Historical Society*

On the left stands a huge old brick house, once a stately country mansion, now fallen into neglect and dilapidation. And just beyond it is the splendid building and grounds of the Carl Schurs Public High School. The proud dwellers along the avenue declare that their young people are already overcrowding the big building, and if one judges by the bright-eyed girls who were filing into the wide entrance, it is educating

a fine lot of young citizens.

On past Irving Park boulevard and into Avondale, where the names on the street signs make evident that this is a Polish neighborhood. "Ski" is the regular terminal, while the trim brick flats and shop buildings and the well kept, well paved side streets leading off from the avenue declare that these people are well to do and enterprising.

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**Carl Schurz High School shown after it open in 1910 and before the additions were added.**

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Down along Armitage avenue the shopkeepers have burst out into a glory of light. Thirty feet apart on either side the street ornamental standards lift globes of fire and across the avenue are looped festoons of light. One may imagine the glitter and excitement on Saturday nights when Milwaukee avenue is ablaze for blocks and the polyglot population throngs the sidewalks.

Western avenue – still far out from the loop – and now Yiddish signs begin to show on the fronts of kosher butcher shops. This is the Jewish layer of population, though Jewish merchants hold their own all along the avenues.

From Jefferson Park in the banks are frequent, some small, some occupying impressive buildings. The people who live on Milwaukee avenue are real folks, hard working, ambitious, thrifty, saving their money, investing in real estate, better patrons of the banks than of the saloons, plenty as they are. And they are intelligent people, depending not entirely for their reading on the big city papers.

Scattered along the streets are the offices of the small local dailies and weeklies, printed in English, in Polish, and in Yiddish. Back a block or two from the avenue stand the tall towers of the churches, many of them impressive and splendid buildings, one serving the largest parish in the world.

Running through the Jewish settlement, one comes into another Polish district, where live the newer immigrants. Here are a few factories, chiefly of clothing. One sees groups of women, shawls over their shoulders, carrying armfuls of coats back and forth. There are many labor offices, with groups of men in front of them and big signs offering jobs in Oklahoma and Arkansas.



**A muddy Milwaukee Avenue street scene near Humboldt Blvd . The two horse pulled wagons read: Humboldt Grocery - Market. John J. Quast, who was born in Germany, was the proprietor of this establishment at 2555 N. Milwaukee and lived up stairs from his business.**



**Looking north down Milwaukee Avenue from Ashland. Some of the businesses seen in the photo, from right to left, are Ashland Lunch Club (2nd floor), Dr. Boehmer – Dentist, Halperin Bros. Café Restaurant, Dr. A. Litvin, Hong Mee Chop Suey, and Prima Buffet Restaurant. In the center is the Continental Clothing & Shoes store. Photo CA 1908**

*Photo Courtesy of Frank Suerth*

Here also the shops grow larger. There are big department stores, huge establishments offering house furnishings and clothing, millinery stores that fairly scream with flowers and feathers that never grew in gardens or on birds. At the corner of Paulina street is rising Milwaukee avenue's first skyscraper, a structure of eight steel ribbed stories.

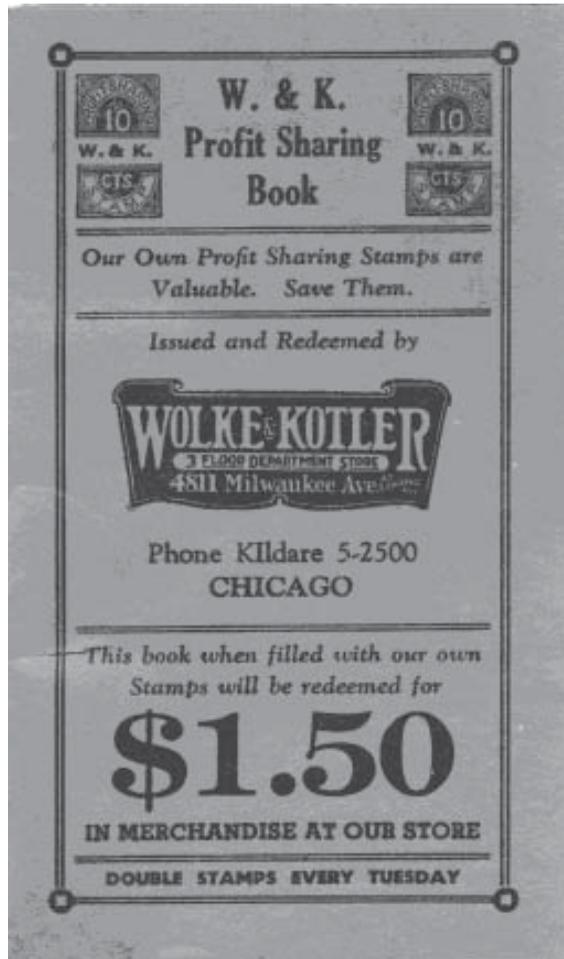
Though Poland into Italy and beyond Italy lie – the railroad walls and viaducts. One drops down through the tunnel into the loop. But very largely Milwaukee avenue stays at home. Set down in the midst of a lonesome prairie, it would be quite able to take care of itself.

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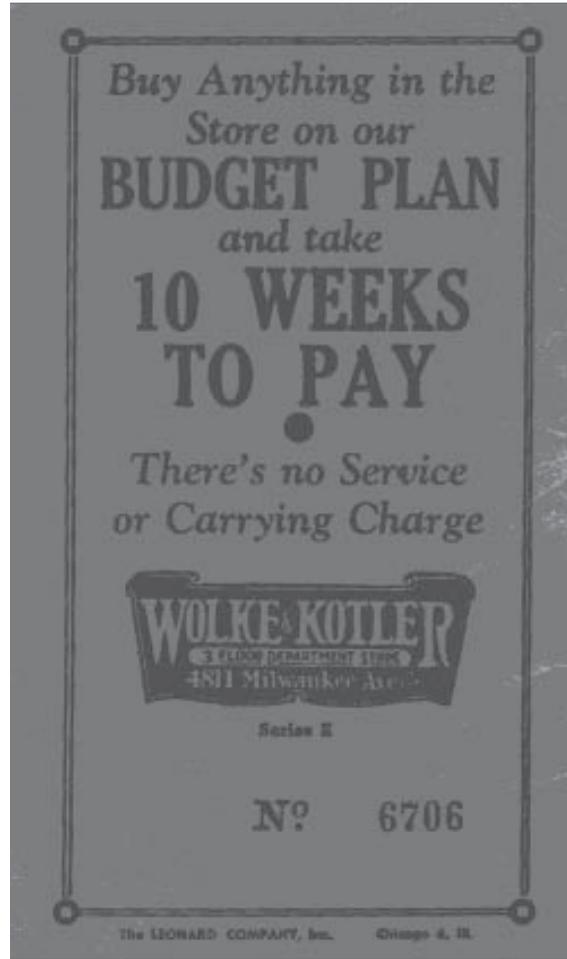
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**Front**



**Back**

This is the front and back of a Wolke & Kotler Profit Sharing Book (Saving Stamp Book). The Wolke & Kotler, 3-floor department store, was located at 4811 Milwaukee Avenue with their phone number Kildare 5-2500. When the book, all 21-stamp pages, was completely filled it could be redeemed for \$1.50 in merchandise at the store. You would receive one stamp for every ten cent purchased and Tuesday was double stamp day. 630 stamps were needed to fill the book.

*A special thanks to Laura Sanders who found this stamp book behind a cabinet, and donated this piece of neighborhood history to the Jefferson Park Historical Society.*



Two women and a dog are in the side yard of a home at 3756 N. Kostner Avenue.

*A special thanks to Ron Ernst who donated this image to the Jefferson Park Historical Society.*



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