

Paul Schwinn  
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In 1845 the Wisconsin territorial legislature authorized the building of a road between Milwaukee and Fond du Lac. The legislature recognized that the road's travelers would benefit from a midway point where they could rest or pick up supplies. On November 15, 1845 Byron Kilbourn (one of the founders of Milwaukee), James Kneeland, and E.B. Wolcott left Milwaukee to find that midway point. Two days later the three men came to the westward bend of the Milwaukee River. There, they found E.N. Higgins, a squatter who had built a crude shanty which legally gave him the first opportunity to buy the land, and the party of three turned into four. They returned to Milwaukee and purchased 720 acres of land and allotted pieces of land for roads, parks, and a courthouse. Now all that was left was naming the new settlement. Several suggestions were tossed around including the name Pikatmaea, however West Bend was chosen because of its geographical significance. Additionally, it was easy to spell.<sup>1</sup>

Today, that small 720 acre plot of land has expanded into a city of over 28,000 residents. Although by some counts West Bend can be classified as a suburb, the city has developed differently than many other suburban communities after World War II. West Bend's population and landscape developed gradually; not as a result of a Levitt-town like housing boom or as a suburban haven for people with jobs in big cities. West Bend has grown in a large part due to the industries that have established themselves in the community such as the West Bend Company, Amity Leather, and the Gehl Company.<sup>2</sup> Yet, while this may all be true, West Bend's landscape has followed post-war suburban building practices. Much of the construction that occurred after WWII has been on cheap land and land which is close to "nature", two phenomena that Adam Rome discusses in "The Bulldozer in the Countryside."<sup>3</sup> This post-WWII construction has

resulted in two striking features in the West Bend landscape: 1) a landscape is spread out and 2) a landscape where streams and wetlands have been altered.

Looking from today's West Bend it is hard to imagine that the city was built in order to accommodate a road. Today the opposite is true. Roads are needed to accommodate West Bend. When one raises their eyes to the skyline of West Bend they are greeted only by open sky. There are very few multiple-story buildings in the city. And when one lowers their eyes to ground level they are greeted by more open space paved over by concrete and asphalt which lies between the various buildings that dot the West Bend landscape. However, this sprawled pattern of land-use in West Bend does not infiltrate the entire city. Since West Bend was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it has a long history, and land-use patterns differ in the original parts of the city. By walking through the city's older and newer areas one can gain a sense of the different ways in which land has been put to use.

One of the oldest parts of the city is the downtown which was first constructed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> As one walks south from the beginning of Main Street which runs through the downtown, one notices the close proximity of the buildings to one another and to the street. There are no parking lots, only street parking. Most of the buildings have multiple stories, the bottom sections are mostly occupied by businesses and the upper sections are occupied by apartments or offices. One block east of Main Street lies 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, which is a residential street where houses with modestly sized yards lie within walking distances of the downtown area. More residential areas outline the downtown area on 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenues. One block west of Main Street lies the Milwaukee River, which provided a source of power and transportation for 19<sup>th</sup> century West Bend. This area of the city contains most businesses one would need to use. In downtown West Bend there are restaurants, a bank, a barbershop, a hardware store, a bakery,

bars, hotels, the West Bend Theater, a small park, and earlier in West Bend's history, there was a butcher's shop, a general store, and a drug store.<sup>5</sup> Surrounding the downtown there are also numerous public institutions such as the post office, the library, two public schools, the old courthouse, and the art museum. In addition, two of the cities main employers throughout its history, Amity Leather and the West Bend Company, are located at opposite ends of the downtown. The city's spiritual life also can be found in the downtown area where there are Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal, and non-denominational churches.<sup>6</sup> And all these places are located within a fifteen minute walk of each other. In short, all the amenities of the city were once located in a relatively centralized location, which helped to preserve the surrounding forests and wetlands.

However, as one ventures out of the downtown area into the newer parts of the city (the parts of the city that were largely constructed after World War II) one can tell that land-use patterns in the city have drastically changed throughout West Bend's history. Unlike the downtown area where businesses, public institutions, residential areas are close to one another, the two new commercial centers (built just off the two major highways which run through West Bend) and the new residential areas were built where land was cheap and where residents could be closer to nature, regardless of the land's original condition. These building practices which are characteristic of the post-war era, made possible by the influence of the automobile, spread out the landscape of the city and made its residents completely dependent on cars. In addition, these building practices led to a vast realtering of the surrounding landscape, which are largely wetlands.

Besides being at the west bend of the Milwaukee River, West Bend lies within the Kettle Moraine area of Wisconsin which is characterized by its hard wood forests and low lying

swampy areas.<sup>7</sup> This means that West Bend's landscape is home to numerous creeks, streams, brooks, marshlands, and swamplands that take on and feed in water to the Milwaukee River. However, one walking through West Bend today might be confused as to how and where these waterways go. Numerous streams suddenly disappear, running underneath streets or buildings and others simply stop because they have been filled. Lands that lie low in the landscape are not filled with water, but rather are occupied by houses.

Although, the construction of the new West Bend High School in 1927 did not occur in the post-WWII era, it was an omen of building patterns which would continue in West Bend. The land that is now occupied by Badger Middle School (the new high school in 1927) was bought by the city of West Bend after WWI for the bargain price of \$20,000 because the land was a mile outside the city and the property was intersected by Battle Creek. However, when the city called for the construction of a new high school in mid-1920s the outlying land intersected by Battle Creek was chosen. Subsequently, during the construction of the high school the creek was filled in and choked off. Today the only remnants of Battle Creek are the giant willow trees which still stand in the park in back of the school. This pattern of buying and building on cheap (and sometimes wet) land on the fringes of the city was continued until the present.<sup>8</sup>

The new commercial centers of West Bend along Highway 33 and along South Main Street and Paradise Drive follow this pattern of building on the fringes, being located at the west and east ends of the city. Unlike the downtown, there is no street parking. Giant slabs of asphalt divided by yellow lines occupied by hundreds of cars lie between the businesses and the streets. And unlike the downtown which was constructed on dry lands in a relatively compact area near the Milwaukee River, the new commercial centers are built on spacious tracks of land that once were wetlands of the Kettle Moraine.<sup>9</sup> Nothing better may demonstrate this pattern of land use

than the two different theaters in West Bend. The old West Bend Theater was built earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in downtown West Bend and shares walls with Husar's Jewelers and the Candy Man. The theater is two stories and has no parking lot. The newer Paradise Theater was built a half mile off Paradise Drive on the East end of town in the middle of a swamp. The one story building is surrounded only by a giant parking lot and the remnants of the swamp which was filled in order to construct the theater.<sup>10</sup>

West Bend's new residential areas were constructed using the same practices. If one were to walk around Villa Park, the neighborhood in which I grew up one would get a good visual depiction of the Chapter entitled "Where Not to Build" in Adam Rome's "The Bulldozer in the Countryside." My own childhood home was built on a marshland at the bottom an enormous hill. All of the houses in the neighborhood were either built on one of these giant hills or at the bottom of them in a low-lying wetland. The original homes in the neighborhood were near forests and fields, close to nature, and one can assume that that was one of the attractive features of the neighborhood and one of the reasons for building there. Since our house was one of the first to be built in the neighborhood, I was able to see the entire landscape of the neighborhood change as I grew up. The surrounding forests and fields were bulldozed under and curvy roads and houses with large front yards were constructed. Ponds were drained and relocated, and then drained once again and filled. Deer and other animals that once frequented our neighborhood became scarce. But more than the nonhuman world was hurt by such practices. Neighborhoods such as Villa Park have contributed to the West Bend areas problems with the contamination of the groundwater from runoff and the declining of the water-table from the reduction of wetlands. Since West Bend draws its drinking water from the groundwater this issue has become evermore important to the community.<sup>11</sup>

The other important feature of the new residential areas of West Bend is their distance from anything else. Villa Park like other residential areas are miles away from any businesses, making it completely impractical to walk anywhere in West Bend. This has made West Bend completely dependent upon automobiles. The first automobile came to West Bend in 1905 and took grip of the city.<sup>12</sup> In the post-war era West Bend became one of the highest car owning populations in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Today there are many monuments all over the city that attest to West Bend's car culture. In the last 10 years Highway 33, South Main Street, and Paradise Drive have all been reconstructed to become 5 lane roads with more stoplights than one could imagine. The High School recently doubled the size of its parking lot to insure that all students could drive to school. And maybe the most telling sign of West Bend's car culture is how crosswalks are used in the city. More often than not crosswalks are occupied by cars waiting at stoplights. Motorists never think twice about stopping in the middle crosswalks because, in West Bend pedestrians are an extinct species.

As my dad drove me to the Wal-Mart on the east side of the city from our home on west end of the city last weekend I received one last visual reminder of just how West Bend has developed. Exiting our neighborhood I noticed the small patch of marshland that still exists between the homes. As we drove along Highway 33 through the numerous stoplights I noticed the three car dealerships which are the closest businesses to our neighborhood. I noticed the creek that disappears under 18<sup>th</sup> avenue and the homes that run along the hill on 18<sup>th</sup>. Later along 18<sup>th</sup> I noticed the giant lot of property that covers several dozen acres on which one small house sits atop a hill. And finally as we pulled into the enormous Wal-Mart parking lot I noticed the small patch of marshland between Wal-Mart and Office Max which used to be home of Quaa

Creek before it was filled to accommodate the businesses. While I today know the history behind West Bend's name, it is hard to imagine that future generations will.

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy E. Williams, The Spirit of West Bend (Madison, WI: Straus Printing Company, 1980), pgs 2-5

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Gerald Schwinn (11-15-2003)

<sup>3</sup> Adam Rome, The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

<sup>4</sup> Williams, 55-56

<sup>5</sup> Williams, 89-101

<sup>6</sup> Williams, 171-195

personal knowledge of West Bend

<sup>7</sup> Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Website,

<http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/parks/specific/kmscenicdrive/foresthstory.html>

<sup>8</sup> Williams 157-158

Washington County Website, <http://www.co.washington.wi.us/data/history.html>

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Gerald Schwinn (11-15-2003)

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Gerald Schwinn (11-15-2003)

<sup>11</sup> Personal knowledge of West Bend

<sup>12</sup> Williams, 122

<sup>13</sup> Williams, 346