University Avenue’s Car Culture:

the enduring legacy of Porky’s drive-in restaurant

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Introduction

Car culture in America can simply be defined as a love affair with cars. From the moment personal automobiles began rolling off the assembly line, they became synonymous with personal freedom and status. Beginning in the early 20th century and virtually exploding after World War II, cities, streets and businesses of all types adapted to accommodate drivers and their automobiles. In St. Paul, Minnesota there was nowhere this was more evident than on University Avenue. For most of the 20th century the automobile ruled University Avenue, and Porky’s drive-in restaurant remained a landmark for more than fifty years. Some say when the restaurant closed in 2011, car culture was disassociated from University Avenue for good. Although the representations of car culture on University Avenue had been waning for several decades, beginning as early as the 1960s, Porky’s was the last holdout representing an era when cars ruled the avenue, both physically and culturally. Those in the Twin Cities that love car culture, loved this place, and not just because of the food, or even nostalgia for “the good old days”, though those were likely factors as well. Rather, Porky’s was the social headquarters in St. Paul for car enthusiasts of all ages; it was a beacon for anyone that wanted to look at cars or show theirs off; and it was a place to meet other car lovers without any restrictions on car preference, make, model or year. With the final closing of Porky’s and the new construction of the light rail transit line down the center of University Avenue, the proliferation of car culture has mostly disappeared and, naturally, without an auto-friendly place to congregate, the car enthusiasts have mostly disappeared from the avenue as well.
Today, in the midst of economic resurgence and redevelopment on the avenue, the visual reminders of the automobile mecca that University Avenue once was are now mostly missing. With this in mind, the goal of this report is to provide the historic and social context, of Porky’s and University Avenue, and how it helped shape a place that mattered so much to so many people. The images and stories collected will help to inspire a public art project, which will commemorate Porky’s as the local landmark that it was. It will also provide a visual memorial on the avenue, for those that miss it to return and remember, and for those that never knew it to have a chance to understand what came before them and how important it was to so many people.

University Avenue

Central Transportation Corridor

University Avenue has always been a major corridor in the Twin Cities for manufacturing, commercial business, and transportation. First constructed in the 1870s as a right-of-way connecting St. Paul and Minneapolis, the central location in the Midway area of St. Paul attracted all types of businesses. Manufacturing proliferated as the area allowed for quick shipments in every direction of the cities, and commercial sales businesses were successful because it was one of the heaviest traveled thoroughfares in the Twin Cities. Almost every mode of transportation has traveled on University Avenue and it has remained a major thoroughfare for almost 150 years now. In the early days, horse-drawn carriages and streetcars were frequent until the electric streetcar rail system was installed in the 1890s. The electric streetcar was in use on the avenue until the 1950s, but began competing with the automobile for space at the beginning of the 20th century. Along with the

[Figure 3] 1918 - University Avenue looking east from Fairview Ave, showing a streetcar, a bus and a few automobiles sharing the avenue.

[Figure 4] 1949 - University Avenue looking west from Albert Street, showing significantly increased automobile traffic along with delivery trucks and streetcars.

[Figure 5] 1961 - University Ave looking west towards Cleveland Ave (after the streetcars were removed but before the interstate was constructed) University Ave was the primary shipping corridor.
automobile came freight trucks and in the early 1950s buses took over the public transportation sector following the removal of the electric streetcar line. In the mid-1960s interstate 94 was built just south of University Avenue, which quickly drew much of the automobile traffic and businesses off of the inner-city avenue and out into the burgeoning suburbs. In 2010, construction began on the new Central Corridor light rail transit line, bringing electric rail back to the avenue and further diminishing the automobile presence on the avenue.

For most of the 20th century, however, the automobile ruled University Avenue. From the State Capitol at one end, to the St. Paul city limits, five-and-a-half miles to the west, University Avenue was an ideal place for automobiles. At 120’ wide, it is a straight-four mile strip from the State Capitol at Cedar Street to Fairview Avenue where the road curves northwest. It then heads straight another one-and-a-half miles until the St. Paul City limits at Emerald Street, where Minneapolis, and University of Minnesota territory, begin.
Birth of the Car Culture

The history of University Avenue car culture is similar to the history of many Main Street corridors all over the United States. University Avenue was the main drag and for more than half a century it was the heart of all things related to the automobile culture in St. Paul. Prior to the construction of Interstate-94, University Avenue, known then as Highway 12, was the main highway connecting St. Paul and Minneapolis. University has even been referred to as the Route 66 of the Twin Cities because of its rise in success surrounding the automobile in the early to mid-20th century and subsequent fall from grace after the interstate highway system was built in the 1960s.iii

As quickly as the automobile gained popularity in America in the early decades of the 20th century, American culture began transforming to accommodate the automobile and University Avenue was where this transformation proliferated the most in the Twin Cities. It became the place to go purchase a car, service it, upgrade it, customize it, and show it off. As the “roaring” ’20s entered the ’30s, the automobile continued to gain in use and popularity across the US and was stymied only slightly by the Great Depression. During the early ’40s, however, World War II caused the production of new automobiles to cease while resources were dedicated to support the war effort. Lack of new automobiles being produced, as well as fuel rationing, managed to support the streetcar systems for another decade. iv Once the war was over, however, increased affluence and the pent-up demand for automobiles exerted itself in full force and car culture exploded in America. In 1953, the streetcar system in St. Paul was decommissioned and replaced with buses. This left the automobile with free reign on the avenue, and it was the perfect time in American culture to have a wide-open avenue for cruising, impromptu drag racing and showing off cars.

Manufacturing

Manufacturing and sales of the automobile had taken hold on University Avenue as early as 1913 when The Ford Motor Company announced plans to build an assembly plant and showroom in St. Paul at 117 University Avenue, just
west of the State Capitol. A St. Paul Pioneer Press article from February 1, 1914 describes the building just prior to its opening as “the largest of its kind in the city.” By 1922, however, Ford Motor Company had already begun construction of a new sprawling factory in St. Paul’s Highland Park neighborhood, and subsequently vacated the building on University Avenue. The University Avenue location had been Ford’s sales and service headquarters in St. Paul for less than a decade, but the choice to initially locate on University Avenue was not without reason and likely influenced many other auto-oriented businesses to locate on the avenue as well. After Ford moved out, the building at 117 University Avenue housed several used car dealerships, including the Peterson-Greenmount Company, which used the building in the 1930s to sell autos.

On the opposite end of the avenue, bordering Minneapolis, Overland Stoves Company built a manufacturing and warehouse building, in 1915, at 2572 University Avenue. Willy’s Overland manufactured automobiles in the building into the 1920s. In December 1922, a Minneapolis Morning Tribune news article hailed the Overland building as the location of the upcoming Twin City Automobile Show. Streamers and lamps were to stretch a block toward Minneapolis and St. Paul, electrical light bulbs would illuminate the entrance, and a square block near the building was to “be leveled and used for the parking of automobiles.” This was one of many auto shows that would take place on the avenue over the decades and only the beginning of many physical alterations that would accommodate motorists and their automobiles. By 1929 International Harvester had purchased the Overland building for manufacturing of farm machinery, automobiles and trucks. During WWII the building was converted to manufacturing airplanes for the military, adding yet another transportation segment to the history of University Avenue.
Dealerships & Repair Shops

Manufacturing of automobiles on University Avenue was relatively short-lived, however that was just the beginning of the car culture’s legacy on the avenue. Auto garages, filling stations, service stations, repair shops, body shops, and dealerships began appearing on the avenue in the first decades of the 20th century as well. They located there for the same reasons the manufacturers located there: it was one of the most heavily traveled highways in the Twin Cities and the primary thoroughfare connecting St. Paul and Minneapolis. By the mid-1920s, there was at least one or more auto-oriented businesses on any one block along University Avenue from the Capitol until the city border. Auto accessory shops flourished, especially during the time Ford was manufacturing Model T’s on the avenue. There was a huge industry that focused specifically on designing and manufacturing accessory attachments to allow people to make all kinds of changes to their cars. By the 1920s there were an estimated 20 to 30 “businesses on University Avenue that did nothing but manufacture and design, wholesale and retail, accessories for the automobile industry.”

By the mid-1950s University Avenue was home to more than a dozen new car dealerships. It was the auto showroom of St. Paul where people could buy just about any make of car. Even when not in the market for a new car, many took trips each fall to University Avenue to see the new car models that were released. And the dealerships at the time made great fanfare out of the unveiling process. Pete Latuff, President of Latuff Brothers Auto Body located on University Avenue since 1933, was interviewed by Peter Myers for the 2012 documentary film “University Avenue: One Street a Thousand Dreams,” and recalled that the annual ritual of going out to see the new cars on University Avenue “was probably the highlight of [his] childhood...you got to look at all the new cars and it was a pretty exciting thing, especially when you’re a kid.”

The annual ritual of going out in September with dad to look at the new cars “was probably the highlight of my childhood...it was a pretty exciting thing. Especially when you’re a kid.”

- Pete Latuff

[Figure 12] 1957 - new model automobiles on display at the Prom Ballroom, 1190 University Avenue

[Figure 13] Peter Latuff, owner of Latuff Brothers Auto Body; interview with Peter Myers, discussing the unveiling of new cars each year on University Ave.
unveiling to build the anticipation. On the debut day the dealerships would serve food and have activities for kids. Gene Sonnen, member #3 of the Minnesota Street Rod Association (MSRA) and co-founder of the Twin Cities’ famous “Back to the 50s” car show, has lived in the Macalester Groveland neighborhood of St. Paul his entire life. He fell in love with cars before he was even old enough to drive and was out cruising University Avenue as soon as he could get his hands on a car. He remembers well the annual show of the new models as well and explained that the dealerships made a huge deal out of it “because every year the cars would change...and radically change!” So there was more excitement each year to see what the manufacturers were going to come out with next. xiv

Midway Ford, Midway Chevrolet, Kline Oldsmobile, and Whitaker Buick were just a few of the major new car dealerships that were popular on the avenue during the mid-20th century. In the mid-1950s there were up to 16 new car dealerships located on the avenue and as recent as the late 1980s there were still up to 10 new car dealers in business. Each of them in time, however, closed their doors and moved to the suburbs amidst rising city property taxes and declining business on the avenue. One of the first Ford dealerships on the avenue was Owens Motor Company at 709-713 University Avenue. Built in 1917, the dealership was so successful a second story and an elevator were added in 1923 and cars were stored on the roof of the building. xv The dealership remained in the same location until 1950 when it closed following the death of Thomas Owens, the company’s owner. The building is still standing today and is used as an office building. xvi

Midway Ford, 1837-1850 University Avenue (southwest corner of University and Fairview Avenues), began in the 1920s as Slawik Auto Sales, a Desoto Plymouth dealer. On the Southeast corner of the same intersection, across Fairview Avenue at 1800 University, was Modern Motors, a Ford dealer. In the 1950s the Slawik family purchased and moved the Ford dealership into the Slawik Motors building and renamed it Midway Ford. The former Ford dealership was renamed Town &
Country Motors, where Chrysler models were sold. Midway Ford closed its University Avenue location in 1977 and moved to Roseville, but continues to operate under the Midway Ford name to this day. Many fondly remember Midway Ford’s University Avenue location for the turntable platform that was elevated outside the building, which displayed a rotating automobile for passersby to see. Bill Casey, MSRA member #12, grew up in the Saint Anthony neighborhood of St.
Paul and was involved in University Avenue car culture most of his life. He recalled that in 1955 a turntable was put up outside Midway Ford, on the corner of Fairview and University. It was elevated about 20 feet off the ground and had a car on top of it that rotated around, for advertising. Gene Sonnen recalled during the Christmas season there was a “convertible up there with a Santa Clause in it” remembering that “as a little kid, it was rotating around, and I thought that was neater than hell!”

Whitaker Buick was located at 1221-1225 University Avenue on the Northwest corner of University and Griggs Street. Midtown Motors operated at the location in the late 1930s and by the mid-1940s expanded and added garages and additions to the west. The Whitaker dealership opened at the location in 1955 and was one of the primary businesses on the avenue until it closed in 2006, the second-to-last new car dealership to vacate the avenue.

In 2007, Midway Chevrolet was the last dealership to discontinue sales of new autos on University Avenue. The flagship location on the northeast corner of University and Albert St (1389-1399 University Ave) was a fixture on University Avenue for 75 years and its closing in 2007 signaled that the hard times for the car culture of University Avenue were not going to improve. Midway Chevrolet started business on University Avenue by running public garages in the early 1900s.

In the mid-1920s the company opened a garage at 1641 University Ave, which had a capacity of 70 cars. In 1932, Midway Chevrolet built another garage at 1389 University Ave and it was not long before the company began selling new automobiles from this location. The dealership remained at the
same location until it closed in 2007. Owner Tom Krebsbach cited rising property taxes as one of the primary reasons he was forced to move the new-car operation from University Avenue.\textsuperscript{xiii}

Many more auto sales and service operations have come and gone on University Avenue throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century; too many to mention them all. Though new auto sales have been moved to the suburbs, there are still to this day several used auto sales lots and repair shops remaining in business, though the effects of the new light rail line and transit oriented development remain to be seen for those remaining businesses.

\textbf{Figure 25} 1950 – Sanborn Insurance Co map, 1363-1399 University Ave; Midway Chevrolet property

\textbf{Figure 26} 1965 – Midway Chevrolet, 1389 University Ave

\textbf{Figure 27} 1924 – University Chevrolet Company, 215 University Ave

\textbf{Figure 28} 1923 – E.B. McGill Motor Car Company, near University and Lexington
[Figure 29] 1926 – Wynn Motors, University Ave

[Figure 30] 1950 – Kline Oldsmobile sign, side of building, 1469 University Ave

[Figure 31] 1951 – National Bushing & Parts Company, 2111 University Ave, auto parts store

[Figure 32] 1952 – Pure oil station, near University and Lexington

[Figure 33] 1958 – Standard service station, 216 University Ave

[Figure 34] 1958 – Motor Cars, Inc., 809 University Ave
Drive-in Restaurants

Drive-in restaurants, geared specifically toward serving diners within their cars, started popping up as early as the 1920s on well-traveled roadsides all over the country. xxiii Their heyday, however, was after World War II when the everyday lives of American’s truly began to revolve around their cars. Anything and everything that one could do in a car, including eating, was an exciting endeavor. “Back then, drive-ins were a common part of the landscape, as ubiquitous as today’s coffeehouses.”xxiv motorists would pull in, park, and order their food through a speaker box next to their car. Before long a server, popularly known as “carhops,” would bring a tray of food out loaded with burgers, fries, onion rings and milkshakes, the common fare at drive-ins. They were family friendly places where the whole family would pack in the car to have dinner out, but they also became popular hangouts for the first generation of teens that were able to purchase their own cars.

Drive-ins became the epicenter of the 50s era “cruising” culture and were the teen center for socializing with friends and meeting new people, especially of the opposite sex. Whereas teens of the 1980s and ’90s would go to the mall to hang out with friends, teens in the ’50s, ’60s and even ’70s would go to the drive-ins. And naturally, the cooler your car was, or the more unique custom features you had added yourself, the more attention you got.

The Twin Cities were no different of course and University Avenue had its own share of drive-in restaurants, carhops and all. There were several drive-in restaurants around the metro area and on any given night one might cruise from the East side of St. Paul to University Avenue to Roseville’s Snelling Avenue to Minneapolis’s Lake Street to pull into the drive-ins to get some good food and see who was hanging out.

Figure 37] 2013 – Google maps image showing the locations of the drive-in restaurants on St. Paul’s University Avenue during the 1950s and ’60s. From left to right: the first White Castle on University, later The Pantry; Porky’s; Henrys Hamburgers; White Castle; and the Three Bears.
University Avenue alone had four separate drive-ins during the height of popularity of the drive-in restaurant in the ‘50s. On the East end of University Avenue, on the northeast corner of Lexington and University, there was White Castle and Three Bears right next to each other. On the West end of the avenue was Porky’s at University and East Lynnhurst just west of Fairview, and there was Henry’s Hamburgers on the corner of University and Beacon St, just east of Fairview. Fred Romo, MSRA member #246, grew up in northern Minnesota and moved to St. Paul in the early 1960s. He has lived in the Highland Park neighborhood of St. Paul ever since. Interested in cars from the time he was very young, it didn’t take long after he moved to St. Paul to become a part of the University Avenue cruising scene. He says “it was a social thing” and the drive-ins were the center of it all. On University Avenue there were several drive-ins to choose from, but he said, “it was always Three Bears or Porky’s really.” Still others said White Castle was the place to be. Former St. Paul police officer Melvin Carter, Jr. was interviewed by Peter Myers in 2011 for the previously mentioned 2012 documentary on University Avenue, and remembered frequenting many of the University Avenue drive-ins. Growing up in the Rondo neighborhood, he said that White Castle was the place to be because “it never
closed” so it was the place to go “after parties to flirt with the carhops” and get some food. He also recalled though that just down the street was the Three Bears and “they had a big hamburger and they’d give you a basket and they’d load you up pretty good.”

And there was also “Henry’s right across the street from the Y” where Mr. Carter recalled as a kid being at the YMCA and going across the street and “asking them to load your hamburger up with pickles and onions – whatever you could get free on top of that thing just to get some volume because you only had enough for one hamburger.” Gene Sonnen remembers Henry’s Hamburgers for their “HUGE neon sign that was like a burger figure,” but wasn’t very fond of their food saying, “they were cheap hamburgers and they were pretty horrible.”

[Figure 41] 1950 – Sanborn Insurance Co map showing the northeast corner of University and Prior Avenues. The first White Castle on University Ave was located in the small square building abutting the street in the middle of the block, 1945 University Avenue, with auto parking behind it. In the 1940s White Castle moved to the corner of University and Lexington and this small restaurant became The Pantry.

[Figure 22] 1936 – Interior of the White Castle at 1945 University Ave

[Figure 43] 1957 – Looking northeast on University Ave from southeast corner of Prior Ave intersection. The white building on the left, in foreground, is the original White Castle building at 1945 University Ave. The sign shows by this time it was The Pantry.
As the popular car culture grew, drive-ins were increasingly busy, often with people parking and hanging out though, not always ordering food. This made business tough for the drive-ins and many implemented parking fees that would be reimbursed only if a purchase was made, discouraging drivers from just pulling through to see who was hanging out or parking in the lot for hours without giving the drive-in any business. The Roadside Drive-In, just a few miles north of University Avenue on the corner of Snelling Avenue and County Road B in Roseville, was one of these drive-ins. With the claim of being the biggest drive-in west of Chicago, the Roadside had 80 stalls with all-electronic service. “In a 2004 interview with the Pioneer Press, Harvey Charbonneau, owner of the Roadside drive-in for 25 years from 1948 to 1973 said: ‘I don’t think we got the publicity Porky’s Drive-in did in St. Paul, but we were a lot bigger.’”

Many that frequented Porky’s, frequented the Roadside as well, and remember the parking fees there. Bill Casey recalled Roadside drive-in and said “that was a big one” and that “because everybody’d drive in and sit around”…”when you’d go in there they’d charge you so much for parking and then if you bought something then you would got your money off and they’d give you a little ticket” to get out.” Porky’s also used this measure to discourage long parking times, but not until later years and generally only when there were large car show events in town.

Drive-in restaurants enjoyed continued popularity into the 1960s, but as American popular culture shifted away from ‘50s cruising culture the popularity of the drive-ins began to fade and competition from new drive-through fast food restaurants such as McDonalds put many drive-ins out of business in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s.

The Roadside drive-in in Roseville, which opened in 1948, closed in 1973. Three Bears closed sometime in the late 60’s. White Castle converted their drive-ins to drive-through restaurants in 1972 to compete with the new fast food craze. The White Castle on the northeast corner of Lexington and University was closed and razed and a new drive-through White Castle was built on the Southwest corner of the same intersection, which is still there today. Porky’s, which opened in 1953, made it to 1978 before it closed its doors due to the new competition and decreased business.
business. But just over a decade later, Porky’s would reopen and become the center of St. Paul’s car culture once again, attracting all ages of car lovers. The reopening of Porky’s would show that though American popular culture had long since abandoned the cruising car culture, many Americans had not. As Gene Sonnen put it when discussing the various ups and downs University Avenue and car culture in general have seen throughout the decades, there was a “lull that we went into in the late ’60s and early ’70s…it went from Beach Boys to acid. I mean that quick...from American Graffiti to long hair and let’s get wasted and the whole thing just went ‘whoop’ like that...but I was one of the hanger-on-ers.”xxxiii And he was certainly not alone as the ’50s-era car culture lived on in many people’s hearts and for many more, continued as a lifelong hobby.

Cruising / Racing / Burnouts

The movie American Graffiti, released in 1973, epitomizes the youth culture of the ’50s and ’60s focused on friends, cars, cruising the strip and hanging out at drive-ins. Many that remember University Avenue during the 50s and 60s say, “Watch American Graffiti, that’s what University Avenue was like.” On Friday and Saturday nights especially, the avenue would be packed with cars just cruising back and forth from one drive-in to the next. Cruising the strip was part of the social game at the time. Especially for those that put the extra time into customizing their vehicles into

“That’s what everybody did...that’s what I did...you’d go from Porky’s to Three Bears, back and forth, back and forth, in and out of the drive-in. And of course, every corner you’d race you know.” – Gene Sonnen

[Figure 46] 1960 – University Avenue traffic at night, note the three cars in line with each other in the right lanes.

[Figure 47] 2013 – Gene Sonnen interview with Anne Ketz, discussing cruising and drive-ins on University Ave in the 1950s and ’60s.
hot-rods or street-rods, cruising was the prime way to show off your car. And drag racing was the prime way to show off the performance of your car. On nights when the avenue was packed with cruisers, there would be drag races at every stoplight, and with 5.5 miles of frequent but well-spaced stoplights, University Avenue was the perfect place for these impromptu races.

Many remember that it would get pretty crazy on the avenue, and as the night wore on, it became less about cruising and socializing and more about competition and racing. The two factions were often at odds, with those that were there for the socializing sometimes attempting to stop the drag racing for fear it was getting too dangerous. But regardless of why they came they all loved their cars. Everyone putting the extra time, money and effort into customizing their cars in various ways for various purposes, and all congregating on University Avenue to show them off. From the State Capitol at Rice Street to Porky’s just past Fairview Avenue, University Avenue was the place to take your car on a weekend night in St. Paul. People would line streets to look at the cars, grab a couple of hamburgers, park and watch the drag races, cheering on the drivers as they went by. Gene Sonnen recalls there often being groups of people hanging out in front of Henry’s Hamburgers on the corner of Fairview and University and lots of cheering when people would pull off from that stoplight in front of the restaurant. Melvin Carter Jr. recalled

“Some guys called it ‘The Five Mile Strip’...and every single light there’d be a race. You know, you’d just pull up, you’d look at each other, and the light would go and you’d just go! It was crazy!...Guys would be hanging around at Henry’s and you’d take off at that light [University and Fairview] and there was like a cheering section there by Henry’s Hamburgers.” – Gene Sonnen

[Figure 49] 2013 - Gene Sonnen interview with Anne Ketz, discussing drag racing on University Avenue.
that the drag racing was so frequent on University as a spectator you “knew who the
guys were just by virtue of watching them.” He said, “we didn’t know them
personally, but we would know what cars to expect. And that was the days when the
’57 Chevy was the craze. That was a big deal.” xxxiv

As the cruising and racing scene got more popular
on the avenue, and the crowds at night got bigger and
more out of hand, the young car enthusiasts were pegged
as “juvenile delinquents,” and it wasn’t long before the
crime scene started patrolling the avenue more heavily. Bill
Casey recalled that in the mid-1970s it got so crowded
on the avenue at night it was becoming dangerous. And
people weren’t just cruising up and down the avenue
anymore; they were racing and doing burnouts in the
streets. Ultimately it became a concern for public safety.

Burnouts became a popular way to show off, both the performance of a car
and the drivers skill and familiarity with that car. By keeping a vehicle stationary, or
close to it as possible, and spinning its wheels, the tires heat up and create smoke,
sometimes a lot of it. Bill Casey said that in the ’70s people would line up to do
burnouts on University Avenue right in front of Porky’s, often throwing bleach or
water on the street to create more smoke. He said around the mid to late ’70s he
could remember sitting at his home [roughly a
mile south of Porky’s, near Fairview] and “hear
‘em smoke the tires over
at Porky’s and then I’d
turn my police scanner
on and listen to all the
arrests.” xxxv

Racing and
burnouts are of course
illegal on public streets,
and though the police did
turn a mostly blind eye
for many years, by the
mid-1970s they began
bringing dogs out and
even went as far as to
water the streets down
to keep the cars away,
and the cruising and racing off University Avenue. Fred Romo said it got pretty bad
out there when they had the dogs out and that it became nothing for the police to
water the streets down: “cause no one wants to get their car dirty ya know, I don’t
want to get my white walls dirty – so I’m not going over there if the streets all
wet.”xxxvi. Gene Sonnen recalled that the police “would bring the water trucks out,
and of course, those car guys, they don’t want to get their car dirty...it was just like

“Their were throwing
bleach or water right
by Porkys there and
they’d be smoking
‘em.” – Bill Casey

[Figure 52] 2013 – Bill Casey interview with Anne Ketz, discussing University
Ave decline

[Figure 53] 2011 – burnouts on University Avenue in front of Porky’s on their
last day in business; hundreds lined the street to watch
rats – they’d just scatter!” xxxvii Many agree that’s what eventually killed the social car scene on University Avenue in the mid-1970s and when Porky’s closed in 1978 there was no longer a central social hangout for the car enthusiasts to meet up on University Avenue. This may have been a relief for the police and those that were concerned about the dangers of the constant burnouts and high-speed racing; however, for the car enthusiasts it was a sad time.

It’s a social thing

Car Shows / Clubs / Organizations

The car folks would always find a place to meet up and socialize around their cars though, and University Avenue always had a certain draw to it. Just because the former hangouts were gone didn’t mean the people and their love for cars were gone. For many years, after all the drive-ins had closed down, in the 1980s and into the ’90s, the parking lot of Montgomery Wards near Snelling Avenue and University was a big hangout. With the permission of management, car clubs were allowed to gather there after hours on the weekends. When things started to get a little out of control, they hired off-duty cops to patrol the lot and collected money in ice cream buckets from participants to pay for the security. It wasn’t “officially” organized or sponsored by anyone and didn’t really have a name. People called it “Saturday Night at Ward’s”. They would bring their “families and friends to show off, look around, and trade ideas.”xxxviii

Organized car shows have always been a major part of the car culture and University Avenue has seen its fair share of those throughout the years as well. The famous Twin Cities car show “Back to the 50s”, organized by the Minnesota Street Rod Association, started on University Avenue in 1973 in the parking lot of the Midway Shopping Center, located on the corner of University and Snelling. Gene Sonnen,
MSRA member #3, is attributed with coming up with the idea for the event saying he wanted to show his girlfriend, later to become his wife, what it was like on University Avenue during the ’50s. He proposed the idea to the other MSRA members and they put together an event to bring people in their classic cars back to University Avenue. It became an annual event and a few years later was moved to the Minnesota State Fairgrounds, but University Avenue was invariably the place to cruise to after leaving the fairgrounds. Today it is the largest show of its kind in the world. In 2013 the show featured 12,033 registered vehicles, all 1964 or older models.

In 1974, the Street Rod Nationals annual car show came to the Twin Cities for the first time and chose St. Paul for its location 5 or 6 more times after that. Car Craft Magazine and Chevrolet Performance have hosted the Car Craft Summer Nationals at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds since 1995. Of course, after all of these events the place to cruise was University Avenue and, when it was open Porky’s drive-in was the place to park and hangout.
Porky’s

When Porky’s closed in 1978, it was the last drive-in on University Avenue to do so. For more than a decade it sat deserted and deteriorating, another abandoned eyesore on University Avenue. In February 1989, the St. Paul City Council voted to demolish the building unless owner Ray Truelson was willing to fix it up and reopen it.\textsuperscript{xii} Truelson took the chance in reopening despite the competition from drive-through restaurants, which had sprouted up all along the avenue in the preceding decades. The well-known red and white checkerboard building was restored along with the famous neon sign of a pig in a top hot and bow tie. The carhops were no longer economically feasible and were replaced with a drive-through window, but the old carport remained, minus the speaker box menus of course.

It didn’t take long for people to start coming back, both for the food they remembered and to congregate around their classic cars. In the first week the restaurant was open, Truelson said he and his workers were overwhelmed by the amount of business they handled. In an interview with the Star Tribune, he surmised that, “Maybe it’s the name recognition, or maybe people just have fond memories of the place.”\textsuperscript{xiii} While both of those are likely contributing factors to Porky’s success when it reopened, the car culture in the Twin Cities had always remained strong and the people that support car culture were the ones that really made Porky’s a landmark once again on University Avenue.

Car culture in the Twin Cities is represented by hundreds of unique car clubs, focused on all varieties of cars, as well as statewide organizations like the Minnesota Street Rod Association and the Gopher State Timing Association. Without all of the individuals that are apart of those clubs and organizations Porky’s may not have
been as successful as it was in the late part of the 20th century. By the time Porky’s opened, the “Saturday Nights at Wards” gathering had grown significantly and Porky’s only helped to increase this as people now had a place to cruise to down University from the Wards parking lot. When Montgomery Wards was torn down around 1994, the classic street rods and muscle cars moved from parking at Wards to Porky’s and could be found there every weekend until Porky’s closed in 2011.

Many think Porky’s was popular just because people were nostalgic for “the good old days” and wanted to reminisce. Though that was part of it, it was much more than that. It was the social headquarters for car lovers of all types in St. Paul, including the modern sport car community, both imports and domestics. The young crowds of car lovers and street racers chose to hang out there too before they would head out to wherever the racing was going on that particular night. It was a diverse crowd of people, built around a mutual respect and love for cars. Gene Sonnen said in more recent years you could go to Porky’s in the early evening on a weekend night and find his crowd, “all old guys now” as he said, hanging out there with their classic cars. But as soon as they started leaving around 9:00 or so, the young guys with the street racing cars, domestic and import, would show up at Porky’s. They would hang out there as well and meet up before “they’d go out and do their thing.”

When Porky’s closed in 2011, car culture in the Twin Cities was once again disassociated from University Avenue and some say it has really affected the whole car culture of Minnesota. There are few places left today within the urban core of the Twin Cities where car lovers can congregate without organizing something ahead of time. For the older model cars there are the weekly car shows in North St. Paul, called “North St. Paul History Cruze Car Show” held every Friday night from June to September, and another in Hastings just south of the metro, called “Historic Hastings Saturday Night Cruise-In” held every other Saturday night from June to October. But for the newer model cars and those that don’t meet the quality standards of the car shows there isn’t a central location anymore where they can count on finding other car lovers.

Though Porky’s is no longer operating on University Avenue and has been removed from its historical context, the building was not demolished. Steve Bauer, a local collector of historic buildings, moved the building, and the carport, to his farmland south of the Twin Cities, not too far from Hastings, MN. Steve began collecting historic buildings set for demolition in the 1980s and now has more than 50 rebuilt structures on his property which he and his wife run as “The Little Log House Pioneer Village.”

“Tearing down Porky’s changed the MN car scene...University Avenue is obviously not the same.” – Doug Pellet

“Now that Porky’s isn’t there – there isn’t an immediate place for young guys to go and get into the car culture. There isn’t a routinely organized event for younger guys with newer cars...Hastings has a year limit...North St. Paul has a year limit too.” – Doug Pellet
famous neon, pig in a top hat sign remained with the Truelson’s; but at the very least the building and the carport, remain extant for people to visit and reminisce. In fact, the MSRA has held their members’ fall picnic at the site for the last couple of years and expect to have about 400-600 cars show up there this September for the annual event. The only major complaint from people is that Bauer chose to paint the building the original colors it was when it first opened in 1953, yellow and black checkerboard. The building was only painted this way for the first couple of years until the Truelson’s painted it the maroon and light pink colored checkerboard that most remember it being. Most would prefer to see it the way they remember it, though in the end, something is better than nothing. Although it is great that Porky’s is not gone completely, and it may still be used by those that frequented it, albeit in a different setting and not looking entirely the same; it is not hard to see that Porky’s is not the same without University Avenue, and likewise University Avenue does not look the same without Porky’s.

Porky’s was important to a lot of people for a lot of different reasons. There are many that met their husband or wife there, others got engaged there, and some met the best friends of their life while hanging out at the drive-in. Porky’s drive-in managed to retain the legacy of University Avenue’s car culture into the 21st century. Now that the restaurant is gone, the next generation of residents will have no hint of that legacy without some sort of visual reminder. The art project that will result from this research will provide this reminder and will hopefully inform and inspire, historically and artistically, those that travel University Avenue in the future.

Authors Note: This report reflects only a fraction of the images, stories, and histories collected during this research process. At the same time, there is still much more out there to be documented. The hope is that the entire research collection can be used and built upon to contribute toward the development of the public art project commemorating Porky’s.
Notes and References

Image Credits

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2. Page 3: 2011-04-02; "Lines at Porky’s on last day"; Courtesy of Gene Sonnen, personal collection; Photographer: Gene Sonnen

3. Page 4: 1918; "University Ave looking east from Fairview Ave"; Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, MR2.9 SP2.2 p79


5. Page 4: 1961-11-05; "University Ave looking west from Cleveland Ave"; Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society, MR2.9 SP2.2 p350; Photographer: St. Paul Dispatch & Pioneer Press

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68. Page 25: 2011-04-02; “Porky's last day in business on University Ave”; Courtesy of PAM; Photographer: Erin Hanafin Berg

End Notes


vii The 106 Group Ltd. Phase I Architectural History Investigation for the Proposed Central Transit Corridor

viii “Myriads of Bulbs Will Illuminate Avenue Leading to Auto Show.” Minneapolis Morning Tribune. December 24, 1922. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Minneapolis Tribune (1867-1922).

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