

Social History of the “West Indianapolis”
Section of Indianapolis, Indiana
By Margaret Wolfer

“West Indianapolis” or simply “WI”, which the residents call the area, is the near southwest section of Indianapolis. It is bounded on the south by Kentucky Avenue and Raymond Street (2200 south), on the north by the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad (approximately 400 south), on the west by Eagle Creek (approximately 2800 west), and on the east by White River (700 west).

In this area and contiguous to it are huge manufacturing plants of Eli Lilly, Chevrolet, Link Belt Company, Chrysler, Westinghouse, Bridgeport Brass Company and several other smaller plants. Also in the area are trucking companies whose trucks rumble over the many railroad tracks and along its main streets. West Indianapolis is considered an industrial wheel of Indianapolis. In this hub approximately 10,500 people live in homes on narrow tree-lined streets, with parks, churches and schools.

Among the early residents to Indianapolis was the Harding family from Washington County, Kentucky. Robert and Martha Harding married about the time of the close of the Revolutionary War and were the parents of twelve children. In 1820, Mrs. Harding, then a widow, settled her family on a “donation tract” just outside of the town of Indianapolis on the west side and built a log cabin on the banks of White River. Mrs. Harding died in 1841. She owned a farm of 160 acres in Wayne Township near Eagle Creek and three of her sons, Ede, Samuel, and Israel, were resident tax-payers in Wayne Township in 1829.

Many of the men who first settled west of Indianapolis in the late 1870’s came to work at the stockyards and on the Belt Railroad, built to serve the stockyards and early industries.

The stockyards opened in November of 1877 and were located near the intersection of Hadley Avenue and Judge Harding Street (now Kentucky Avenue and Harding Street). The stockyards were built at the suggestion of the McCarty family who owned the site and Thomas D. Kingan of the meat packing firm at Maryland Street and White River. For ninety-six years the stockyards operated at this location. Due to the expansion of the Eli Lilly plant, the stockyards were moved to 2577 Kentucky Avenue and were opened for business on December 17, 1973 at this new location.

The early workers came with their families from Kentucky, Tennessee, and southern Indiana and they settled in the area north and west of the original stockyards. This area became known as the The Village of Belmont. The village limits were roughly the Indianapolis and St. Louis (now the New York Central) Railroad tracks on the north, White River on the east, Raymond

Street on the south and Belmont Avenue on the west. The Village covered 565 acres of land and had a population of 471 persons.

It was on Perry Avenue near the Vandalia (now the Penn Central) Railroad that the world's largest cart, wagon and carriage making plant, The Perry Manufacturing Company was established. Later in 1911 this company became The Perry Motor Car Company on Oliver Avenue which built the Marion Motor Car with nickel-plated trimmings, ventilated front windshield and electric lights. It was in 1930 that this plant became a part of the General Motors empire. Today it is the Chevrolet Truck Body Plant.

In 1867 tallow-making or rendering business was carried on by the Abattoir Company and the Lewitt and Company, both located in WI. Also established in 1867 was the W.F. Piel and Company Starch Factory. It was located on grounds bounded east and north by Dakota and Morris Streets, bordering White River on the west. In 1939 the National Starch and Chemical Division purchased the W.F. Piel Starch Factory. Today the National Starch and Chemical Division is located at 1515 Drover, west of White River.

In the Village of Belmont in 1881 a school was built at the corner of Reisner and Howards Streets. The school was called W.I. #1. On November 11, 1902, the school's name was changed to Daniel Webster. A new building was built in 1925 at Reisner and Miller Streets were the school is located at the present time and its name is Public School #46. In 1882 the Village of Belmont changed its name to West Indianapolis and became an incorporated town and elected a board of trustees. The name of the Daniel Webster brick schoolhouse was also changed at this time to West Indianapolis High School. The town's high school stood as a prominent community center because the spacious building was still the only logical place for meetings and gathering of all kinds.

According to the 1890 census, West Indianapolis was the largest suburb of Indianapolis with a population of 3,527. Then four years later in 1894 WI was incorporated as a city. It was on March 15, 1897, that the City of Indianapolis annexed WI, but as in other neighborhoods, the old name lived on. Again the name of the town's school was change this time to Public School #46.

In 1913 much of the east end of WI was flooded by the waters of the White River; this resulted in a geographical and social distinction that still exists in WI. The flood covered everything east of the railroad tracks just east along Harding Street. This area became known as the "Valley." The west part of WI was called the "Hill". A local resident was quoted in an interview as saying, "When I was young, eyebrows would be raised if a girl or boy from the "Hill" dated someone from the "Valley." Later the southwest became known as the "Hollow." The northeast became known as the "Bottoms."

During the 1913 flood Assumption Church became the temporary home for over three hundred homeless people. Father Weber, founder (in 1894) and pastor of Assumption Parish, set up an organization which at times fed as many as eight hundred persons daily. His rectory served as a Red Cross Station. Father Weber also served as a mediator between the militia, the city police, and the local population and several times he was called on to coordinate their rescue and salvage efforts. Funds for rebuilding after the flood were sent to Assumption by the City of Indianapolis Flood Relief Committee to be distributed to people who requested funds for home re-building.

Again, in August of 1916 another flood threatened the area. It was feared that the newly constructed dike at the river front could not bear the pressure of the raging waters of White River so an evacuation of the lowland population was ordered. Assumption School served once more as a refugee center for several families. "Story has it that most of the children found living in Assumption School such an adventure and Father Weber's hospitality so gracious that they cried when they had to return to their own homes."

Also in 1913 the city purchased some swampy ground in the "Hill" area just north of Morris Street and east of Belmont for a public park. The money to buy the land was willed to the city for the purpose of a park by George Rhodius, a prominent business man, and it was for him that the park is named. Today, Rhodius Park, with a community house, swimming pool and ball diamond is a major part of the community's recreational facilities.

The present Mary Rigg Neighborhood Center, 1917 West Morris Street, moved to WI in 1939, from 617 Pearl Street, where it was originally known as the Immigration Aid Association. The Association was established in 1911 to help the city's foreign born adjust to life in America and help them with the Government Citizenship Examination.

It was in 1923 that the Immigration Aid Association became known as the American Settlement. But in 1939 the Pearl Street area became more and more an industrial district and the agency decided to seek a new location and field of service.

The storerooms were rented at 1907 West Morris Street and the American Settlement House became the Southwest Social Centre. In 1950 the Southwest Social Centre was faced with the threat of eviction when the four store buildings it occupied were put up for sale. To prevent this, the Rotary Foundation of Indianapolis purchased the buildings and provided additional funds for modernizing the crowded facility. By 1952, with 58 organized groups using the facility, the Centre facilities were hopelessly inadequate to meet the needs of the neighborhood. In November, 1954, the Indianapolis Times reported the following story: "The Southwest Centre is going to have a new home. The new building will be a gift to the Social Centre as a project of the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Rotary Foundation of

Indianapolis, Inc.” Thus on March 6, 1956, ground-breaking ceremonies for the new building were held at 1917 West Morris Street. And it was more than a year later, April 29, 1957, that they newly completed Southwest Social Centre was dedicated.

Miss Mary Rigg, the Centre director, continued to direct the Centre with zeal and enthusiasm, with foresight and strong leadership, until she retired in 1961. In 1971 the Southwest Social Centre was re-named the Mary Rigg Neighborhood Center in honor of the tireless worker who directed the agency for 37 years from 1924 to 1961.

Across the street from the Centre at 1926 West Morris Street is the fifth Branch Library. The community of WI has been served by the Public Library since 1897. When the City of Indianapolis annexed WI a library was established in a red brick building at the corner of Morris and River Avenue. The location proved to be unsatisfactory for it was a valley just west of the White River which overflowed its banks and flooded the valley in 1898. It is said that Miss Eliza G. Browning, city librarian, went with field glasses in hand to the top of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument to check on the condition of the library. Although it was almost surrounded by water, she managed to have the books moved. It was found after the muddy waters receded that all the books had been shelved about one-half inch about the highest water mark.

In May, 1898, it was decided to erect a building on higher ground in the yard of School #46 on Reisner and Howard Streets. This building was soon completed and the library was moved in November, 1898. But in 1908 the school needed the space occupied by the library so once again the location was changed.

This time a permanent library building was erected. This was made possible by a gift of \$120,000 by Andrew Carnegie to the City of Indianapolis. It was in 1920 that part of this money was used for the present building. The new building was officially dedicated January 12, 1911. Through the years the library has played an important part in the cultural, informational and recreational pursuits of the people of WI.

At one time West Indianapolis had 6 elementary schools - #46, #47, #48, #49, #83 and Assumption Catholic School. WI presently has three elementary schools: Public Schools #46, #47 at 1240 West Ray Street, and #49 at 1902 West Morris Street. George Washington High School, which is nearby, opened in September 1927, with an enrollment of 861 pupils.

There are a number of churches, among which the largest are: West Morris Street Free Methodist Church, 2320 West Morris Street, Parkview Christian Church, 849 South Belmont; and Assumption Catholic Church, 1117 Blaine. There are six recognized Protestant denominations, two Negro Baptist as well as Pentecostal, Missions and at least eight other denominations.

The crime rate, compared to other areas, is fairly low today, and this could be due to the influence of the many churches and the existence of recreational facilities available to the neighborhood. But the crime rate has not always been low for WI was the center of bootlegging operations in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Plus the heavy influx of people looking for work made it a pretty rough place to live.

WI currently has a Southwest Health Center staffed by Methodist Hospital. Also a Well Baby Clinic is provided at the Mary Rigg Neighborhood Center.

The people in West Indianapolis believe in work, know their neighbors but have a "live and let live" attitude to guide their actions. A big problem in WI is caused by the fact that the area is fully developed; this causes the young people to move out because they cannot find a building lot. "If there was room here many would stay", stated one resident in an interview.

There are several blocks in WI which are integrated and have been for years but there are no racial conflicts. Blacks constitute 4% of the population. Again the "live and let live" philosophy guides the actions of these people.

The friendly people more and more speak out about conditions in their area through the West Indianapolis Neighborhood Congress, Inc. (WINC), which is recognized as one of the best organized neighborhood groups in the city. WINC, which is headquartered at the Mary Rigg Neighborhood Center, held its first Town Meeting on Sunday, February 7, 1971. The residents in the area serve on its board and meet monthly to discuss neighborhood concerns.

The community continues to change in the 70s and what changes will occur in the 80s will depend on many factors and upon how WI residents react and cope with future community problems. Although Chevrolet Motors bought many homes in the Valley area and new highway (I-70) took hundreds of homes out of the community, the citizens of WI hope that as the wheels of industry roll on, that a unique hub of homes, on narrow tree-lined streets, with parks, churches, schools, and people, will survive and prosper for many years to come.