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Greenbush: A Center of Economic and Cultural Capital

Note: As you know, I began this project with the goal of producing a paper on the Blount Street MG&E plant. However, when I began researching Madison's past, I could not avoid the outcroppings of my own past. Roughly one hundred years ago, a young man named Consiglio DiLoreto grew disgusted with the lack of opportunities on his family's farm in Italy and chose to immigrate to the United States. This man was my great-grandfather. While mining in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, he and his cousin heard about the promise of a far-off place called Montana. They climbed aboard a train, but were startled upon their arrival to realize that Montana was not a city, as they had expected, but a vast, unsettled territory. Disheartened, they decided to head toward Chicago and traveled as far as their dwindling funds would allow: to Madison, Wisconsin. Eventually, Consiglio's wife Antoinette joined him, and together they raised their family on Seymour Street near Greenbush—"the Bush," as it was affectionately known—a neighborhood primarily peopled by Italian and Jewish immigrants.

Essentially, the story of Madison's Greenbush neighborhood mirrors that classic Gifford Pinchot story of conservation: "the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time" (Pinchot 22). Located adjacent to Monona Bay, just south and west of the picturesque and imposing capitol building denoting the heart the city, the Greenbush area has long held value for those looking to make the most of the narrow isthmus delineating Lake Monona from Lake Mendota. Recently visiting the triangle-shaped area enclosed by intersecting West Washington, Regent and Park Streets for the first time, I was struck by its diminutive size: how could it be that the part of Madison I had heard so much about amounted to just 52 acres, only slightly larger than the patch of land I grew up on in northeast Wisconsin? However, I came to realize that the magnitude of the Bush's legacy has little to do with its physical dimensions. The history of the Bush is an essential part of Madison lore because of the larger conflict it has come to represent: the battle between a business community looking to create the most efficient use of one small tract of land and the collective memory of the inhabitants of that neighborhood who primarily respected the landscape not for its commercial value, but for its cultural pricelessness.

Formerly a marshland, the Greenbush neighborhood got its start when an enterprising man named George Prengler purchased nineteen acres in 1891 and took on the difficult task of hauling in ashes to create sites for houses. Author Timothy Heggland characterized the nature of the land as a barrier to much-needed urban growth, noting that "development languished in these low-lying areas until Madison grew to a point where its need for land adjacent to existing neighborhoods outweighed this problem" (1).

This conception of marshland as an untapped resource for development was characteristic of the years preceding the modern environmental movement, long before wetlands came to be respected for their aesthetic and ecological value (Rome, 157-158). Indeed, a strand of the Greenbush story that has been chronically overlooked is the inherent unsuitability of the land as a foundation for a neighborhood. However, residents of the Bush dealt with the former identity of the site on a day-to-day basis. In one cookbook titled *A Taste of Memories From the "Bush,"* Sarah Brashi Jones tells of how her mother had to carefully navigate established paths in order to avoid the many puddles that plagued the neighborhood (qtd. in Murray 22). Thus, Greenbush provides a compelling example of the difference between preservation, which would have entailed allowing the marshland to continue sheltering wildlife and preventing floods, and the conservation ethic that called for building a much-needed neighborhood over the top of an intricate model of ecological connectivity.

After converting the land as best as he could, Prengler built or brought in the houses he would sell to mostly impoverished northern Italian, Sicilian, Sicilian-Albanian and Russian-Jewish immigrants for \$5 down and \$5 to \$10 per month (Heggland 4). Many of these houses came from the area surrounding the University, just up Park Street, which was in the process of expansion. Building upon Prengler's pioneering start, the neighborhood quickly grew to its conventionally reported size of 52 acres, or about ten city blocks (Murray, *Taste of Memories*, Introduction). Most residents of the Bush continued to group themselves by country of origin. My great-aunt Clara DiLoreto gave an interesting geographical generalization of the area: Sicilians dominated the actual triangle, while Sicilian-Albanians made their homes on the outskirts, close to Regent Street. The northern Italians established themselves near Vilas Park, and African-Americans settled on South Park Street. My own family, steps away from the heart of the Bush in an area now covered by the Kohl Center, lived among Irish and German immigrants.

By most accounts, Greenbush residents of varying geographical origins coexisted well: African-American and Italian boys played sports together on an abandoned lot off of Regent Street, the Jewish proprietor of Novick's grocery store encouraged my great-grandmother to buy food for her family on credit when her husband had missed work due to illness, and very few people locked their doors.

However, some cultural stereotypes became deeply imbedded into residents of the Bush: at her recent ninetieth birthday party, my great-aunt Assunta (Sue) Saccomando recalled fearing the Sicilian men due to their habit of claiming neighborhood girls for their sons and refusing to take “no” for an answer.

Within the context of the city of Madison, however, residents of Greenbush were relatively isolated. My great-aunt Clara admitted that, as a child, she did not know anyone from other parts of the city. In one chapter of her collection of Greenbush memories, Antonina Paratore Dinsmore retells this story with a darker undertone:

The world outside our private ghetto was even more mysterious and threatening. We had physical boundaries for our play area. But should we stray beyond the pale, the taunts from those other kids sent us scurrying back with the words ‘dego’ and ‘wap’ ringing in our ears. (37)

However, while children in the Bush sometimes suffered because of their identity as newcomers, the adults relied on their common status as immigrants as a source of comfort. Aunt Clara emphasized the importance of the neighborhood Catholic church on Park Street, St. Joseph’s, in the lives of her parents and their peers. In the book of memoirs she distributed to members of the family, Clara stated, “I think that St. Joseph’s gave my parents spiritual renewal and a feeling of community which was important to both of them especially since neither of them had family here” (15). No doubt, many other residents of the Greenbush neighborhood valued this sense of community via shared faith.

A number of other locations in and around the Bush also served as catalysts of community building. One of these was Columbus Park, later renamed Brittingham Park, lying between West Washington Avenue and Monona Bay. According to a map drawn by Tony Guastella, the park had two baseball diamonds, a drinking trough for horses, and a water station. However, more important than the park’s physical accoutrements was its ability to host the massive-scale picnics organized by residents of the Bush on summer afternoons. Another vital location was Neighborhood House, located at 768 West Washington Avenue and founded in 1916. Although no one in Clara’s family participated in activities held at Neighborhood House, she remembers that it was run by two kind, single women who opened it after a large donation from Mr. Brittingham and support from area fraternal organizations. She recalled

that the women held classes to teach neighbors to sew, cook American dishes, understand American culture, and gain citizenship. Dinsmore's mother learned to speak English from the women at Neighborhood House. Dinsmore recalls how "She and her friends walked to class with their notebooks, and together they tackled their new language," and that the classroom was just as often a place of laughter and camaraderie as it was a place of serious scholarship (11-12).

The gardens of the Greenbush neighborhood also provided a location for bonding. Former resident Vito Paratore recalled that "Gardens were everywhere. If you visited a family, they'd always send something home with you" (Goroff, Goroff and Murray). However, the bulk of the garden's bounty remained within the family in a version of conservation that the *Ladies' Home Journal* drew upon when it stated, "So you have been practicing conservation all your life, doing on a small scale what the Government is beginning to do on a huge one, but you never spelled with a capital C" ("What is Meant?" 33). In my family, practicing conservation meant putting up about one hundred cans of tomatoes from the garden each summer, which my great-grandmother later used in pasta dishes and stews. Beside their individual gardens, the people of the Bush reaped harvests from the land. Both cookbooks, *Grandmothers of Greenbush* and *A Taste of Memories from the "Bush,"* include several recipes for cardune, or burdock. Joanne Bruno Dibelius, who grew up in the Bush, recalled that her mother collected and cooked not only cardune, but also the mustard greens and asparagus that grew along roadsides (qtd. in Murray, *Grandmothers*, 124) Armed with a multitude of mason jars and a knowledge of wild species, families in the Bush did all they could to create sustainability within the innermost of Von Thunen's rings: the intensive agriculture of the urban garden.

However, residents of Greenbush also relied on outside help to feed their families. The small area was home to many family-run grocery stores: the Guastella map labels five, as well as several butcher shops and bakeries. The grocery stores were also the arrival point for crates of grapes shipped from California via the Milwaukee Road to eager Sicilian and Italian men who traditionally made their own wine (Dinsmore, 56). Critically, according to DiLoreto, the ethnic grocery stores owned by both Italians and Russian Jews sold foods from the "old country," providing a culinary link back to the

immigrants' place of birth even after they had traversed thousands of miles and staggering cultural changes.

Proprietors of restaurants in the Bush shared old ways of cooking with other members of the Madison community. The most prevalent spot in Madison for Italian cuisine was Spaghetti Corners, the informal name coined during World War II for the intersection of Park Street and Regent Street. At the time, these streets were major Madison thoroughfares, and lay on the path to Chicago. Servicemen stationed at Truax Field frequently visited Jimmy's Spaghetti House, DiSalvo's Spaghetti House, Bunky's, The Roman Inn, and Tiny's Lunch (Murray, *Taste of Memories*, Introduction). Serving traditional dishes to those unfamiliar with Italian cooking and ways of life not only helped residents of the Bush support themselves, but also allowed Madisonians and others to come to appreciate the relatively new residents who had emigrated from Sicily and Italy.

However, roughly fifteen years after the heyday of Spaghetti Corners, a new policy of urban redevelopment spelled the end of the Bush as its residents knew it. Ultimately, a new idea of conservation took hold in the early 1960's: seen by the Madison Redevelopment Authority as too valuable for single-family homes, the land was turned over to business groups who sought to erect modern apartment complexes. An article from the *Wisconsin State Journal* in April of 1960 states that court-appointed appraisers established values for houses in the neighborhood which residents could either accept or appeal to a jury. However, the story always ended the same way: long-time residents were evicted and forced to reestablish themselves somewhere else. The article summed up the redevelopment project in one telling sentence: "The projects have been proposed to *conserve* [emphasis added] and rehabilitate the areas with a limited amount of land clearance" ("Renewal Area Prices Set" 2.1). Another article run in December of 1961 expressed that the attitude of expelled Greenbush residents was "better than expected," although they faced a host of problems including a lack of decent housing within their price range ("Negotiations Studied" 1.7).

The victory of those businessmen and advocates of conservation via urban redevelopment is strikingly apparent today: the only hints of the Italian heritage of the Greenbush neighborhood that

remain are a memorial on Regent Street, a plaque on the corner of Park Street and West Washington Avenue, Fraboni's Deli and the burnt-out shell of Josie's restaurant on the former Spaghetti Corners. Family homes, gardens and grapevines have been replaced by a series of apartment complexes including Bayview and Parkside, part of the University Hospital, and a nursing home. The neighborhood remains diverse, but in a different way: while briefly parked on West Washington Avenue one afternoon, I watched an African-American man amble down the sidewalk, an Asian woman secure groceries including a ten-pound bag of rice to the handlebars of her bicycle, and a group of day-laborers of various ethnicities cross the street with lunch pails in hand. The only road leading into the interior of the triangle, really amounting to no more than a cul-de-sac allowing access to the various apartment complexes, is named Braxton Place after one of the women who worked at the old Neighborhood House and helped secure housing in the new apartment complexes for displaced women from the Bush (Murray, *A Taste of Memories*, 17)

Doubtlessly, the Triangle Redevelopment project of the 1960's enabled many more people to squeeze their homes into the ten-block area. Some of the apartment complexes stretch to eight stories, allowing room for tasteful landscaping, sidewalks, parking lots, and a small playground. In terms of providing affordable housing, this newest incarnation of Greenbush fulfills the Pinchot doctrine of "the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time." Unfortunately, it came at the expense of a culturally vivid neighborhood. One brand of conservation, the kind practiced by the government and christened with a capital C, came to dominate over another kind of conservation that was not nearly as pretentious and existed among the thousands of small decisions Bush residents made each day while running their homes and their lives. However, a new kind of conservation has come to take hold, a conservation of cultural diversity that can best be seen in the murals affixed to the chain link fence surrounding the new playground: images of people of different ethnic origins gathering together, just as the previous residents of the area did beginning over a century ago.

