

## Kenosha, Wisconsin and the Grey Magic of Urban Sprawl

Kenosha, a small city tucked into the southeastern corner of Wisconsin about equidistant from Milwaukee and Chicago, has approximately 96,000 people, one movie theater, and no book stores. A friend of mine and fellow Kenosha native, in part of a collaborative effort to understand what we perceived to be the peculiar social psychology of our hometown, once summarized it with a sardonic, bitter-sweet epithet: “like anywhere else, but more so.”<sup>1</sup> In many regards, Kenosha does, indeed, seem to hold a funhouse mirror up to the greater national experience of the twentieth century, like an exaggerated reflection of Progressive-era local and regional planning, of post-war boom and bust, and most importantly of a special brand of post-industrial cultural displacement and confusion about land use, labor, and the relationship of the community to a larger and still more uncertain world.

The early part of the twentieth century saw the first of Kenosha’s major transitions as a settlement of Euro-Americans. From a tiny harbor-town and fishing community along Lake Michigan it became a locus of real industrial production – due in no small part to the veritable explosion of industry and commerce in Chicago, a mere fifty miles to the south. A 1928 invitation by Kenosha’s Industrial Bureau of Commerce to prospective corporate investors boasted of seventy-five factories, cheap real estate, cheap fuel, and – it argued with an undertone of fashionably nativist utilitarianism – a

---

<sup>1</sup> Personal interview with Amanda Leonard.

more docile and industrious supply of immigrant laborers than those on the East coast.<sup>2</sup> Here, men still outnumbered women by a significant margin: young, first generation Germans, Irish, Scandinavians, and Italians established themselves alone before sending for their families. The Bureau, judging from the rapid growth it witnessed in such a short period, expected the city to reach a population of 200,000 by 1980, overshooting the actual figures by over 100%.

Among the many industrial employers of this expanding labor pool was Nash Motors, an automobile company with a 100-acre manufacturing plant near the harbor. It had been purchased a decade earlier from T.B. Jeffrey Company, an operation established just after the advent of the automobile and at one point the second-largest such production plant in the country.<sup>3</sup> The production of durable goods, cars and trucks in particular, would continue to dominate Kenosha for another sixty years, not only in its economic output, but in its cultural conception of itself and its relationship with the rest of the country.

Harland Bartholomew, a civil engineer and urban planner hired by Kenosha's first City Manager in 1922, recognized and further facilitated that central role of automobile production and ownership.<sup>4</sup> Bartholomew had previously headed urban planning projects in Newark, New Jersey and in St. Louis, Missouri, but he set a new precedent in establishing a comprehensive design for a non-suburban community of Kenosha's modest size. The Nash Motors plant was unequivocally the town's commercial and cultural focal point, and thus became "1<sup>st</sup> Avenue" on an unconventional grid, which begins not at the

---

<sup>2</sup> "What Kenosha Offers to Industry: a brief story of some of the highlights of an exceptional industrial community." Kenosha Industrial Bureau of Commerce. Kenosha, Wisconsin. 1928.

<sup>3</sup> "Nash Motors." Exhibit. Kenosha Historical Society.

<sup>4</sup> "Building a Bright Future on a Solid Foundation of the Past: The Plan for 2010."

center but in the eastern-most part of town. The consistency of this grid simultaneously aided vehicle traffic in the city and began the long process of rendering the streets non-navigable to pedestrians.

Bartholomew's design also preserved a good portion of the shoreline south of the Nash Motors plant and proposed some of the most comprehensive zoning codes in the country, which the city government readily accepted. It is a mark of Kenosha's full and earnest participation in the Progressive movement that new levels of an expanding local government bureaucracy willingly hired a team of engineering experts to plan and design the city's infrastructure, rather than retreating to the background to allow individuals and businesses to create such an infrastructure spontaneously. In a similar vein, Kenosha's industry benefited hugely from federal government contracts during World War II. Even in the wake of the national ban on civilian auto production, employment at Nash Motors doubled over the course of the war, assembling transport trailers and helicopters for the Army.

Few communities experienced the post-war prosperity to quite the extent that Kenosha did. The production of military technology had given Kenosha's industry the kick-start it needed not only to recover from the Great Depression, but to reach previously unimagined heights of production. A series of mergers put Nash Motors in the ownership of the Detroit-based American Motors Corporation (AMC) and employed, at its height, tens of thousands of factory workers. The United Auto Workers Local 47 labor union was a powerful force in both state and local politics and consistently secured its members with the highest wages in the industry, insuring blue-collars workers and

their families a solid place in the American middle class.<sup>5</sup> Further, a nation-wide boom in cheap oil worked in tandem with Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System to create a new automobile-based infrastructure and thus, a skyrocketing demand for cars and trucks.<sup>6</sup> In responding to that demand, American Motors was helping to change the American landscape in a dramatic way, in effect inventing whole new dimensions of interstate trade and tourism. Moreover, the new infrastructure brought with it – to Kenosha and to the outskirts of metropolitan areas around the country – the decentralization and cultural dislocation of “urban sprawl.” New Kenoshan businesses moved westward, further from residential areas, congregating on a few major roads that could only be reached by car.

In this essentially unregulated burst of expansion, one recognizes at once the prudence and the limitations of Bartholomew's 1922 vision: cars had become as vitally important as he had expected and much more so; an internally consistent and comprehensible grid system had proved quite advantageous. The city center, however, was shifting gradually, not from one place to another place, but rather from one place (The AMC manufacturing plant) to no place in particular; the relationship between the core and periphery was becoming fuzzy and confused. AS occurred in the '50s and '60s all across the nation, open spaces gave way to subdivisions to support a growing population, farmland gave way to commerce to support a new standard of living, a farmhands gave way to machinery to support industrial monoculture.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> *Agreement between American Motors Corporation Kenosha Plant, Kenosha, Wisconsin and the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace, Agricultural Implement Workers of America, UAW-AFL-CIO Local 74* [later 47]

<sup>6</sup> Cronon, William. “Environmentalism Triumphant?”

<sup>7</sup> Map. *Patterns of Farm and Non-farm Housing. Kenosha County, WI – June, 1960.*

The mixed blessings of AMC's – and thus Kenosha's – post-war prosperity rode on what modern Americans now recognize as a fragile and fickle pair of wings: cheap petroleum and a specialized niche in the global market. The economic downturn of the '70s and '80s were particularly unkind to Kenosha's industry. The 1973 Arab Oil Embargo introduced to the automobile market a new demand for fuel-efficient vehicles. AMC made few compromises in the interest of fuel efficiency or other, more global concerns in comparison to its foreign competitors; in 1973, it spent \$3 million on product recalls ordered by the Environmental Protection Agency for failing to conform to California emissions requirements. Additionally, the UAW refused to give any grounding wage negotiations, even as revenues plummeted and competition grew. In 1987, Chrysler purchased the company, and within a year, the plant closed entirely, leaving thousands of workers unemployed.

It is difficult to overstate the disorienting power of the vacuum left by AMC, not only in job loss, but in cultural identity. Former factory worker Joe Gordon recalled, of the day Chrysler announced the closing: “About two hours into, I was on the verge of tears cuz then I started thinking about everybody: *there's nothing left.*”<sup>8</sup> My own mother, who had secure work as a school teacher, recalls a pervasive sentiment that “the whole town was just going to die out,” break off, move to somewhere more prosperous.<sup>9</sup>

Remarkably, it did nothing of the kind. Rather, a small economic miracle occurred, fraught with complications and cultural confusion: the combination of even greater urban sprawl and a kind of white-collar revolution. Where previously the city council had held only one member with a bachelor's degree, in 1988 seven white-collar

---

<sup>8</sup> Dudley, Kathryn Marie. *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Post-industrial America.*

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Jeanne Ehlers.

businessmen were elected within a single year, three of them with master's degrees.<sup>10</sup>

Manufacturing, they argued, was no longer a valid ticket to prosperity, and the middle class belonged to the educated.

The new guard's land-use strategy was two-fold: first, to attract tourists by preserving and restoring pieces of the natural landscape. Among its priorities were the Chiwaukee Prairie, the wetlands of the Des Plaines River, and the construction of a South Port Marina. This effort has been marginally successful, in the sense that tourism has, indeed, increased, employment has stayed high, and the mean income has, against all odds, avoided any precipitous drops. From a stricter conservationist perspective, however, the success of the project is somewhat limited, as ever-expanding residential areas close in on what remains of the Chiwaukee Prairie. (Full disclosure: this includes the house that I grew up in.)

The second major component of the economic restoration strategy was to answer the crisis with more, better, and different urban sprawl, attracting commuters who worked in Milwaukee and Chicago with the promise of lower rents, lower crime rates, and a quieter atmosphere. Today, the number one private employer of Kenoshans is the Illinois pharmaceutical giant, Abbott Laboratories, second only to the public education system, which expands at a frantic pace to accommodate the children of these new arrivals. The city-workers brought with them the city, as franchise restaurants and other services accumulate on the up-until-recently vacant west side. By necessity, Paelli's Bakery now competes with Panera Bread, Villa D'Carlo with Fazzoli's, Shirel's Ice Cream with Cold Stone Creamery, Andy's Drive-in with Red Robin, Lupita's with Qdoba, Mo's Café with Starbucks. The former of each pair is about as kitschy as it sounds. Gentrification and

---

<sup>10</sup> Dudley, 53.

urbanization have, arguably, saved Kenosha from economic and demographic deterioration, at the expense of its local color, much of its open spaces, and some of its farmland.

Stepping away from the funhouse mirrors and back into reality – or at least to a different series of trippy illusions – I have little better understanding of the peculiar psychology of the place I grew up assuming was normal, but I’ve gotten an inkling of the cultural, social, and environmental legacy I’ve inadvertently inherited. Its abundant contradictions helped to explain some of the complexity of that mentality: a blue-collar city with no blue-collar jobs; fiscally liberal but socially conservative, with a distrust of liberal cosmopolitanism; at once too proud and too humble to recognize its natural resources and labor resources as a part of a larger and more intricately interrelated whole; faintly populist in orientation, but deeply cynical. I suppose that’s not terribly different from any other defunct manufacturing center in the United States, but I’ll sign off on that “more so” argument.

## Works Cited

### Books

Dudley, Kathryn Marie. *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Post-industrial America*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago, IL. 1997.

### Pamphlets

*What Kenosha Offers to Industry: a brief story of some of the highlights of an exceptional industrial community*. Kenosha Industrial Bureau of Commerce. Kenosha, Wisconsin. 1928.

*Building a Bright Future on a Solid Foundation of the Past: The Plan for 2010*. SEWRPC Community Assistance Planning Board, 1995.

*Agreement between American Motors Corporation Kenosha Plant, Kenosha, Wisconsin and the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace, Agricultural Implement Workers of America, UAW-AFL-CIO Local 74*. October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1964.

### Interviews

Ehlers, Jeanne. October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008.

Leonard, Amanda.

### Exhibits

*Nash Motors*. Kenosha Historical Society. 2000.

### Maps

*Patterns of Farm and Non-farm Housing. Kenosha County, Wi – June 1960*. Field work conducted by the Department of Rural Sociology, The University of Wisconsin. 1960.

### Lecture

Cronon, William. “Environmentalism Triumphant?” Lecture. November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008.