

## **Waterbury Holiday History Tour**

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During the holiday season, it is often useful to have a strategy for expending abounding energy, entertaining guests, or finding time to explore and rekindle. I became interested with the notion of blending stories and songs of the Christmas holidays with the history and architecture of the Waterbury Neighborhood. As a result, I created this walking/driving holiday themed tour of the Waterbury area. I have grown to love the Waterbury area and feel so fortunate to live amongst its mighty oaks and captivating past. My hope is that you will grab a cup of cider, and either load into the car, or venture out on an invigorating walk sharing this history of the neighborhood and the joy of the holiday season.

### **Begin in Waterbury Circle:**

Start the tour in Waterbury Circle, where most of the houses were built in the 20's and 30's and have chimneys. How would Santa arrive without the Chimney? The chimney has a starring role in Clement Moore's *The Night Before Christmas*: "stockings were hung by the chimney with care, in the hopes that Saint Nicholas would soon be there."

You might ask, where did the tradition of Santa Claus entering homes through the chimney originate? In pre-Christian Scandinavian tradition the god Odin was Master of Yule and entered through chimneys and smoke holes. Italians have a similar tradition, in which an old woman delivers gifts to children throughout Italy on Epiphany Eve, January 5.

Santa arriving through the chimney immigrated with Europeans to North America in the 1800's. Clearly, it would not be prudent to leave doors or windows open for Santa Claus, so he would enter into smoke-holes in the roof or through chimneys in more affluent houses.

In this Waterbury neighborhood off of 56th street, architect Edwin Beck built a majority of the homes. His signature trait in the neighborhood was the matching chimney and shutter design. Look specifically for the owl design in the chimney and the matching cut-outs in the shutters. On this street you will see several brick chimneys with designs including owls, lighthouses, and fir trees.

So we know how chimneys were in the picture but what about the "stockings hung by the chimney with care?" The myth is that a man with three daughters was unsure how he would ever raise the needed dowry for his daughters to marry. One night, Saint Nicholas dropped a bag of gold down the chimney. The bag coincidentally fell into a stocking that had been hung by the fire to dry. The father, wanting to find the source of his good fortune stayed by the chimney to find the person responsible for his luck and learned it was Saint Nicholas. Even though Nicholas begged for anonymity, the news of his good fortune could not be contained and we began to understand that Saint Nicholas would leave treasures for us in stockings hung by the fire to dry.

### **Proceed to 56th Street, go south of Grand to Hanawalt Elementary:**

Here, in the heart of the Waterbury neighborhood is Hanawalt elementary school. Hanawalt was built in 1914, named after a Civil War Soldier and married to the daughter of the abolitionist Jordan, of the Jordan House, located in West Des Moines. You might ask, how is Hanawalt connected to Christmas? A 1949 film titled "Holiday Affair" debuted shortly before Christmas. The film starred a 7 year old Des Moines boy named Gordon Gerbert. In the movie, Gerbert plays the son of war widow Janet Leigh, who is in a romantic conundrum and her son, Gordon Gerbert, Hanawalt alum, helps make up her mind in favor of Robert Mitchum.

Gordon grew up in the Waterbury area and attended Hanawalt elementary. Gerbert had a solid Hollywood career. He was Burt Lancaster's son in the 1950 swashbuckler "The Flame and the Arrow" and John Wayne's son in the World War II-based movie "The Flying Leathernecks" (1951). Later he appeared on such television shows as "The Donna Reed Show," "Annie Oakley," "Gunsmoke" and "Wild Bill Hickok."

The Gerbert family, while in Des Moines made their home down the street at 5615 Pleasant Drive.

### **Proceed North on 56th turning East on Grand:**

Pass by the Temple B'nai Jeshurun on Grand, which was built in a neo-classical style in 1931 and dedicated in 1932. The congregation is the oldest Jewish community in Des Moines, originally founded in 1873. The building features stone carvings, stained glass, and original paintings inside. Though founded in the Orthodox tradition, it later became Iowa's first Reform congregation. According to the Temple's website, "B'nai Jeshurun means 'children of righteousness'. It is a poetic name for the Jewish people, often used in the Bible to designate the ideal character of Israel." In 2019, Hannukah, the festival of lights, will be December 22 – 30.

### **Proceed down Grand to the Corner of Polk:**

*Clang, clang, clang went the trolley  
Ding, ding, ding went the bell  
Zing, zing, zing went my heart strings  
From the moment I saw him I fell  
-Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane*

In the late 1800s a trolley line extended from downtown Des Moines, going west along Ingersoll Ave ending just beyond Polk Boulevard. In the back of the building at 4717 Grand Ave is the location of the trolley turnaround.

In the 1944 holiday classic movie, "Meet Me in St. Louis," where Judy Garland sings the Trolley song, was also the debut of a Christmas classic "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." Since the Garland

version 65 years ago, many have copied the song in their own style, including Garth Brooks, Robert Goulet, Lady Antebellum, James Taylor and Bob Dylan.

### **Go North on Polk Boulevard to Ingersoll:**

Imagine what it was like at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with trolley lines up Ingersoll and down Polk Boulevard. Polk Boulevard is named after the owner of these trolley lines, Jefferson Polk. Ingersoll is named after Ebenezer Jared Ingersoll, who founded Hawkeye Fire Company in 1865. The building the company was started in is still standing downtown across 4<sup>th</sup> Street from Java Joes. A transplant from New York City, Ingersoll moved to Des Moines in 1858, and lived and worked in Des Moines for 33 years making a mark on its development. He is buried in the Woodland Cemetery.

### **Stop at the corner of Polk and Harwood looking a few blocks to the West:**

Imagine the rolling hills of the first site of the Des Moines Golf and Country Club, from 1897 to 1923. The club house was located at 49th and Harwood. The club moved west to the former Ashworth Estate in the 1920s, and then to its current location in Dallas County when I-235 was developed in the 1960s.

Be sure to drive or walk through the neighborhood on December 24 in the early evening to see all of the paper lanterns lining the streets and sidewalks. Called luminaries locally, they're inspired by the Mexican tradition of lighting *luminaria* to line the way for the Christ child and for families gathering on Christmas Eve. Neighbors began lighting luminaries on Waterbury Circle several decades ago and it has spread throughout the neighborhood, down Harwood to Polk. More information about joining this tradition is included in this newsletter.

### **Continue North on Polk, stopping at Roosevelt High School:**

Roosevelt High School is named after the 26th president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. The school, built in 1921, was tagged with a total construction cost, including landscaping and athletic fields of \$1,331,600. Roosevelt was one of the first schools in the nation to be built at a cost exceeding a million dollars, and was referred to as the "The Million Dollar School" for several years. In 1923, the school opened its doors to 1,282 students in grades seven through 12. Architects, Proudfoot, Bird and Rawson designed and built a modified Gothic style building set on a 20-acre campus.

During December 16 and 17 of 1965, Senator Robert Kennedy called for a Christmas truce to mourn the dead of the Vietnam War. In support of that truce, 5 Des Moines Schools students were suspended for wearing black armbands. The American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa

challenged the students' suspensions in court, and in 1969 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the students. The "Tinker" case became a landmark case for student's first amendment rights. A repeated line from the case is that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate."

Roosevelt is also home to another famous alum. Drake University graduate, Bill McQuire Bryson, is a prolific author of several books including "A Walk in the Woods," and "1927." Bryson grew up in Des Moines. His book, "The Thunderbolt Kid," tells about his childhood in the 50s. Many people believe the characters in the "Thunderbolt Kid" bare a likeness to Jean Shepard's characters, (a.k.a. Ralphie), in the holiday movie "Christmas Story."

### **Stop at the corner of Polk Boulevard and Chamberlain Avenue, stopping at Tifereth Israel Synagogue**

In 2014, the synagogue's former Rabbi Steven Edelman-Blank wrote an op-ed, published in the Des Moines Register, called "Why a rabbi feels at home at Christmas", which included the following:

*"I do not expect other people to change how they approach this season. I do not ask anyone to take down their decorations. Rather, I embrace being different. I also focus on the pride I have about the contributions of the Jewish community to Des Moines. I remind myself that the Jewish community is as much a part of this city as anyone else. The synagogue I am fortunate to serve was established more than a century ago. We are not strangers to Des Moines. We have helped build it into the great place it is today. And we are not going anywhere.*

*So now I am less taken aback when someone tell me to have a Merry Christmas, a holiday which I never will observe. I simply wish them a Merry Christmas back without missing a beat. I remind myself that, though my surroundings may have changed for awhile, I am still part of them as they are part of me."* Rabbi Steven Edelman-Blank

### **Proceed North on Polk turning East on Chamberlain Ave:**

Notice the gingerbread brick style homes of the North side of the street. A favorite holiday tradition is construction gingerbread houses of cookies, frosting, and candy. The first known recipe for gingerbread came from Greece in 2400 BC. The Gingerbread houses adorned with candy that we know today originated in Germany during the 16th century and became associated with Christmas. The popularity arose when the Brothers Grimm wrote the story of Hansel and Gretel, a story of siblings that wandered deep into the forest and found a house occupied by a wicked witch made totally of gingerbread and candy.

### **Proceed East on Chamberlain Avenue:**

Near the corner of 42nd is an example of a Lustron house. Lustron houses have historical significance because they were pre-fabricated homes that became popular due to the ease of construction. These post-WWII houses were constructed of ceramic and steel leftover from wartime manufacturing. These houses took 360 working hours to complete. The houses came with built-in shelves and pre-installed appliances, ranging from about 700 to 1,140 square feet. They were advertised as symbols of modern living, delivered in a kit of more than 3,000 pieces on specially outfitted trucks.

The houses were built to be heated by a radiant heating system in the ceiling. The steel walls with baked-on porcelain enamel were nearly impossible to drill through, so homeowners resorted to hanging shelves and artwork with magnets. A combination clothes washer and dishwasher came pre-installed in every unit. Colors that were available were surf blue and dove gray. Other examples of Lustron homes can be found throughout Des Moines, including near University and Polk Boulevard, in Beaverdale, and on Fleur Drive.

### **Proceed to 42nd Street and turn North:**

Since Amazon was not available in the 70's, the advent of the Christmas season was marked by receiving the JCPenney or Sears Christmas catalog in the mail. Each company's catalog was nearly 2 inches thick, with pictures and prices of every possible Christmas gift a child would ever desire. Pages were dogeared for reference in finishing a Christmas wish list.

Sear and Roebuck started making catalogs in 1886. The catalog not only sold Christmas gifts but in 1908 began a new chapter in the catalog business with their offering of kit houses (commonly known as "mail-order homes"). These kit homes were permanent houses, with thousands of choices in plans and materials.

Northeast of the Roosevelt, near Cottage Grove and Kingman between 35th and Polk Blvd is a neighborhood full of kit homes of several styles. In the early 1900s, these homes became popular due to the difficulty of acquiring the necessary materials to build a home. The advantage of ordering from a catalog, was having the delivery of a blueprint, and materials, down to the correct number of nails needed to construct the house.

### **Continue North to Kingman Ave:**

Andy Williams, a famous crooner in the 50s and 60s, spent part of his childhood on Kingman Avenue. He also attended Callahan Middle School. Williams and his three older brothers moved from Wall Lake, Iowa to Des Moines. The Williams brothers performed at WHO radio in

Des Moines when Ronald "Dutch" Reagan was a sports announcer for the station. The family eventually moved to Los Angeles.

In his solo career, Andy Williams started a television show and an annual Christmas show where he sang a number of Christmas carols. "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" was recorded and released by Andy Williams in 1963 for his first Christmas album.

### **Turn Left and Proceed West on Kingman Ave:**

Christmas would not be Christmas without the Charles Dickens tale *The Christmas Carol*, where Scrooge is haunted by ghost of Christmas present, past, and future. Iowa too has a famous ghost, Kate Morgan, responsible for the haunting of the famed Hotel del Coronado, from the movie "Some Like It Hot" with Marilyn Monroe and Tony Curtis.

Morgan was born Kate Farmer in Hamburg, IA. On Dec. 30, 1885, Kate married Tom Morgan, who some say became a gambler who worked aboard trains. Kate possibly became an accomplice. Kate found herself in Coronado, CA. She was registered under the name of an alias and was later found dead in her room Nov. 24, 1892.

She supposedly has stayed to haunt the hotel and there are documented reports of paranormal activity in Room 3327, which was Room 3312 when Morgan lodged at the hotel. There are accounts of flickering lights, TVs that turn themselves on and off, sudden temperature shifts and the sound of inexplicable footsteps on the floor above.

A local ghost is rumored to haunt the Drake Observatory which is located on the Waveland Golf Course and may be accessed via Observatory Road.

### **At the Intersection of Polk Blvd and Kingman turn South toward Observatory Road:**

The Drake Observatory, on the Waveland Golf course, houses a telescope built in 1884. The Drake University website explains that the eight and a half inch refracting telescope which donated by Francis Marion Drake, the namesake of Drake University is housed in the observatory. The historical observatory was built in 1920-21 and was made possible due to the cooperation of the City of Des Moines and Drake University. While the city supplied the land and the funds to build the observatory, the university provided the scientific instruments and staff. Supposedly, the observatory has been known to be haunted by Dr. Robert Morehouse was the first chairman of the Astronomy and Physics department. His ashes, along with his wife's are interred inside the Observatory. Reportedly students working in the basement have reported feeling someone in their presence overlooking their work.