

SKYLINE

NEWS OF LINCOLN PARK, OLD TOWN, RIVER NORTH AND GOLD COAST

Walk helped turn North Dearborn

51 years for summer ritual that began when area needed improvement

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Gold Coast

The Gold Coast has had its ups and downs over the years, and in the wake of the Great Depression and World War II, parts of the neighborhood had fallen into disrepair.

Longtime resident Patricia Study remembers the neighborhood as not quite as ornate as it is today.

"People find it hard to believe when I tell them what we've dealt with," said Study, who moved to North Dearborn Street with her husband in 1958.

"Dearborn was not in good shape," she said.

At the time, North Dearborn's wide avenue was lined with large, lavish residences, once home to some of Chicago's most prominent families. While some of the homes continued to be upheld,

such as the Cardinal's Mansion at the north end of State Parkway, many were in poor condition and had dropped significantly in value.

Absentee landlords and residents abandoned the homes they could no longer afford to maintain. Some buildings were divided into rooming houses and often filled beyond capacity by negligent owners. Commercial entities — particularly bars — began to increase their presence around the 1200 block of North Dearborn, a shift that the few remaining families in the neighborhood did not welcome.

"We could see it creeping up Dearborn," Study recalled. "The bars and the boarding houses brought more crime and policing into the area."

Around that time, two individuals decided to foster change on North Dearborn. Louise Richards, a founder of the North Dearborn Association, and her husband Harper Richards, an architect, came up with a plan to revitalize the neighborhood.

In an effort to show off the avenue's potential, the Richards gathered six families on North Dearborn and arranged a public showing of their carefully tended gardens. The Richards' own yard, home to a traditional Japanese garden with a fountain and pool, was among the first featured in the walk.

And so the tradition of the annual garden walk was born.

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"It was a marvelous gimmick to get everyone, even the absentee owners, to do something with their yard," Study said. "It gave the whole neighborhood the attention it deserved."

Others in the neighborhood followed suit, and soon residents began to take pride in their avenue again. From there, the locals took it upon themselves to safeguard the historical personality of the neighborhood.

In the 1970s, neighbors got the attention of former Ald. Burton Natarus (42nd), who took up the cause by down zoning residential portions of the street to ensure developers would not spoil the temperament of the neighborhood with disproportionately tall buildings.

"We wanted to keep the character," said Study, who personally went around door-to-door in the neighborhood to get signatures supporting the zoning changes. "And we were also after the landlords, illegally squeezing too many people into rooms."

The walk has continued as an annual summertime ritual on the Near North Side, growing at one point into a festival that included food, music and a contest for the competing gardens. And while it continues to be a major fundraiser for the North Dearborn Association, Study said the walk has been scaled back to its original format, in the interest of keeping the gardens the central focus of the tradition.

This year's garden walk is set to feature flowery displays in 22 private gardens throughout the neighborhood.

Participants in the walk, some of whom have been involved for years, employ a variety of gardening styles on their patches, ranging from Asian to French Provencal. The walk also includes a guided architectural tour of Dearborn Parkway.

Along with the usual pageantry, some of the gardens in this year's walk will incorporate literary themes in their design, said Woody Olsen, co-chair of

the event. Gardeners will incorporate imagery from Alice in Wonderland, Return to Never Land and Tales of the Alhambra into their displays.

Louise Richards passed away not long after the garden walk began, and Harper Richards moved to Hawaii where he remained until his death in 1996. Their contributions are well recognized by many living in today's Gold Coast.

"If the Richards were alive today, they wouldn't believe how the garden walk has evolved," said Study. "It's only improved over the years."

Study continues to enjoy the event that she had once been a contestant in. She said that, for years, whenever she and her husband's garden won a prize during the event, they would mail the blue ribbon prize to Harper Richards.

"We always felt that he should have the ribbon," she said.