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Eighty Years Around Hyde Park — What's Past Is Prologue

*Excerpts from a talk by Leon M. Despres
before the Hyde Park Historical Society on April 14, 1991*

Part Two:



In my childhood and early adolescence there were many Hyde Park meeting places. There were at least five motion picture theaters we depended on for entertainment. When there were political campaigns, there were meetings in hotel ballrooms, in theaters, in Shotwell Hall on 55th Street, in Rosalie Hall at 57th and Harper - a big meeting place - all of which have disappeared. Those meetings have given way to high tech. The radio became a substitute and after radio came television. Now video tapes provide much of the entertainment for which we used to depend on the motion picture theaters and meeting halls. Hyde Park is now much more a community of people tied to their homes that it was in most of the eighty years I lived in it.

We had drama groups in Hyde Park that functioned very well. It would be hard to imagine the Compass today or some of the other drama groups that originated in Hyde Park, because the places aren't here anymore. We have the excellent Court Theater, but not the half-dozen other little groups that appeared, flourished, waned, and reappeared.

Another influence which has altered Hyde Park is the impairment of security. In my childhood there were policemen on the beat. They walked the beat, and one got to know the policeman on the beat. He would walk around all day long and there would be someone around at night. There were police patrol cars, but no radio

phones. Now we have far more efficient general patrolling but we also have a general urban atmosphere of violence and crime. It's not peculiar to Hyde Park, but what it has done is to reduce and greatly alter the quality of night life in Hyde Park. In my childhood and well into my adulthood there was no thought of insecurity at night. And when insecurity came, there were some of us who thought, well, we have to show that it doesn't exist. Then, in 1967, I was shot at 55th and Dorchester. That feeling of insecurity represents an enormous change.

I think I'd like to mention the change in the churches. There were far more churches in my early days in Hyde Park. When I moved to Hyde Park there were no synagogues. There was a very small Jewish population in Hyde Park and no synagogues at all. There were lots of churches but many of them have disappeared. Then, starting in the 1920's synagogues came to Hyde Park, and many of them are gone. There's still an active, lively religions federation, the Hyde Park Interfaith Council, but there are only two synagogues and one of them is planning to leave.

One important aspect of the Hyde Park community during all these years was the relationship to the communities north and south. Woodlawn was a very important area for people who worked at the University. It was a great housing area for University personnel. And there was close

contact with the communities to the South and to the North, between Hyde Park and Woodlawn, between Hyde Park and Kenwood and Oakland, and also between Hyde Park and the area west of Washington Park. Today, after eighty years, Hyde Park is a circumscribed community with limited personal relations with the north, south, and west.

Hyde Park was almost lily white. Fortunately a few African American families lived in a few locations, including the 5500-5600 Lake Park, and the 5300 Maryland blocks. Hyde Park had its poor, many of them living in the buildings over the stores on 55th Street, but they were white. The real estate interests kept the community white by inducing property owners to sign legally enforceable racial restrictive covenants. Fortunately, however, there were African American pupils in my classes in the Ray School and Hyde Park High School. Without them, I would not have had good childhood racial peer group experiences.

There were no computers in the Ray School, but there was a shower room and a bath attendant, to give the blessings of salubrity to bath-less Ray School children. For me, it was an adventure one afternoon a week to be excused from class at the Ray Branch (56-Stony Island) to go to the main building for a shower. My Ray School showers were the first showers in my life. 5488 Everett had splendid bathtubs, but shower equipment was not then standard.

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