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Old Indy neighborhood was an island of racial harmony

Will Higgins, will.higgins@indystar.com Published 7:05 a.m. ET Oct. 31, 2016 | Updated 9:12 a.m. ET Nov. 7, 2016

What made the scene unusual, though, was that Miller is black and Levy is white. Few people in Indianapolis, or anywhere, grew up in the 1940s in an integrated neighborhood.



(Photo: Kelly Wilkinson / IndyStar)

"Across the street there was a grocer." "Yeah, little short guy, I can picture him." "Sid Eskenazi lived here." "Bill Owens' pool hall was there." "This was our ball diamond — every Sunday." "Bessie Meshulam lived there — she married Mel Simon."

It was two octogenarians, Beatrice Miller and William Levy, back in the neighborhood of their youth, driving around, walking around, recalling all the usual things.

What made the scene unusual, though, is that Miller is black and Levy is white. Few people in 1940s Indianapolis grew up in an integrated neighborhood. Where Miller and Levy lived, in an area bounded by South, Morris, West and Madison streets, was a pocket of tolerance in an otherwise starkly segregated city. Located just south of Downtown (<http://www.downtownindy.org/>), it was known simply as the Southside.

The Southside was never a garden spot. It was cheap. It's what its residents could afford, blacks up from the South and foreign-born Jews and immigrants. What the two disparate groups had in common: Neither had much.

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Their old neighborhood is mostly gone, many of its small-frame houses and modest businesses demolished in the early 1970s by the construction of I-70.

But from the 1910s to the 1960s, it was an island of racial harmony. Even during the 1920s when Indiana politics was dominated openly by the Ku Klux Klan, Southsiders continued living in an integrated way. Old photographs show their grade school, School 22 (<http://www.myjips.org/>), was as black as it was white. Later, in the mid-1940s when Miller's family moved to the west side, she attended all-black School 24 and "thought it was weird there were no Jewish kids, and I didn't like it."

Southsiders even ate at the same drugstore counter. Passo's was owned by a Sephardic Jew named Passo. It was on the southwest corner of Meridian and McCarty streets. It burned in the 1970s and Shapiro's (<http://www.shapiros.com>), the last vestige of the neighborhood's Jewishness still standing, expanded into the space.

"Woolworth's? Downtown? No, we couldn't go there," Miller said. "But at Passo's we didn't have that problem. We sat down at the soda fountain like anybody else."

"That's true. I know because I worked there," Levy said.

Movie theaters were bastions of segregation. Indianapolis had several "black" theaters in black neighborhoods, said Stanley Warren, the Indianapolis-born educator and historian who grew up on the city's segregated east side (where the only whites he recalls seeing as a youth were the milkman and an insurance salesman). "But if you went to the movies Downtown," Warren said, "you'd have to sit in the balcony."

On the Southside, the Oriental Theater in the 1100 block of South Meridian Street didn't have a balcony. Officially, it was off-limits to blacks. Miller and Levy both recalled the neighborhood kids getting around that: The Jewish kids would surround and shield crouching black kids, and the group would move in a phalanx through the lobby.

I-70 blasts through where the Oriental stood. Levy's childhood home, like the other houses in the neighborhood a modest frame affair, also was plowed under by the highway.

The interstate didn't demolish everything, but it divided the Southside, ruined its cohesiveness. "Seventy killed it," Miller said, "because you couldn't easily get from one side (of the interstate) to the other, and a lot of people walked."

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(<https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2016/10/23/downtown-indy-booming-but-something-holding-housing-market-back/91906210/?from=global>).

But even before I-70, the Southside's old ways were sliding away, said Susan B. Hyatt, an anthropologist at [Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis](https://www.iupui.edu/) (<https://www.iupui.edu/>). "After World War II, a lot of Jewish soldiers came back and got the GI Bill and went to college, then got VA loans and moved to the northern suburbs. The black soldiers had a much harder time getting the GI Bill and a harder time getting VA loans for housing." So more of them stayed.

The Southside's history of racial harmony was so unusual that Hyatt and a colleague at IUPUI, Paul Mullins, began studying it. They and their students combed the old neighborhood, documenting where things were, interviewing residents and former residents. Their work is part of a broader IUPUI research project called "Invisible Indianapolis" that attempts to unearth hidden stories of long-gone places.

"The better we understand the history, the better we can plan the future," Hyatt said. "There's a tendency for us to see the city today and conclude it's always been this way, but of course it has not."

Hyatt and Mullins will give a public presentation about the Southside at 7 p.m. Nov. 9 in the Concord Neighborhood Center, 1310 S. Meridian St., as part of the Spirit & Place Festival. There's no cost to attend.

A final point of interest: Bill Owens, who, as Levy and Miller recalled ran the pool hall on South Meridian St., was a retired Negro League baseball player. He played between 1922 and 1933 on at least five different teams. Two years before his death, at age 95 in 1999, Owens recalled in an interview with the Star the time he executed a triple play. He was playing shortstop for the Memphis Red Sox in the ninth inning in a game against the Birmingham Black Barrons.

Runners were on first and second. The batter hit a line drive at him, which he caught for one out. He tagged second base, catching the runner off base, for the second out. He then threw to first for the third.

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