



EVERYDAY PEOPLE

# A NEIGHBORHOOD OF SATURDAYS

WILMA L. MOORE

It was a sweet evening dedicated to history. Former neighbors came together to reminisce about a neighborhood that they had shared more than fifty years ago. Although it was cold and snowy outside, the tenderness of long-ago memories warmed the hearts of the scores of participants. This neighborhood was located on the near south side of Indianapolis. Now known as Babe Denny, the north/south and east/west street boundaries for the neighborhood were seen as South Street to Morris Street and Madison Avenue to West Street, respectively.

The event, held at the Jewish Community Center, was a book launch for *The Neighborhood of Saturdays: Memories of a Multi-Ethnic Community on Indianapolis' South Side*. The book had grown out of a project coordinated by Susan B. Hyatt, an Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis anthropology professor. She and her students, including editorial and research assistants Benjamin Linder and Margaret Baurley, had worked with former African American and Jewish residents to reconstruct the neighborhood. Hyatt also got acceptance for the project from her university community and several organizations with south-side ties. The affair celebrated the culmination of a three-year

project that included oral history interviews and scan-a-thons of photographs and artifacts that belonged to the former residents. Their voices shared stories about and recollections of the built environment and their schools, religious institutions, community centers, businesses, and relationships between the two groups.

*A Neighborhood of Saturdays* examines the neighborhood from the 1920s to the 1970s. It acknowledges other groups within the neighborhood, but the focus is on the Sephardic Jews and the African Americans. According to Hyatt, the greatest overlap between the presence of the two groups in the neighborhood occurred during the 1930s and 1940s, with much

of the Jewish community moving farther north in the city during the post–World War II period. Two maps in the book suggest the level of vitality of the area before and after the addition of Interstate 70. Many blacks relocated to other areas of the city during the 1960s and 1970s. The title of the book also pays homage to the annual picnic reunion held every first Saturday in August by former African American residents and the importance of Saturday as the Sabbath for the Jewish community.

Participants in the project told of their reconnection to people that they had not seen for decades. At a time when racial segregation in Indianapolis schools and

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Members of the Etz Chaim Sephardic Congregation gather for the ceremonial moving of the Torah from the original synagogue on the south side of Indianapolis to Sixty-fourth Street and Hoover Road in 1964.

NEIGHBORHOOD OF SATURDAYS DIGITAL COLLECTION, INDIANA UNIVERSITY-HURDIE UNIVERSITY AT INDIANAPOLIS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY



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*Above: Former south side residents at the Neighborhood of Saturdays book launch in December 2002. From left to right: Becky Profeta, Henry Dabney, William Levy, Arthur Dabney, Gladys Nisenbaum, and Henrietta Mervis. Left: Indianapolis city councilor Jeff Miller (far left) presents copies of a special resolution to Arthur Dabney, south-side picnic committee; Susan Hyatt, IUPUI anthropology professor; Alan Cohen, Etz Chaim Sephardic Congregation president; Hildermon Harris, Babe Denny Neighborhood Group president; Letha Beverly, Bethesda Missionary Baptist Church representative; Niki Girls, Concord Neighborhood Center executive director; and Reverend John W. Woodall Jr., South Calvary Baptist Church.*



*A Sunday School class gathers outside at the South Calvary Baptist Church in Indianapolis, 1949.*

housing patterns was the norm, black and Jewish individuals recalled special friendships that they had shared at school and in their neighborhoods. Both communities identified continuity within their individual cultures through their religious institutions. South Cavalry Missionary Baptist Church and Bethesda Missionary Baptist Church remain on the south side and continue to serve their congregations. Many of the members of these two congregations moved to other parts of the city, but return

to the old neighborhood to worship. The Etz Chaim Sephardic synagogue moved north with its congregants.

During the evening of the book launch, the project participants brought with them the compassion of their memories. The early acts, as projected by those memories, set them on the path to construct their worldview and their life's work. For that group of people that night what was on stage was their humanity—the glue that brought together all of the structures

that they discussed. Those of us who had not been neighborhood residents received the benefit of their reminiscences, taken back to a time and place that mattered.

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