

Road reconstruction affects many aspects of neighborhood life, especially when it involves a main artery such as Oakland Avenue that pulses directly through a residential community like Shorewood. This year's newsletter series will highlight the stories of the Village's Main Street.

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Newsletter Editor:
Alex Vagelatos

Contributing Writers:
Karen de Hartog
Kathy Kean

Graphic Design:
Natalie Carroll

SHOREWOOD

from the river to the lake

News from the Shorewood Historical Society

Issue 2, April 2026

BENJI'S —THE OLDEST BUSINESS ON OAKLAND AVENUE

by Karen de Hartog

The mid-century, single-story building on the east side of the 4100 block of North Oakland seems oddly out of place. Surrounded by three-story Tudor style apartments and the huge Metro Market across the street, it is easy to overlook, unless of course, you are looking for Benji's Deli and Restaurant which has occupied the back of the building since 1963.

We believe that Benji's is the oldest business on Oakland Avenue (same location, same business, just different owners).

The building was constructed in 1961. At that time there was a service station to the north (currently Starbucks) and a Polly Prim Drive-in (dry cleaner) to the south (currently Fox Hole). The first tenants included Thirty-One Flavors, a dentist, a lawyer and a restaurant in the back. Kohl's grocery store was across the street. In September 1963, the restaurant was purchased by Werner Benjamin and named "Benjamin's Restaurant and Delicatessen."

Benjamin was born in Germany in 1927. He left the country after Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass, a terrifying night on Nov. 9-10, 1938, marked by widespread violence against Jews, burned synagogues and shattered homes) to live with relatives in the Netherlands. During the war, he went into hiding, supported by the Dutch resistance. He came to the United States in 1947, sponsored by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and stayed with relatives in California and Wisconsin while working a variety of jobs, including food service, before ending up in Milwaukee.

In an oral interview conducted by the Jewish Museum Milwaukee, "Benji" indicated that the large Jewish community on the east side of Milwaukee influenced his choice of Shorewood as a location for his restaurant. Corned beef and blintzes brought

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Benji's Deli and Restaurant sign.



Since 1963, Benji's Deli and Restaurant has occupied the east end of this building which was built in 1961.



Benji's Deli counter.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Our newsletter focus this year is on Oakland Avenue. In the last issue we featured old street pictures and businesses. In this spring issue we encourage you to stop at Benji's or one of the other local restaurants for a bite to eat and then to walk along the Avenue and Look Up! to view noteworthy details on apartments and other buildings.

Although construction has caused disruptions to normal Village life, we have an opportunity to focus on what we often take for granted. Many Oakland Avenue apartments date from a century ago and reflect life along the Oakland Avenue streetcar line, which played a major part in Village life and development. Indeed, the 2011 Architectural Survey of Shorewood noted that groupings of apartments on Oakland Avenue north and south of Capitol Drive could qualify as individual National Historic Districts.

Newer apartments show how things evolve in a living village. They reflect current building materials and cater to new resident needs.

Spring is also a time when we can celebrate the many ways residents and organizations have enhanced Village life for decades. The Men's Club hosted their annual Easter Egg Hunt in Hubbard Park. The Woman's Club will celebrate their 90th Anniversary Year in April and Historical Society Board Member Karen de Hartog will speak at their April meeting about "Remarkable Shorewood Women." School plays, concerts and sports events will mark the end of another year of school activities.

We are fortunate that documents and pictures about these annual events and organizations are included in the Historical Society archive. Our consultant, Lillian Pachner, has high praise for our collections which showcase a variety of community civic groups and activities. Our digitized photos, newspapers, phone books and yearbooks enhance

our offerings and provide residents with easy access to Shorewood's story.

And of course, **The 42nd Annual Dinner & Business Meeting of the Historical Society** will take place on **Thursday, May 7** in our historic Hubbard Lodge.

We are looking forward to welcoming members and guests. This year, as part of the national celebration of the **250th Anniversary of the signing**

of the Declaration of Independence, the Historical Society has invited Marquette history professor Dr. Patrick Mullins to be our guest speaker. In his illustrated presentation, he will explain how he curated "Defying Empire: Revolutionary Prints from Britain and America" currently on display at Marquette's Haggerty

Museum of Art. This exhibit was done in collaboration with the Fox Point-based Chipstone Foundation. Dr. Mullins found many hidden humorous references in the prints and other clues in the pieces of porcelain that make this exhibit an intriguing way to study the political thinking of men and women who lived on both sides of the Atlantic in the 18th Century. Members should have received invitations. **Please RSVP by Monday, April 27, 2026.**

Finally, May is National Historic Preservation month. Celebrate by taking a walk along Oakland Avenue – or any block in Shorewood – and enjoy our well preserved community!!

Kathy Kean

keank@aol.com

H: 414-962-2450

C: 414-581-3883



("Benji's – The Oldest Business on Oakland Avenue" cont. from Page 1)

the customers in. Benji, who was often topping off coffee cups, passing out samples, and visiting, kept the customers coming back. He hosted meetings of people who were raising money to support Israel. He was a friend to those in need. Those who ordered a cup of soup often went home with a quart. He hired students and refugees to work in the restaurant and inspired a very loyal clientele.

Benji sold the business to a group of investors in 1994. Under their ownership Benjamin's became "Benji's" and a second deli was opened in 1996 in Fox Point to cater to the Jewish community who had moved to the North Shore suburbs. The investors operated the business until 2006 when they sold it to the current owners, Mike and Chris Price.

Mike Price was a student at UWM in 1991. He worked at Pete's Big Boy on the west side of Oakland Avenue which, unfortunately, burned down in 1993.

"Pete told me to apply for a job at Benji's," said Price. Benji quickly hired Mike as a cook. By the time the business came up for sale in 2006, Mike was managing both the Shorewood and Fox Point locations and knew the business well. He and his younger brother Chris bought the business.

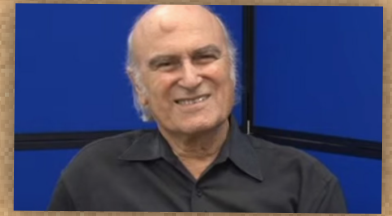
The Price brothers have made a few changes to the restaurant's interior. The original restaurant had an old European feel with stained-glass lamps, faux windows at each booth and a carpeted floor. The interim owners stripped down the interior, so the Prices added back some color and visual décor, while deliberately keeping the distinctly old-school, New York-deli vibe.

Many menu items have been offered for more than 60 years. Customers today find a seat on one of the counter stools or at a cozy table to enjoy hand-carved corn beef sandwich on rye – which involves cooking the corned beef for just the right amount of time to make it easy to slice – an industry rarity today. Hoppel Poppel and Matzo Ball soup ("Jewish penicillin" according to Mike Price) are also on the menu. Specialty Jewish dishes, often associated with holidays, were dropped as the Jewish community continued to move north. Today's customers are multi-ethnic and multi-age – but still very loyal.

Like all businesses, Benji's faces challenges. Chris Price remembers the day that Miller Bakery which had supplied their bread for years, suddenly quit making rye bread – a deli necessity. Now they obtain their bread and other necessary items from smaller, boutique businesses. Then there was the challenge of the Covid lock-down. They survived by doing a lot of carry-out business and with the generosity of customers. "People would come in and leave \$50 on the counter to encourage us to stay open," said Chris.

Werner Benjamin returned to the restaurant frequently after he sold the business. He kept an office in the basement and would visit with old friends. "Eventually he had his own chair in the restaurant, and sometimes he took a little nap while he was here," said Chris. Benjamin died in 2021 at the age of 93.

Currently the restaurant faces the challenge of Oakland Avenue construction. "So far, so good" said Chris, "but we encourage residents to support all local businesses during the construction."



Werner Benjamin
(Photo credit: Jewish Museum Milwaukee)



Mike and Chris Price



Interior of Benji's Restaurant

Chris and his brother see themselves continuing with the business until their retirement. They have talked about expanding their locations beyond Shorewood and Fox Point – possibly to the west side – but things have not come together to make that happen.

Members of the Wisconsin National Guard are frequent customers at the Fox Point location. Recently a group came to the restaurant for lunch dressed in full uniform gear. They were about to leave for a year-long deployment in the Middle East. They enjoyed their corned beef sandwiches and left the waitress a \$50 tip – loyal customers who will be back.

References: Chris Price interview with author, Shorewood Today, Summer 2023; Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle July 23, 2021, Werner Benjamin obituary; Jewish Museum Milwaukee Archives, Oral history interview of Werner Benjamin; Shorewood Herald, digital collection, Shorewood Historical Society.

BE CAREFUL NOW, BUT DO TAKE A GOOD LOOK AROUND...

With the northern stretch of Oakland Avenue under construction, we have a unique opportunity to turn our gaze upward and outward. Shorewood's older buildings often contain remarkable designs, details and colors that we may normally miss. Here are just a few. But we won't tell you where to see them. That's up to you.



Look Up!



Shorewood's building boom during the 1920s is apparent in the wealth of architectural details adorning many of the buildings along Oakland Avenue.



Look Out!



Between piles of snow and piles of gravel, navigating Oakland Avenue lately has been a traffic challenge.



... MEANWHILE, EVEN A LATE SNOWSTORM CAN'T STOP PROGRESS

The first weeks of reconstruction have given us a look into Oakland Avenue's summer and fall. The Village's main street has been noisy and dusty and a bit like a puzzle for drivers. But we know everyone's hard work will be worth it in the end.



Gladys Gores in her garden. Gladys was born in the house once located at 4525 N. Oakland Ave. and lived there for 83 years (1921-2004) surrounded by flowers, vines and fruit trees.

OAKLAND AVENUE MEMORIES

4525 N. Oakland Ave. and Gladys Gores

The 4500 block of North Oakland Avenue has changed a great deal just since 2000.

On the east side of the street, Matt Rech Auto Service occupied the corner (currently the Cornerstone apartments).

On the west side, there was a tiny little house with a big garden: 4525 N. Oakland Ave.

The original two-room farm house was built about 1870. The house appears on a 1876 map owned by Frederick Fisher; a barn and sheds were added to the property.

The farm was purchased by John Gores in 1911. He added two rooms to the home and daughters Irene and Gladys were born in the house.

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("Oakland Avenue Memories – 4525 N. Oakland Ave. and Gladys Gores" cont. from Page 5)

Gladys lived in the house for 83 years (1921-2004) surrounded by flowers, vines and fruit trees.

The Village of Shorewood acquired the property in 2004 for \$176,000 and razed the house and two properties to the north. In 2011 they were replaced by the Ravenna Apartments (4523 N. Oakland Ave.) and store fronts.

Saving what was then the oldest house in the Village was discussed before it was razed, but moving the house to a suitable location and maintaining it proved to be unfeasible.

The Historical Society hosted tours of the house and garden while Gladys was still in residence. She donated a number of decorative and family history items to the Society's archive.

Gladys said she was ready to move to Luther Manor as upkeep on her property was becoming difficult for her. However, she took along many of the flower bulbs from her yard to plant at Luther Manor. Neighbors and Village horticulturalist Judy Bilgo also dug up and replanted flowers around the Village, many of which are hopefully still blooming every summer.

Gladys Gores died Dec. 20, 2016, age 95 years.



The original two-room farm house located at 4525 N. Oakland Ave. was built about 1870. Despite efforts to save it, it was razed in 2004.



The Gores farmhouse was replaced in 2011 by the Ravenna Apartments at 4523 N. Oakland Ave.

ARCHIVE WELCOMES PHOTO DONATION



Volunteers of the PTA VACHS (Volunteer Assistants in Clinics and Hospitals) preparing for a tuberculosis prevention program in March, 1945. Photo donation from the estate of Richard Cecil, SHS Class of '52.

Erin Cecil-Pego sent us pictures she found among her father's belongings (Richard Cecil, 1934-2018, SHS Class of '52). Along with some delightful pictures of Lake Bluff students, there was the adjacent picture of the PTA VACHS (Volunteer Assistants in Clinics and Hospitals).

According to the *Shorewood Herald* (March 1, 1945) VACHS was organized in part to train volunteers to take over the clerical duties of nurses during WWII. The volunteers completed five hours of training at the Shorewood Opportunity School with continuing education and supervision provided by Irene Hugunin, Shorewood's Supervisor of Public Health. They were encouraged to donate about 100 volunteer hours per year.

In Shorewood they assisted with

weighing and measuring students, hearing tests, immunization clinics, supervision of the playground and as aides in epidemics. They also assisted with the March of Dimes drive.

The caption on the picture says that the volunteers were meeting with Mrs. Hugunin (center) to prepare for a tuberculosis prevention program in March of 1945. Ruth Cecil is seated third from right. Volunteers wore the VACHS symbol on a hair band and on their sleeve.

We are not sure how long the formal program lasted, but parent volunteers assisted the Health Department with health screening for many years.

Our archive has a sizeable collection of materials related to the Village's health programs. The VACHS and Lake Bluff pictures are a welcome addition.

DISCOVER HOME HISTORY WITH IN-HOUSE RESEARCH

“In-House Research” refers to the Society’s collection of materials related to the history of Shorewood homes. All of the materials, including pictures, phone books, and maps, are kept in the Sheldon Room on the lower level of the library.

Since the beginning of 2026, Mary Jorgensen, our In-House volunteer consultant, has welcomed 13 visitors to the Sheldon Room. “Assisting the home historians is a two-way street,” says Mary. “They often bring pictures and other information that we can copy and add to our house files while I can help them find answers to other questions they have about their home.”

For example:

- A man who lives on Lake Bluff in a house built in 1928 discovered that his home is called the “Samuel and Ruth Gans House” to note the original owner. Samuel Gans ran Hixon’s Clothing Store in the Schroeder Hotel (now Marc Plaza).
- A home on Morris built 100 years ago remained in the same family until the current owners bought it. The house passed from parents to a daughter who lived to be 100, then to a granddaughter.

By checking phone directories, the occupation of the original home owners can sometimes be determined. Recent occupations included bank officer, lawyer, meat cutter, telegrapher for the Milwaukee Road, furrier, electrician, building supervisor, and a longtime Shorewood public works employee.



A Shorewood telephone directory is an analog example of some of the materials used in the In-House Research room.

Discover the story of your home!

Contact us
for an appointment at
shorewoodhistory@yahoo.com.

We also welcome donations to our house history files such as "before and after" renovation pictures.

Support the Shorewood Historical Society by becoming a member. Join online at shorewoodhistory.org or contact us at shorewoodhistory@yahoo.com for more information.

SHOREWOOD HISTORICAL SOCIETY BOARD OF DIRECTORS, 2025-2026

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Shorewood Historical Society
3930 N. Murray Ave.
Shorewood WI 53211

www.shorewoodhistory.org

Email: shorewoodhistory@yahoo.com

The Sheldon Room/In-House Research is located in the Shorewood Village Center (lower level of library) at 3920 N. Murray Ave. and is open by appointment via contact by phone: 414-847-2726 or email: shorewoodhistory@yahoo.com

The Shorewood Historical Society is a nonprofit 501 (c)(3) organization. Your donations and in-kind gifts are tax-deductible as allowed by law.



3930 North Murray Avenue
Shorewood, WI 53211

Please keep the
Shorewood Historical Society
in mind when cleaning out
your attic or basement.

We are in particular need of
pictures, abstracts and other
information about Shorewood
homes and neighborhoods.

CONTACT US AT:
SHOREWOODHISTORY@YAHOO.COM
OR 414-847-2726 WITH QUESTIONS
OR TO MAKE A DONATION.



REMINDERS:

- * **SAVE THE DATE:** Shorewood Historical Society Dinner at Hubbard Park Lodge, May 7, 2026.
- * **PLEASE REMEMBER:** Return your RSVP for the SHS Dinner invitation by April 27, 2026.
- * **SAVE THE DATE:** Shorewood Historical Society Archive Potpourri presented by SHS President Kathy Kean. May 13, 2026, 10–11:30 am at the Village Center. (Pre-register thru the Senior Resource Center.)
- * **PLEASE REMEMBER TO SUPPORT LOCAL:** Help keep our Oakland Ave. businesses in business!



SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Oakland Avenue has had it's share of continuous construction and changes to its streetscape through the years.

In this throwback to 2007, the old Benji's sign still stands across from the former Pick 'n Save building and adjacent to what is currently the Foxhole Craft Beer Shop & Kitchen.

See inside for more stories about Shorewood's vital main street.