Growing up in Kansas City's northeast neighborhood in the mid-1930s and 40s was, by all accounts, a magical time.

— John, 1928

The Northeast was Kansas City's first suburb where the city's working class and power elite lived together along the beautiful tree-lined boulevards and avenues.

During its formative years in the 1860s, the Northeast was a boundary along the northern and eastern borders. Those born and raised here fondly remember a simpler time—a place where down-home, old-fashioned, neighborhood values and strong sense of family and community held it all together.

Prior to 1870, the Northeast was a small community with its boundaries extending to the east, north, and west. The boundaries were defined by the Kansas River, East River, South River, and North River. The boundaries were later changed to reflect the growth of the community.

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Time off from work was a valued commodity, especially during the World War II and Great Depression eras. Northeast residents enjoyed the simple pleasures of the time, including the beautiful parks in the Northeast.

I literally lived in the old Gladiators Theatre,” says John Hefner, who was raised right down the street from the local movie palace located at 25th and 11th Street. “The theatre was a huge attraction for children and adults alike. The theatre was a focal point for the community, offering a variety of shows and attractions. It was a popular spot for friends and family to gather and enjoy the entertainment on offer.”

The Gladiators Theatre has a rich history dating back to the early 1900s. It was built in 1910 and became a popular destination for movie-goers. The theatre was a symbol of the community’s culture and identity, and it played a significant role in the local economy. Many people remember attending movies at the Gladiators Theatre, and it was a cherished memory for many generations. The theatre was eventually closed in the 1970s, but its history and legacy live on through the memories of those who attended it.

The local newspaper, John fondly remembers Mr. Gifford Stone, a local baseball player who lived and worked in Northeast. He made him a model sailboat that he raced in the community’s ponds.

Many enjoyed leisure time through Cliff Drive at historic Dierker Park. Established in 1945, the park has since been updated and expanded, offering a variety of recreational opportunities for community members. It is a popular spot for picnicking, as well as fishing and swimming in the lake. The park is a great place to relax and enjoy the natural beauty of the area.

“Back in those days, we didn’t have the luxury of air conditioning,” recalls John. “But it was a lot more INVOLVING than now. We had to make the most of the time we had, and it was a lot more fun.”
Thousands of children passed through the doors of Garfield and Summit, two Northwest elementary schools. Miss Geneva Tank was the Principal at Summit Elementary where John Fitch was a student. A “remarkable woman,” she recalls. She was a graduate of the University of Illinois. She was a very hard worker who taught two subjects at the same time. She was very popular with the students.

Field trips focusing on the three sites were a part of the curriculum at Summit. Teachers took students in the city offices directed by Karl Rogene. Rogene was Assistant Director of the Office of Children’s Affairs. In 1931 and 1945 when he accepted the position as Director of the District’s Social Services. In addition, Summit would frequently play records on a wireless-type phonograph to their classroom.

Starting in 1920, eight grade and freshmen students attended the new Northwest Junior High School where the beloved Clifford H. Swinov was the Principal.

Churches in the Northeast during the mid-20th century were often the center of activities in neighborhoods, offering both academic and sports programs.

The Freshmen Class of 1926 Through the Halls of Northeast High School When we learn to “do our bit.” There’s a snappy class that’s working. For their beloved Northeast High. The teachers look with wondering eyes. And the upper classroom says, “They are grabbing every hour and prize. As it passes by their way.” Come you back to Northeast High School In the year of sixty-five, And you’ll find it in Northeast Junior. We are winning by nothing else. For we are picking, pulling, working. For our school in a material way. We are no longer at our work. And by this fall we win some day. Yes, we’re picking ever forward. Gaining honors every way. We’re the Stephenciens of tomorrow. The wise Freshmen of today.

Northeast High School was designed by noted architect Charles A. Smith, and as the time of its completion in 1931 was a state-of-the-art school with a number of American habitats inspired of in “modern” school buildings. In addition to an indoor pool, it boasted a modern kindergarten and kitchen, outdoor athletic field, gymnasium room for students and a rest room for teachers.

The school mascot was “The Viking.” The Vikings would become a powerhouse in intramural academic and athletic programs, dominating in football, basketball, track and field, as well as debate and forensics. Some of the first academic clubs were the Turtle Golf Club and Glee Club. John Fitch graduated from Northeast High School in 1945.

Today, Northeast High School’s enrollment of nearly 4,000 mirrors a whole lot of “permanent” people in literature, Carson and Walt Disney partner L. B. Kinks; internationally renowned composer Monty Norman; former FBI Director William Sessions; former R&B Pied Pipers lead singer Teddi King; and former KRON Police Chief and FBI Director Clarence M. Worley—call Northeast High School their alma mater.
In the early 1900s, the Northeast transitioned into a working-class neighborhood as affluent families left for newer suburbs and the industry boom began.

The city’s East Bottoms began to transition from a German immigrant community that formed the little bank of the Missouri River Valley to an industrialized area where the Heine Brewery as well as the Blue Valley Mill called home. Railroads and banks began to develop around the grain elevators and flour mills under the rugged cliffs of scenic Cliff Drive. Hundreds of Northeast workers would commute the hills to the river valley below to work in the mills and factories. Berms of runaways that ran from the mills to the East Bottoms can still be found along Cliff Drive. The railroad-employed scores of Northeast residents; Missouri Pacific, ATSF, Missouri, Kansas, and Texas, and Kansas City Southern to name a few had operations in the East Bottoms.

1915, Chicago-based Montgomery Ward acquired a 20-acre tract of land on the far eastern end of St. John Avenue. The company hired local Kansas City architect John McKechnie to design a 1.2 million square-feet facility in the Industrial Northeast section, which would become one of the most iconic warehouse storages in the Midwest. Langmore-Northwood realtors Mary Jane Coleman recalls of leaving her home in Argentine Kansas on the interstate and having to maneuver four times to get to work at the new Ward building. Following her position as a Ward, Mary Jane would walk to the interstate downtown to the KMBC radio studios where she hosted her show for local radio station.

For John Hepke, a job in the Montgomery Ward Print and Wallpaper Department, earning $5.5 cents an hour, was a big deal. He worked at the St. John’s and Belmont facility. As the same time, he worked as a library page at Northeast High School for librarian Miss Clara Faren. Ultimately, the library job paid more per hour than his career so he worked for the Kansas City Public Library downtown for over ten years, then for the NCC Penn Valley Library during his retirement.

Hebner and others would deliver trucks were a big part of the work force in the Northeast. There was a man named Debelka, who rode around in his colorful wagon and would set up shop on the side of the street, selling everything one could imagine,” remembers John. A number of busker carts and wagons piled the streets and byways, selling fresh fruits and vegetables, and delivering newspapers and coal and ice to homes in the Northeast.

By 1919, the increase in the neighborhood’s population warranted a new construction of a Holley home at 44th and extremely Avenue. The facility was a mammoth structure, as well as the method for a number of eleven and distressing buildings including the Northeast #30. Independence Avenue 404, 48 Street Line, 12th Street Line, and the Polkitory “Trib”. A short line that ran between St. John Avenue and WA Four.

Carts were placed on the streets according to the given area for shopping, and they traveled in and out of the city, delivering goods.