

Gertrude Knowlton Wilson: University Heights, 1900

Essay by Gertrude Knowlton Wilson, Christmas 1979

University Heights, in 1900, was a closely-knit neighborhood. No one lived more than three blocks away from his neighbor and our parents were young and strong and brave.

In all we were seven families: five were professors at the university, one was a circuit judge, and one a lawyer. Life was primitive and rugged. Kerosene lamps must be cleaned each day; washing was done by hand with the help of a washboard and copper boiler; the nearest telephone was at Schubert's Saloon a quarter of a mile away, and the horse-drawn streetcars came out University Avenue only as far as Breese Terrace. There were no sidewalks and the streets were unpaved. Consequently, in early spring mud reached halfway up carriage wheels. Arc lights lighted the streets and we children loved to watch the lamplighter lower the lamp by a rope and replace the stick of carbon.

Along with primitive living conditions we had an unbelievable luxury – a live-in maid, or maids, as the size of the family required. They were strong, young farm girls from nearby Sun Prairie or Cross Plains who wanted something more glamorous than milking cows on their parents' farms. They knew how to cook and wash and iron and clean and were given a home and three dollars a week. Thursday and Sunday afternoons were theirs to enjoy as they pleased. However, with the nearest telephone a quarter of a mile away and the closest streetcar almost as far, their entertainment was limited. More often than not they spent their afternoon off in their own rooms or with the children of the household.

If the lives of these young girls seem drab and dreary to us we must remember that leaving the farm was a real adventure and housework away from home with real wages is more interesting than housework at home with no wages.

I remember a pretty Norwegian girl who lived with us for several years. Thea Waller was her name and she is listed as a member of our household in the Dane County census of 1905. This enormous volume is a treasure chest of information, listing along with names, birth dates etc. the occupation of the head of the household: tailor, carpenter, milkman, tanner, teamster, stonemason, blacksmith, washerwoman, professor, and capitalist.

The "capitalist" was Mr. Outhouse, who lived, not on University Heights, where the struggling young professors lived, but in the more prosperous Wingra Park. If you look at this section of the census for 1905 you can readily see that the Tenth Ward was divided into three distinct parts, determined by the occupation of the head of the household. University Heights was settled by young professors, Wingra Park by businessmen and tradesmen, and University Avenue by men employed at the university farm.

The house where I was born at 1717 Kendall Avenue was built in 1895. It was the second house to be built on University Heights and the entire cost, including the house, lot, cistern, windmill and pump, and various extras such as special carpentry and beautiful brass doorknobs, was \$6,319.98. It is a large house with four bedrooms, one with a fireplace, on the second floor, and three on the third floor. There were seven in our family and so the house was none too large. The largest of the third floor bedrooms was my father's study. It was heated by a big pot-bellied coal stove with an isinglass window in the door. Off in the corner was a tank into which the windmill pumped many gallons of water each day.

Adjoining my father's study was the best (as far as I was concerned) room in the whole house – the octagon, or tower, room. It contained treasures of all kinds, including a large basket trunk.

This unusual article was bought in Germany by my father and mother when he was studying in Heidelberg and Leipzig between 1887 and 1890. Into the trunk were stuffed clothes and all kinds of other things to be brought home across the ocean. For us children to be allowed to hide

in the trunk was the height of adventure. The tower room also commanded a wonderful view of Lake Mendota and Eagle Heights.

We were never warm in winter in spite of burning twenty tons of anthracite coal in the furnace, wood in the fireplaces, and pea coal in the kitchen range. The fire in the kitchen range was never allowed to go out. There was always something good cooking on the stove and a constant humming of the teakettle.

Besides the warmth of the kitchen there was another room where we could find refuge from the cold. This was the maid's room on the third floor, which because of some mistake had the chimney in the middle of the room.

The winters were long and cold and there were hardships, but there was also much fun and goodwill. Our coal-burning furnaces did their best to warm us, but we were very often cold. But iceboating and skating on Lake Mendota, and sliding on bobsleds made us forget the cold. Just as we expected the sun to rise each morning, just so we expected to shiver each day. But life was simpler then and our hearts were warm.

We looked forward to the melting of the snow for that meant spring was soon to come. With sticks and mud we made dams and changed the course of streams. Clothespins wrapped in bits of colored cloth were dolls (I never played with dolls) and towns and castles were built with sticks and mud. For weeks on end mud was the enemy of every mother and housekeeper, but what child does not love to play in it?

My mother often said that I was the only one of her five children who did not cause her anxiety. I was the youngest and the odd one whose happiest times were those spent with the animals at the university farm. I helped the farmhands feed the pigs, and as I sat on the wooden seat of the low-slung wagon, driving the horse, no fine lady in her coach and six could have been prouder than I was of my chariot. The distance from the barn to the pigpens was less than two blocks and the liquid mess in the barrels sloshed around with each jerk of the horse, but I was a goddess and Pegasus was my horse. At the day's end I helped unharness the horse and rode it bareback into its stall in the horse barn.

Rover, my beautiful collie dog, was my constant companion. Our love was mutual. He responded instantly to my call and respected no authority but mine. As soon as the blast from the whistle at the university heating plant sounded at twelve o'clock noon each day Rover stopped whatever he was doing (either lying in the pansy bed or digging up the flowers) and trotted down the hill toward Randall School to meet me. Rover and I spent much time together. I made a harness for him, hitched him to my wagon or sled, and together we explored the Heights.

Except for the tragedy of my father's early death, which a small child cannot comprehend, mine was an enviable childhood. I was a happy and uncomplicated child and was allowed to go my own way – feeding the pigs, roaming the hills covered with wildflowers, climbing trees, always with my adoring and adored Rover.

At times totally unrelated images pass like a kaleidoscope before my eyes:

Dr. Sheldon, our family doctor, so absorbed in reading the *Madison Democrat* (the morning newspaper) that he forgot all about the sick child that he was called to see. His horse, meanwhile, breakfasting on Professor Kahlenberg's succulent corn and trampling it down...

Frank Stormer, friend and handyman of the neighborhood, working in our backyard, tears streaming down his cheeks because Ellen Stevens had died that morning...

Happy, the Smith's bulldog, raising his head and howling when my sister sang and played the piano...

And finally Mother, dressed in a white shirtwaist and long white skirt, sitting on the front

porch darning stockings...

I am more grateful than I can say for these happy years. The hardships have dimmed, but the freedom of the hills and woods and the love of wildflowers and animals have remained with me all these years.

Statement of cost of residence built for Amos A. Knowlton
1895
1717 Kendall Avenue in University Heights

<i>Item</i>	<i>Cost</i>
Plastering	\$ 241.00
Heating and tin work	\$ 296.00
Mason work	\$ 500.00
Plumbing and drainage	\$ 363.00
Carpenter work	\$ 2,283.00
Painting and glazing	\$ 500.00
Well	\$ 147.04
Less allowance on well	\$ (122.41)
Windmill and pump	\$ 110.00
Electric wiring	\$ 38.85
Hardware	\$ 108.00
Mantel	\$ 34.77
Architect's fees	\$ 221.00
Paper instead of back plaster	\$ 20.00
Extra drain tile and laying same	\$ 40.30
Carpenter extras	\$ 321.63
Plumbers extras	\$ 127.80
Storm sash	\$ 65.00
Extras, McCarthy and Starck	\$ 500.00
Cost of lot	\$ 525.00
 Total	 \$ 6,319.98