

*Crossroads: Memories
of the Normandy Wedge*

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for the

Normandy Area Historical Association

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Drivers leaving St. Louis on Natural Bridge Road pass by an unusual, triangular-shaped intersection where Florissant Road joins it from the north. Thousands of vehicles go through it each day, but few people know of its historical significance—that it once was the center of activity in a largely rural area.

Known as the Normandy Wedge, this junction began as a sleepy country crossroads, gradually developed into a commercial district—with a cafe, grocery store, bank and other businesses—and served as a nucleus for one of the first St. Louis suburbs, the city of Normandy.

“You can’t believe that in such a short span of time—like 50 years—things can change so drastically,” said Doris McDonnell, who grew up in the neighborhood and remembers how it was in the early days.” Just the Wedge—it’s almost all asphalt now. The stores, the meeting places are all gone. There’s only a few left . . .”

Most of the development in Normandy dates from the 1920s. The city was incorporated in 1945. The first settlement, however, goes back much further—to the early 1800s. A land speculator, J.B.C. Lucas, obtained the property from the federal government. He named the spot after he birthplace of his father—Normandy, France.

Around the time of the Civil War, Natural Bridge Road was a one-lane, plank road with a toll booth at the Florissant Road intersection. It was surrounded by farms, but there were few visitors until railroad tracks were installed from St. Louis to Florissant in 1878. Along that route, one of the stops was Normandy Grove, a picnic ground where the Wedge is today. Every weekend, trains from St. Louis would take picnickers out to the shady stand of trees along the tracks.

By World War I, Normandy Grove had become such a popular spot that an Italian immigrant named Victor Massa opened a restaurant there. In a short time, other businesses located nearby and houses appeared in the surrounding

area. Massa's son-in-law, Vic Devoto took over as manager of the cafe and ran it for many years. His daughter, Angela Waldbart, spent a lot of time at Devoto's, which quickly became a gathering spot for local residents.

"They'd come in at night for dinner after the show," she recalls. "They'd be coming in, buying drinks and talking politics. The neighbors—all along Pasadena Hills and Glen Echo Park—they were all regular customers of my dad's. People would come in and have a sandwich. He had the best roast beef in town—everybody still tells me that."

By the early 1920s, Normandy was growing steadily in population. Some people commuted to jobs in St. Louis; others operated farms. North of the Wedge along Bermuda Road, the Lammert Family established a farm next to North Hills Country Club. Their extended family grew to about 25 as relatives built houses along the road now known as Lammert Lane.

"My dad and mom built their home here in 1926-27 and we just basically grew up in the Normandy area," said McDonnell. "The Wedge just sort of grew with us, and we grew with the Wedge. It was the 'hub,' like they say."

"We had a truck called a 'Federal 6'," remembers Doris' uncle, Lawrence Lammert. "Two or three times week, we'd have to take our vegetables down to Third Street, and then supply all of the local groceries from Ferguson all the way down to Grand Avenue with vegetables when we had them. We had hot beds so we'd have lettuce in January and February of each year. We raised our own beef and our own pork and had a couple of milk cows and three or four horses to work with. We made out real good."

McDonnell's dad used to take her and other family members out to eat at Devoto's Cafe. "He'd go to the counter and get a beer and I would get a roast beef sandwich," she said. "I remember those roast beef sandwiches and the pickles; I can still smell them today. DeVoto's had good food."

By the late 1920s, the Wedge was home to a restaurant, car dealership, hardware store, meat market and grocery. Also in the neighborhood were a

church, school, post office and two orphanages. Despite this growth, however, the area still retained its rural character.

"Natural Bridge Road was not made or paved when we moved out there," said Marion O'Keefe, who lived near the Wedge from 1927 to 1933. "We used to walk up there all the time. Of course, Devoto's owned the restaurant that was there, but it was just ground that you walked through to get to the Kirkwood-Ferguson streetcar. It was very primitive."

The recent construction of the Metro Link rail system in the St. Louis metropolitan area seems like a modern idea, and a popular one at that. But it's not exactly a new concept. St. Louis once had a suburban rail network that allowed people to work in the city and live in the country. Since one of these streetcar lines passed right through the Wedge, it played a significant part in the area's growth.

The streetcar has special significance for Angelo Gavasto, whose parents rode it from St. Louis, and met at Normandy Grove picnic ground in 1919. Fourteen years later, they bought property in Normandy off Bermuda Road, where Gavasto still lives. The family owned an automobile, but for years used the streetcar as an alternative form of transportation.

"My dad never did learn to drive," Gavasto said. "Automobiles were not quite prominent. They were there, but the cost of them naturally prohibited the working class. The streetcars were always crowded because most of the workforce was in the downtown area or Clayton. I know you have to attribute the development of Normandy to the fact that they had accessibility to all parts of the city and county."

In the 1950's, the highway system began to challenge the streetcar lines and the rail network began to decline. "The couple of times I rode it, I really enjoyed myself," Lammert said. "One reason I think they discontinued it—it was a menace in the road because it was right in the middle with traffic on

both sides. As population grew from the city into the county, they had to widen these roads out and that was the reason they got rid of it. But it was a great ride.”

In the 1930s, Americans faced the biggest challenge of the 20th century—the Great Depression. Across the country businesses closed, workers lost their jobs and families were put out of their homes. Even the relatively affluent community of Normandy was affected by the economic tragedy.

“Everyone was moving away looking for jobs,” said O’Keefe. “There wasn’t any work. And they just thought if they went someplace else it might be better, and I don’t think they found it better anyplace else, but it’s the feeling they had. My father lost both of his businesses, he had to just walk out and close the doors. That was the way it was. It was the way of life.”

Despite the hardships of the Depression years, Normandy continued to flourish, and residents began talking about incorporation in the early 1940s. In 1944, a group of community leaders met at the new Normandy State Bank on Natural Bridge Road to discuss the matter.

One of their most pressing concerns was a grossly inadequate sewer system that had sewage running into a creek along Florissant Road. After the meeting, 85 percent of residents signed a petition for incorporation, which was approved in 1945. An Irish immigrant, Tom Bradley, became the first mayor. The community now had legal status, as well as social identity.

As more families moved into the suburb, that meant more young people. Several schools served these children, such as St. Ann’s Catholic School near the Wedge and Normandy High School, which was built in 1925.

In those days, there were no TV sets, video games or other high-tech toys. Children used their imagination in creating games and adventures. They

played sports and went to picnics and dances. Children in the Lammert family, however, had a special way to have fun. They built their own swimming pool.

"We would work and work and clean it all up and paint it," remembers Margaret Schaefer, formerly Margaret Lammert. "Of course, there was no filtering system for the pool down there so we would clean it out and drain it. Then we'd take a hose from Norwood and fill it so we could go swimming in it—that's the type of things we used to do. We'd just make our own fun. We used our own initiative and imagination . . ."

In the early days, St. Ann's Catholic Church on Natural Bridge Road was a center of social activity in Normandy. A small, temporary chapel was built in 1854 on land donated by Anne Lucas Hunt, daughter of J.B.C. Lucas. Three years later, it was replaced by a more artistic, stone structure. For nearly a century, local residents attended church services there, as well as weddings, picnics and sporting matches.

Melba Rudolph moved to Normandy in 1939, got married at St. Ann's and reared her family in a brick bungalow near the Wedge, where she still lives. "We used to have a lot of teen-age events at St. Ann's, and a lot of non-Catholics were invited," she said. "We always had a good turnout for those events."

"St. Ann's was a pretty large church at that time and a pretty prominent church because there were a lot of important people who moved out to this area," added Schaefer. "They would have big carnivals that came around once or twice a year. They would have bingos and lottos, and they would have a big dance. When people had fun in those days, they didn't have other places to go down in the city; they went to their churches and they had fun like that."

Normandy, which had started out as a rural community, gradually began to expand with new subdivisions, businesses, and schools. Residents saw a need for higher education and helped establish a college which eventually became the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

The boundaries of the St. Louis metropolitan area moved steadily outward and by the 1950s, the Wedge was just one more indistinguishable part of the urban conglomeration. Less-affluent newcomers took over the aging properties located there and older residents moved further away from the city. As its character changed, the city of Normandy struggled to maintain its tax base. Little by little, the Wedge lost many of the qualities that had drawn people there in the first place.

"Well, the community as a whole lost its cooperative instincts, I think," stated Fred Small, a long-time resident who helped to get the university started. "Everybody was for themselves as time went on. Used to be you could leave your doors unlocked and not have to worry about what was going to happen. You couldn't always count on your neighbors after a while."

Wilson Price-Hunt, a descendant of the Hunt family that originally owned much of the land in Normandy, lived near the Wedge in the 1950s and saw many changes take place during that period. "Natural Bridge road carried all of the traffic that Interstate 70 now carries," he said. "It became almost a little quiet street after Interstate 70 became popular. I also remember the startup of the UMSL campus, but I don't really think it changed the area as much as the residents thought it would."

Although some people today are pessimistic about the future of the Normandy Wedge area, others believe it still is a good place to live and raise a family. "I'm hoping that the younger generation will pick up on the foundation that we have set for them for this particular township," said Gavosto. "Like anything else, it's up to the individual. You have to have the self-pride to try to do for the community what the community can in turn do for you."

Melba Rudolph believes that it's important for people today to know something about their town's history. "I think it's important for the future generation," she said, "to have the knowledge of what the historic value of the area is and let them know from the old-timers that it is very pleasant, and prayerfully that it will be the same in the future."

As the citizens of Normandy today look to the uncertainties of the future, older residents look back with fondness on the days they spent growing up around the Wedge. "It was peaceful," said Doris McDonnell. "It was a lot of fun. We had the best of everything. Most of all we had our family; we had our friends. We had the school and we had the church and everybody was all involved in everybody else's life. It was more of a closeness."

"I thought where we grew up was wonderful," said Schaefer, her sister. "I wish that everybody had the chance to grow up the way we did. Because we were so close knit with our family which was so nice. And I think that's so important because we knew aunts and uncles. We're still are friendly with our first and second cousins and most people don't even know their aunts and uncles. To me that's a gift."

Gavosto also feels good about his life in the area. "I'm very proud of the fact of being a resident of Normandy all these years without any problems—never having caused any or never having had any. And I'm still trying to be a good resident and citizen of Normandy."

In the past 70 years, Normandy has gone from a quiet, rural area into a thriving metropolitan community, and the Wedge has brought many people together. Children once gathered here to play in the shady grove along the train tracks. Families congregated here to do their shopping and banking. Patrons met at the local cafe to discuss the topics of the day.

As the next generation of Normandy residents face the future, they should look back at the hard work and experience of those who came before. If they can build on that rich heritage, then the area will continue to be a good place to live and raise a family for many years to come.

This material was compiled from a series of videotaped interviews.