

Hennepin HISTORY

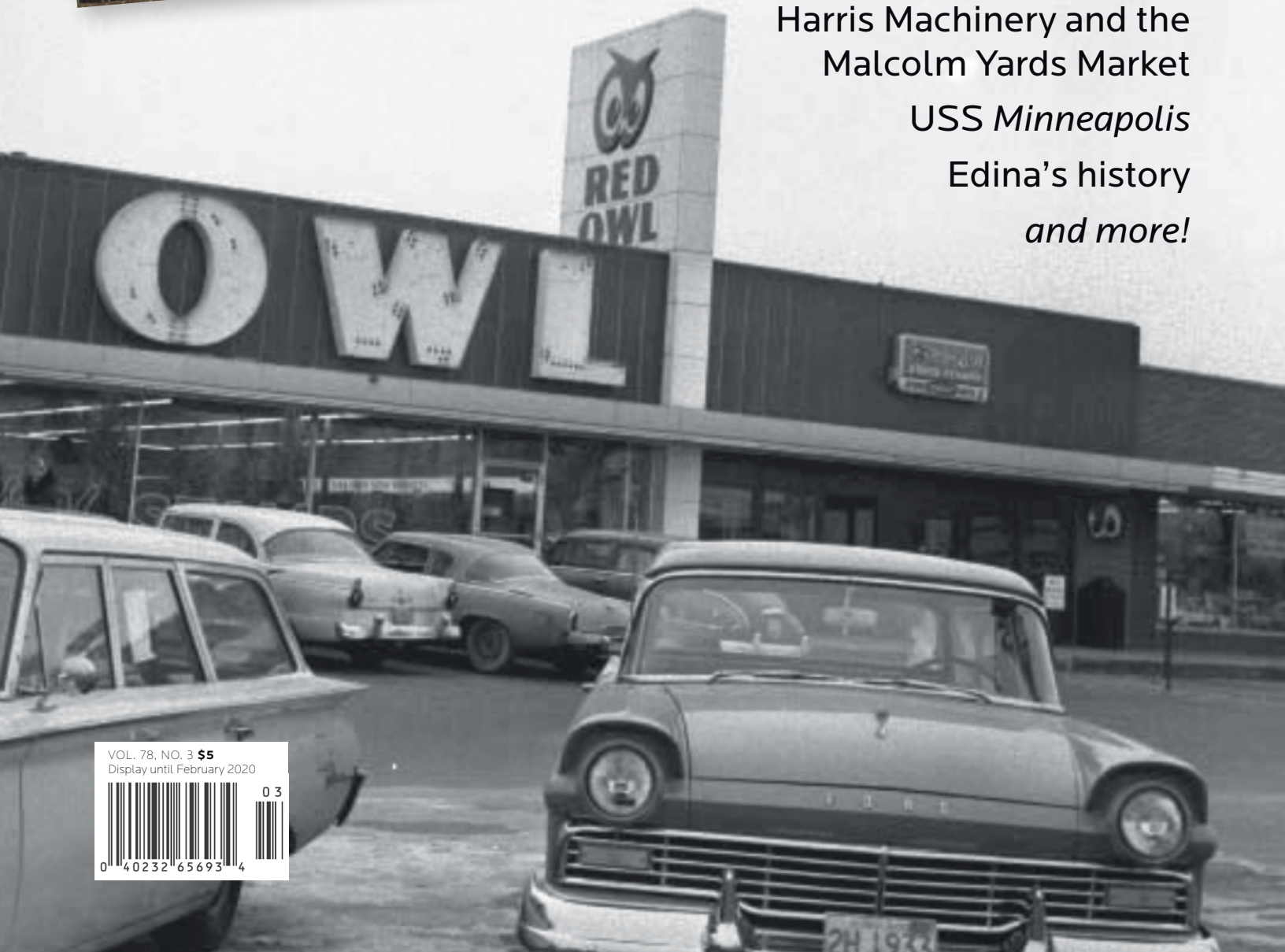


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Red Owl Finds a New Generation of Admirers

WILLIAM BURLESON

At the Minnehaha Avenue Open Streets event this year, I stopped in front of one of the many vintage stores that has moved into the neighborhood in the past few years. There in the window is a big Red Owl logo. I take a picture. “That is the most photographed thing on the street,” a man behind me says. I look through the glass, and the metal sign looks to be in pretty good shape. I ask the man his name, and he tells me David. “I used to shop there all the time,” David adds, before continuing down the street.

What makes a business iconic? For all the businesses big and small that have come and gone, why is it some businesses inspire nostalgia and connection for many?

For Hennepin County residents over a certain age, Red Owl grocery stores certainly qualifies as iconic. Once the major grocery store chain in the Twin Cities, the mere mention of Red Owl continues to inspire far away looks and “I remember when” for a significant number of people.

It certainly does for me. Red Owl was OUR grocery store. Growing up on the edge of downtown Minneapolis, the 18th Street and Nicollet store supplied our family with all our grocery needs through the sixties and seventies. Besides the Red Owl store, I recall that the little plain cement block “mall” held a Snyder’s Drugs and a dry cleaner. It more than served our needs; it was the unquestioned hub of our family’s shopping, and at times, dining, if you call a grilled cheese at Snyder’s lunch counter “dining.” As a kid, as my mother did the weekly shopping, I would roam the aisles before settling in to play an arcade game in the hall between the stores, where I would look through a periscope and launch torpedoes (a pencil of light) at a battleship (painted on a piece of metal, going

back and forth). For the record, I was really good at it.

It’s easy to find others with rosy memories of Red Owl. “The Red Owl was up the street a block away,” Gayle Sjoblom, a once-Twin Citian now living in Phoenix. She shopped there with her father. “We would go there once a week, sometimes twice.” She recalls that “It had a really good bakery.”

There are Red Owl reunions. There is a Red Owl Facebook group. There is Red Owl merchandise. There was a January 2018 *Star Tribune* story, that opened with, “Supermarkets like Penny’s, Country Club, Applebaum’s, Shoppers’ City and Rainbow came and went. Only one old grocery chain still brings a smile to people in the Twin Cities.” Yet its reign ended 31 years ago when SuperValu purchased the name.

What is it about Red Owl?

FROM COAL TO CAULIFLOWER

Red Owl started out selling groceries, dry goods, and coal, with its first store opening in Rochester, Minnesota, in 1922. Its slogan was: “Be Wise: Burn Red Owl Coal.” A private investment firm affiliated with General Mills owned and operated the growing chain, before being purchased in 1968 by Gamble-Skogmo, a retail chain headquartered in St. Louis Park. By the time I was sinking battleships on Nicollet Avenue, Red Owl stores were all over the upper Midwest, commanding more than 50 percent of the Twin Cities grocery market. Then, in 1980, Wickes Corporation bought the chain. Red Owl struggled under the leadership of the West Coast furniture chain. They tried a discount version called the “Country Store” but the stores suffered and business sagged. Finally,



Red Owl at Hi-Lake Shopping Center, 2124 East Lake Street, Minneapolis, courtesy Hennepin County Library

in 1986, Wicks, wanting out of the food business, sold its operations to three Red Owl executives. At that time, the company, headquartered in Hopkins, operated 441 stores.

Still, despite the change in leadership, it was too late to save the sinking ship. SuperValu, a grocery wholesaler with a variety of franchises such as its name sake and now Cub Foods, had been a long-time competitor. In 1988 they acquired the Red Owl name, along

with its warehouse and distribution operations. That was that — Red Owl was no more.

Gary Newman started working for Red Owl at the Southdale store in 1960 when he was 15. His dad’s friend was the store manager, which apparently didn’t help him much, since he worked in the “burner room” in the basement burning boxes. Over his

career in the grocery business he worked at several different stores as the produce manager, including the 24th and Hennepin and Brookdale stores. Eventually he became the district produce supervisor for the north side of Minneapolis. He speaks with great pride in his work and in Red Owl. For him, the grocery business comes down to “you need to give neighborhood what they want.” Newman did that, making sure the mix of merchandise would meet his customers’ needs. After Red Owl was no more, he worked for



SuperValu and then Cub at Lake and Hiawatha for 18 years until he retired. “For a long time, the Hiawatha store had a big Latino clientele. We would sell cases of limes and mangos every day.” “You’ve got to know the neighborhood. You can’t have everything the same.”

A Red Owl store would stand out in the marketplace today because it’s a format you

rarely see now in grocery stores. We take market segmentation for granted, with high-end grocery chains (Lunds/Byerlys, Kowalski’s), discount stores (Cub and Aldi), corporate behemoths seemingly dabbling in a side business (Target and Walmart), and co-ops and niche markets (Trader Joe’s and Whole Foods). Red Owl was a medium to small-sized operation rooted firmly in Middle America.

GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Is it that no-frills, something for everyone, egalitarian middle-of-the-road approach that leads to its present-day cult-like following?

“Let’s face it, consumers can be a little strange. We develop deep emotional attachments to some of the places where we shop,” Renata Sago said on the Marketplace radio show in 2017. The story was about how “former Red Owl cashiers, produce managers and accountants get together over lunch at least once a month to reminisce.”

Newman told me about the reunions for Red Owl employees, which began in 1992. They “Started with 35, then it went to 80” attendees. After the fore-mentioned 2018 *Star Tribune* article, Newman estimates that 150 people showed up, “many of whom didn’t work there at all, but shopped there and wanted to share their memories.”

There is soon to be a Red Owl Museum, however humble. Jim Pessek, who has lived in Stewart, Minnesota, for most of his life, runs the Stewart Area Historical Society. Five years ago, the historical society acquired the old Red Owl store right in the center of town. It will serve as a Red Owl Museum as well. “It was a little tiny store,” Jim says. It’s only 40 by 40 (feet). The store closed in 2002. “The store was there over 60 years.” Pessek has gathered an impressive collection of Red Owl memorabilia.

He also maintains the busy Red Owl Stores Facebook group @ RedOwlMemories, which has over 1,300 members, featuring a seemingly endless stream of





photos of Red Owl souvenirs. Now the museum sells Red Owl T-shirts to raise money. They approached SuperValu about using the logo, and they said yes. “They were really nice about it.”

The future Red Owl museum has gotten a lot of press, including the *Star Tribune* and *Marketplace* stories and features on Fox 9 News, KFAI radio, *McLeod County Chronicle*, and the *Hutchinson Leader*.

None of which answers the question: Why?

Pessek may have the answer, right there on those T-shirts: “The logo,” he says. “It’s a nice logo.”

THE LOGO

We can thank a well-renowned wildlife artist for that iconic red and black logo.

When Les Kouba died in 1998, his obituary from the Associated Press called him the “Dean of Minnesota wildlife artists.” He was selected as the artist for Minnesota’s first waterfowl stamp in 1978, and he twice designed federal duck stamps. In 1996, the Minnesota Waterfowl Association presented him with a lifetime achievement award. Kouba was also known for creating many original commercial art designs, including the Old Dutch windmill, the Greyhound bus dog logo, and Schmidt beer cans. And yes, the Red Owl logo.

It’s a magnificent logo. Mid-century modern, friendly yet dynamic. When I see it, I feel like I’m riding to the store in our family Vista Cruiser, back full of us kids.

How iconic is the logo? To find out, while writing this article at

my neighborhood coffee shop, I lean over to the millennial sitting next to me. His name is Jason, and he’s 29. I show him a picture of the logo and ask him if he knows what it is. “Yeah, it’s the Red Owl logo.” I ask him how he knows that, given that the chain had been gone for two years by the time he was born. “My parents had a condiment bottle with the logo on it. I remember asking what it was, and they told me it was this great old grocery store that closed.”

A survey sample of one, to be sure, but I think the result is quite expected, if not the rule. “A good logo or trademark is recognizable and memorable. A great one can become a huge asset for a company and a brand,” according to Ross Phernetton, Creative Director for Barefoot Proximity. “And an iconic logo, like the Red Owl, becomes a cultural asset that’s really owned by the public.”

You can now buy far more than condiment bottles and fundraising t-shirts adorned with the Red Owl logo. Stephanie Kloek Towley and her husband run a website selling Red Owl memorabilia (zazzle.com/towleo08). “My husband and I are in our 40s and grew up toward the tail end of the Red Owl heyday,” says Kloek Towley. “The logo has definitely stuck with us.” She said that a few years ago, her husband found a t-shirt with the Red Owl logo, and it instantly took them back to their youth. Now they sell Red Owl t-shirts, bags, hoodies, and assorted tchotchke. “It’s hardly a business,” they mainly do it to “spread the nostalgia and magic that seems to be so unique with this brand.”



Was Red Owl better than any other regional supermarket chain? It would be difficult to argue that it was significantly different than its competition, or that the chain was groundbreaking in some way. Yet, for me and apparently a good number of fellow travelers, Red Owl is a piece of community history that signifies a simpler time, a time before marketing became so sophisticated and specific, and our grocery store was determined more by location than demographic. And it’s hard to overestimate the power of nostalgia, the memories of pulling up in your dad’s Vista Cruiser, getting a shake at the Snyder’s lunch counter, and shooting torpedoes at battleships.

Yes, Red Owl occupies a special place in Hennepin County history, and it’s all about the round face, big eyes, and pointy-eared iconic artwork. Good design matters. You would be hard pressed to find an Applebaum’s logo or SuperValu logo in a vintage store, much less anyone who would care. But Red Owl, now there was a logo.



Items on this page from the collections of Gary Newman



Items on this page courtesy Hopkins Historical Society



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Images on page 24 courtesy Hopkins Historical Society. Artifacts on page 25 from the collections of Gary Newman

William Burlison is an author and lifelong Minneapolis resident who currently works in the field of communications. Learn more about him at williamburlison.com. **WANT TO INCLUDE SOMETHING ABOUT THE ANTHOLOGIES YOU’RE PRODUCING?????**

