

Dowling Community Garden 2005 Celebrating 62 Years

By Eric Hart

The Dowling Community Garden is one of only a few original World War II Victory Gardens still being gardened today and is probably the second oldest in the nation (second only to the Fenway Victory Gardens in Boston). This is quite the feat for a community garden, most come and go relatively quickly, subject to the whims of the real estate market and changing ownership and public priorities. Through the dedicated efforts of 60 years of Dowling gardeners, the Dowling Community Garden has persevered and grown to become the fine community asset that it is today. The fascinating history of how the Dowling School came to be and the community garden established is one that spans 150 years.

Pre-settlement History

The land Dowling Community Garden sits upon has been under US Government control since 1805 when Zebulon Pike obtained the land from the Native Americans for the establishment of Fort Snelling. The land remained part of the Fort Snelling Military Reserve until the early 1850's when it was decided that the land was no longer needed for military purposes. Almost exactly 150 years ago, in August of 1853, the land was surveyed for the government so that it could be sold to white settlers. As luck would have it, the surveyors established survey lines on 46th Avenue and 38th Street, close to the present day garden boundaries of 46th Avenue and Dowling Street. Since settlers wanted to know what the land was like, the surveyors made note of quality of the land for farming. There was also a map produced which showed the major features of the land. One of the prominent features of the land around Dowling was a five block long and four block wide marsh! As the map in the Appendix shows, about 80% of the present day Dowling Garden was in the marsh except the SW corner of it! Of the marsh the surveyors said, "unfit for cultivation"! It is likely that this marsh had little open water and was probably well on its way to becoming solid land. 1855 to 1910 After the land was surveyed, it was opened to settlement and in 1855 the land was sold to the first settlers. In the late 1850s and early 1860s, the land was in the hands of speculators who eventually were foreclosed upon by St. Anthony banker Richard Martin in 1862 (after a crash in the real estate market due to the Civil War). Since the property was so far from any sort of development, roads or railroads, Richard Martin held onto the property and did not subdivide it into lots. Mr. Martin had a successful career in real estate in Minneapolis and New York where his family was from and he never married. He was handicapped and it was probably for this reason that in 1885 he stipulated in his will that the land he owned along the Mississippi River (which went from present day 38th to 44th Streets, east of 46th Avenue) be turned over to a charitable organization run by the Episcopal Church that would build an orphanage. He died in 1890 but it wasn't until 1900 that the land was finally turned over by his executor to Sheltering Arms which built an orphanage near 44th and West River Parkway in 1910 (where Becketwood now stands). William Eustis and Dowling School Sheltering Arms set aside the land nearest their building for the use of the orphanage and their intent was to eventually sell the rest of their land to create an endowment for the orphanage. In 1910 they sold part of the land between 38th and Dowling Streets to a developer, who divided the land into lots. This is why Dowling Street exists and the land is not part of the Dowling

School site. In March 1923 Sheltering Arms sold their land between Dowling Street and 42nd Street to a developer named Arthur Skamser. When they sold the property, Sheltering Arms dictated how much the lots could be sold for and it was clear that this was a valuable piece of real estate. Mr. Skamser proceeded to divide this land into lots and was very close to recording his survey with the County and selling lots (perhaps within days) when he was approached by William Eustis. Mr. Eustis was a successful Minneapolis lawyer, developer, and Mayor (1891-93) who had quietly amassed a large sum of money. He was also handicapped (he used crutches) and had been quietly building his fortune which he intended to donate for the benefit of crippled children. Mr. Eustis was able to buy the land from Arthur Skamser in May of 1923 by paying 20% more than Mr. Skamser had paid only 2 months earlier. Then about 2 weeks after his purchase, William Eustis donated the 21 acres that is now the Dowling School grounds to the Board of Education of Minneapolis with this condition: "The tract of land hereby conveyed is to be used by the Grantee [Board of Education of Minneapolis] as a site devoted exclusively to the physical, intellectual, and moral well-being of crippled children." The land directly south of the Dowling School grounds (between 40th and 42nd Streets) was also purchased by Mr. Eustis and it was donated at about the same time to the University of Minnesota for use as a recovery hospital for crippled children (which was never built). In addition to the land, Mr. Eustis also donated a large sum of money for the construction of a school for crippled children on the site. The Dowling School for Crippled Children moved to this site and was opened on November 19, 1924 (after being established in 1920 at a different location). The school was named after Michael Dowling a prominent handicapped Minnesotan who died in 1921. If not for the shrewd business dealings and foresight of William Eustis, the land where Dowling School and the Dowling Community Garden sit would have houses on it!

Site Before World War II The first aerial photo of the grounds was taken in 1938 and gives us some valuable clues about what was there before the Victory Garden was established. There appears to be an orchard on the school grounds south and east of the present day south gardens. The aerial photograph also shows the area of the present day north gardens (north of 39th Street) along 46th Avenue as vacant with no trees. 39th Street looks as though it is a dirt road on the Dowling grounds; just to the south of that dirt road along 46th Avenue, appears to be paths in a grid pattern which could indicate a garden. Although it is unlikely these were community gardens, they could have been used to benefit the school children. Since the current garden site was once a marsh, fill was brought in make the land buildable. It is hard to say when the Dowling Garden site was filled in but it was probably in the 1920s since 46th Avenue was put through in 1920 and many of the nearby houses date from the 1920s. As any Dowling gardener will tell you, the fill was low grade, mostly rocks and sand. A test dig done in 2002 by the author in the north gardens found about two feet of sand and rock fill on top of a dark, black peat soil, remnants of the marsh! The first foot or so of soil has been worked enough to contain some organic material and few rocks but the second foot of soil before the peat consisted mostly of small to medium sized rocks and sand.

Development as a Victory Garden

This was the soil that Rose Pearson and her husband Elof had to deal with when they started a Victory Garden in 1943. In a 2001 interview, Rose says: "A man came over from the university with a breaking plow. They had kind of an open space along 46th Avenue, and they went in there with that plow. I tell you, that was the worst mess. That plow was out of the ground more than it was in the ground, because it was so rocky."

Due to limitations on gasoline and rubber during the war, most large victory garden plots were first tilled by horse drawn plows! From Rose's recollections, the original location of the garden was at the northern end of the present day garden, near Dowling Street along 46th Avenue. The Victory Garden they started at Dowling was part of a much larger national effort to encourage home gardens. Home food production was very much part of the effort at home to support the troops overseas. The Victory Garden program got a small start nationwide in 1942 and by 1943 had become a huge phenomenon. In 1943, the Twin Cities alone had 130,000 gardeners (20 million nationwide), and by 1944 it was estimated that 40% of all fresh vegetables in Minnesota were grown in Victory Gardens. It was not unusual in areas with small yards and a lack of open space (like the area near Dowling) for unused land on school and other public grounds to be opened up for Victory Garden plots. This jingle from a 1942 radio show "Farm and Home Hour" sums up the spirit of the day:

Get out and dig dig dig in the sunshine
You can make one garden grow
Every seed you buy will gladly multiply
Til we've overcome our foe.
Get out and work work work for the nation
We can keep our country free
Help the rain above feed the ones we love
Dig our way to victory.
Plantin' corn – every day
Plantin' beans – come what may
Turn the sod – trust in God
And the earth will show the way.

Get out and dig dig dig in the sunshine
Every heart will feel a glow –
As we turn the tide we'll be glad we tried
To make ten million gardens grow.

Another slogan (which even present day gardeners should heed): "Let there be no slackers on the home front – the Victory Garden front."

In the early days of the Dowling Community Garden, plots were much larger and there were fewer gardeners. The average plot measured about 120 by 100 feet--roughly the size of the average city lot, and big enough to fit 30 of today's Dowling plots. The early gardeners had grown up on farms and were used to gardening large spaces and knew how to preserve the harvest by canning and drying. According to Rose Pearson, the garden was moved south, out of the filled marsh area where the soil was better and not as rocky, shortly after the war. At that point the northern part of the garden was abandoned and the new garden started somewhere south of 39th Street and extended as far south as the present day corner of Coffey Lane and 46th Avenue. When the University sold some of the land in this area to a developer in 1959 (there are two duplexes on this site now), the garden was forced to move back north again to where it had been during the War. At that time the garden only consisted of six very large plots.

1960s to the 1980s

For much of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the garden was only located north of 39th Street and consisted of large plots. Since the plots were so large, there were many fewer gardeners than today. With such a small group, there was no garden committee and things were pretty informal. New garden spots were dug up as new people needed them. Water was a real problem, with some gardeners even going to Minnehaha Creek to haul back water in 50 gallon barrels! Only gardeners who lived right across Dowling Street from the garden, such as long time gardener Bob Monhardt, could run a hose to their plots. By the early 1980s the garden had grown to only 15 plots, albeit very large plots which dwarf today's 20X20 foot plots. For about 10 years starting in the early 1980s, the Dowling School grounds just to the east of the present day gardens were used as part of an horticultural training high school located in a wing of Dowling School. As part of their curriculum, students installed a number of landscape features and plant nurseries around the school grounds. The area between the north gardens and the Dowling School parking lot was redone to recreate elements of a golf course, complete with a sand trap! Even today, it's not uncommon to see golfers practicing on the Dowling grounds. The asphalt paths on the east edge of the gardens are intended to be golf cart paths, complete with a turn around at the end! The orchard on the school grounds is part of students' efforts as well. There were two tree nurseries established on the site, the newest being the one directly to the south of the garden and the oldest being east of the south gardens. The intent was to transplant the trees and shrubs in the nursery to schools and other public land around the neighborhood but this never happened and now we have a good sized forest to the east of the gardens and a rapidly growing forest to the south!

Mid-1980s to the Present

By the early to middle 1980s, Dowling had grown large enough to get its first coordinator, Fred Burke. Many of the original gardeners were reaching an age when a large plot seemed overwhelming and the new people didn't know what to do with so much space. Most people didn't can or preserve their harvest so a smaller plot was more than enough. Demand for garden plots was growing and the waiting list for a plot had grown to 30 or 40 people. As a result, under Fred's watch the yard-size plots of retiring gardeners were gradually subdivided into smaller ones and the number of Dowling gardeners began to steadily climb. In the early 1990s when Steve Dosch took over as coordinator, there were approximately 50 plots which had been subdivided from the original 6. With demand growing for garden plots and fewer and fewer large plots left to subdivide, Steve expanded the garden south of 39th Street. Plots were also added east of the original north gardens, bringing the total to around 150 by the turn of the 21st Century. In the mid-1990s, Steve also oversaw the construction of a garden shed between the north and south parts of the garden. In 1995, the Dowling Community Garden finally got water to the north and south gardens. The pipes were run from the school to water stations on the east side of both the north and south gardens, which consist of a group of 55 gallon plastic barrels. Currently about 1/3 of the gardeners at Dowling volunteer to help fill those barrels on a regular basis so finally the garden has a reliable source of water. After these accomplishments, Steve stepped down as coordinator in 1995 and Joan Krey became garden coordinator. Today The garden is run by a small group of volunteers who meet monthly to plan activities and improvements, tackle ongoing management issues, and serve as liaisons with the community. Currently, the Dowling Garden gets low cost liability insurance through the non-profit Green Institute and has a 5 year

lease with the Minneapolis Public Schools.

Garden Traditions

Fall Harvest Potlucks were a tradition for many years at Dowling and were reinstated by former coordinator Joan Krey in the past five years. Besides sharing their favorite recipes and harvest, gardeners regale each other with tales of the garden season past. Since 2000 the Potluck was expanded to include all three community gardens in the Longfellow neighborhood. Community spirit is still alive at Dowling with vegetable sharing, recipes and gardening help freely offered to fellow gardeners. Gardeners have long shared their harvest with other gardeners as well as with others in the community. In the past there have been efforts to donate surplus produce to area food shelves and the Danebo nursing home and in 2003 a more formal donation program was started by garden volunteers. Surplus produce is being collected twice a week and donated to the charities Loaves and Fishes and Aliveness Project.

Garden Diversity The Dowling Community Garden provides gardening space for a variety of people, including immigrants and those of limited means. In the early 1990s Hmong immigrants from Cambodia from all over the metro area started to raise their family's supply of vegetables at Dowling. Former garden coordinator Steve Dosch remembers hearing some of their stories of terror and survival from a war-torn homeland, and he came away with "the gift of perseverance and inspiration, not giving up on life." It is not uncommon for gardeners at Dowling keep their plots for many years and garden until they are physically unable to do so. Having a garden plot at Dowling helps keep these seniors active and sometimes helps stretch meager pensions and fixed incomes that much farther. Marylou Velasco was one such senior. She gardened for many years and would take two city buses from downtown Minneapolis to get to the garden, hauling everything in a two wheel cart. Marylou lived on a meager pension and gardening at Dowling helped stretch her pension (and keep her off welfare), was a way to get fresh air and exercise, and provided an escape from the crime ridden low income high rise building she lived in. Amazingly enough, she was legally blind and marked the paths in her garden with white cups so she wouldn't step on the plants! Over the years she developed a relationship with the neighbors in the houses across 46th Avenue and was invited into their homes to use the bathroom and get a drink of water. Dowling also has a number of single parents, mostly women, who are low income and use their plots to provide low cost fresh vegetables for their families.

Recent and Planned Garden Improvements

In the late 1990s, the Dowling Community Garden was awarded \$10,000 in Longfellow Community Council NRP funds for improvements to the garden. Using some of that money, four raised bed gardens were built by garden volunteers in Fall 2000. The beds are approximately 5 by 12 feet and are designed for people in wheelchairs. They were built using non-toxic plastic lumber and the paths around the beds use an innovative porous plastic pavers which is filled with wood chips and is approved for wheel chair use. In the early part of 2001, a landscape designer was hired to create a plan for improvements to the garden which would make it more welcoming to neighbors and pleasant for gardeners. These plans call for improvements to the 39th Street entrance with an extensive perennial garden of hardy, low-maintenance plants and a pergola covered with vines, and establishing amenities such as bike racks, benches, and a neighborhood kiosk. In 2003, Dowling Garden volunteers agreed to plant and maintain the vegetable gardens at the historic 1850 Stevens house in Minnehaha Park. This is an

opportunity to grow heirloom varieties of vegetables and flowers grown in the 1850s, and demonstrate sustainable gardening practices. Since 2000 the Dowling Garden has been a member of Minnesota Green, a program of the Minnesota State Horticultural Society which gives free seeds and plants for use in community gardens. Dowling has been able to give out free seeds for garden use at the past three Spring cleanup events. In 2003, Dowling Community Garden was awarded a grant from the Minnesota State Horticultural Society to establish demonstration beds that showcase organic gardening methods and heirloom seed saving.

Evolving Garden Governance

In the past 5-10 years, managing the garden has become more complicated and now the Garden Committee meets monthly year round. The Garden Committee helps the coordinator with everyday management tasks (which have grown considerably in the past few years), garden improvements and special projects. Garden rules have evolved, to meet the needs of a large number of gardeners and increased regulations on public lands. To facilitate gardener communication, a voicemail phone number was established in 2000. There has been a garden newsletter for the past 10 years or so. At first the newsletter came out once a year but now it comes out at least twice a year, in the Spring and Summer. Each newsletter gives gardening tips, event information, and volunteer opportunities. Since early 2001, Dowling has had its own web site, www.dowlingcommunitygarden.org, which has recipes, pest control information, garden photos, garden rules, and periodically features Dowling gardeners.

Dowling Community Garden Mission

- Provide community garden space
- Build a sense of community
- Serve gardeners with special needs
- Promote sustainable gardening practices such as organic gardening and on-site composting
- Share produce with community organizations
- Provide a place of beauty for others to enjoy
- Provide environmental education and outreach to Dowling gardeners, Dowling School parents and children, and the community
- Provide garden space for Dowling School children, teachers, and after school programs

At Dowling Garden, organic gardening practices are encouraged; pesticide and herbicide use is not allowed. Dowling Garden is a contributing member of [Seed Savers Exchange](#) and [Seeds of Diversity Canada](#)--organizations preserving heirloom varieties of vegetables, fruits and flowers.

Gardening Opportunities

Dowling contains over 175 plots, serving more than 200 gardeners from six cities and 15 neighborhoods in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Dowling School

teachers and children garden four of the plots. Dowling gardeners are culturally diverse, of all ages and abilities. There is always a waiting list of gardeners for available space.

Wheelchair-accessible Gardens

Raised bed gardens are used by disabled gardeners and Dowling Special-Ed students. Taller raised bed gardens are used by older gardeners or those with limited mobility.

Environmental Education

Through our web site and newsletter we distribute gardening and harvest advice. Dowling maintains demonstration gardens showcasing organic practices, holds informational events, distributes fact sheets and seeds. We are increasing wildlife habitat through bird and bat housing and native plant gardens.

Excess Produce Donation

Produce is collected during June through September and donated to food shelves and meals programs.

Community Focal Point

Dowling Garden presents Heirloom Festival, a celebration of food and sustainable gardening on August 13th from 10 am to 2 pm. We are improving open space used by community members with flower gardens, a picnic table, benches and a bike rack.

References

Information taken from a 2001 Dowling Oral History taken by Monika Bauerlein and Emily Green, the WWII collections at the Minnesota Historical Society, the University of Minnesota

Archives, Deeds and Mortgages filed at the Hennepin County Records office, government surveys, and various published articles and books. Specific references are available upon request.