

# Ragged streets are nice

By Garrison Keillor

The other day I ran into a fellow I hadn't seen for a long time — How've you been? What're you doing these days? We asked ourselves — and he asked me. "You're still living in Minneapolis, aren't you?" I said, No, I live in St. Paul. "Yeah, I thought so," he said.

The clear implication was that St. Paul and Minneapolis are one city, which is called "Minneapolis," of which St. Paul is an outgrowth to the east. It's an implication that St. Paul residents run into almost every day.

In fact, St. Paul is its own city, as different from Minneapolis as pumper-

nickel from Wonder Bread, and anyone who sees the two as one long stretch of Interstate Hwy. 94 ought to get out of the car and take a walk.

For one thing, St. Paul has more of what Minneapolis calls "deteriorating neighborhoods." This means a place where the residents don't rake the leaves into plastic bags and put them out for the trashman.

You can walk into many St. Paul neighborhoods and be back in the 1940s, before lawn care became compulsory, before fastidiousness took over. In those pre-beautification days, yards had junk for kids, yards had dirt piles to dig in, and lawns were marked by base-

paths and 50-yard-lines. Crabgrass and dandelions were generally overlooked. Home-owning was more passive. Home was simply the place where you lived. It was not the object of your life to make it trim.

This is how most people in small towns own homes, and it is still the way in much of St. Paul, as shown by one statistic:

Of the 850 miles of St. Paul streets, 400 are uncurbed.

This is a fact that takes us to the very root of the difference between St. Paul and Minneapolis. (In Minneapolis, a man in Public Works tells me, there are 1,067 miles of streets, and 99 percent of those miles are curbed.)

As St. Paul residents know, curbs are not a necessity of urban life. They serve no essential purpose. This may come as a surprise to people who live in Minneapolis, who probably think that curbs are required by state law, but it is true. The purpose of curbs is to make a straight edge.

I asked the man in Public Works, "What are curbs for?" He chuckled, heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, to show that he appreciated my sense of humor. "Well," he said, "for one thing, if you didn't have curbs the water would run into the property." "But when it rains, the rains falls on the property, too," I said. "Yes, but this way, you don't have so much lawn fertilizer washed into the lakes and the river," he said. (They use a lot of lawn fertilizer in Minneapolis.)

"Let me see if I can find someone who can think of something else," he said, but that person was out to lunch. So I called the St. Paul Department of Public Works. According to a man there, these are the reasons for curbs:

- (1) Curbs "retain the boulevard." They prevent cars from parking on the grass.
- (2) Curbs "promote even drainage." On uncurbed streets, the water flows off unevenly.
- (3) Curbs make street sweeping and snow plowing easier.
- (4) Curbs improve the appearance of streets. "Without curbs, it doesn't really look like a nice street." Curbs also "define the street."
- (5) Curbs protect the pavement. On uncurbed streets, the pavement deteriorates faster.

This is so much sheepdip. You might just as well say that curbs limit inflation or promote respect for the law. The fact is that curbs are an expensive (\$10 per foot of frontage, at the very least) accommodation of the fastidious home-owner. Such persons as are devoted to lawn care cannot abide the sight of a raggedy street. It offends their sense of propriety. They feel that a lawn not abuted by concrete will fall apart.

All of this might be harmless enough, were it left to the choice of home-owners. But now a gigantic scheme has reared its head, to pave and curb St. Paul by 1995 at a cost of about 100 million 1974 dollars. Last week the City Council was presented with the proposal and shown a 20-minute slide show, prepared by the Public Works Department, making a case for it. Now the council wants neighborhood and community groups to see the show, too, before the council makes up its mind on the paving plan.

I hope the council will take a long hard look at the proposition that St. Paul needs more straight edges (and harder surfaces, so that cars can be driven faster by our homes). It represents not only a long-term commit-

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"That's got to be a good place to eat; look at all those ox carts."

ment to the automobile, but a threat to the very nature of this city.

In Minneapolis, where the curb prevails, streets have the appearance of being permanently joined tongue-and-groove to the earth. One senses that the city was built up from a concrete base. People may leave, houses may crumble, trees may die, but the streets shall not pass away.

In the uncurbed neighborhoods of St. Paul, however, one senses the impermanence of streets and, hence, of the automobile. A street is merely an oily substance sprayed onto dirt. It is not impervious to nature. It cracks at the edges, and grass springs

up in the cracks. Someday, when gasoline goes for \$2 the gallon, dogs will sleep in the potholes.

There is a quiet pastoral feeling imparted by these streets. They could be plowed up and planted in oats, with very little loss of capital investment. They are a natural and essential part of St. Paul, the largest small town in America. Curb them, and we may as well be living in Minneapolis, where they have neat lawns, numbered streets and all the other amenities.

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### Jerusalem

From early morning to sundown, we have been traveling by bus for several days in the north of Israel. Presumably it is a VIP tour, and a few soldiers, armed, accompany us to military installations, small settlements and collective farms, or kibbutzim, that exist precariously along the dangerous Lebanese and Syrian borders.

The incongruity of being a tourist in this place at this time is striking. A sensible apprehension for personal safety—not enough to keep anyone off the tour—remains always in the pit of the stomach, the back of the mind.

And why do Israelis bother with these tours during tense and difficult days? It is, obviously, a way of telling their story. A very effective way. See for yourself, they say, how we live and where. See for yourself what we must do to survive.

The bus moves at a moderate clip, and the sun is warm in a blue sky. Visible a few miles in the distance is the Lebanese border, peaceful-looking in the soft, mirage-like haze of morning colors.

Miles and miles of ugly barbed-wire fences are coiled along this border. One type is new, copied from the Russians, and it is covered with sharp metal bits like razor blades. Brightly colored markers by the hundreds are scattered between the fences, warning of mine fields. Jeeps and olive-drab trucks patrol the roads, checking specially constructed dirt paths for footprints or other signs of unwelcome visitors.