

Downer Avenue's icon, as illustrated in a children's book.



The Lost Wagon

After nine decades, a historic popcorn wagon is no more. Can it be saved?

by JENNA KASHOU

John Updike never hung around Downer Avenue, but his 1965 collection of poems, *A Child's Calendar*, sported an illustration of the avenue's popular popcorn wagon. Milwaukee artist Nancy Ekholm Burkert illustrated the book and portrayed her children, Claire and Rand, buying goodies from the wagon. "It was one of their favorite places," she says.

For 92 years, from 1916 until 2008, the popcorn wagon, believed to be the city's oldest, operated at 2590 N. Downer Ave., a beloved East Side icon. Burkert knew it as Mrs. M's Popcorn Wagon, after former owner Ella Muehleisen. The last of its many owners was James Penfield, who bought it in 2006.

"I was retired and it was a wonderful part-time job," says Penfield. "People would come by and say they've been buying popcorn there for 20 years, and now they were bringing their kids and grandkids."

But in 2007, the city approved plans for a parking garage on land that included the spot where the popcorn wagon stood. Downer Avenue Parking Lot bought out Penfield's lease and the wagon for an undisclosed sum. It was then donated to the Urban Playground Foundation, a local nonprofit that helps improve urban spaces. The wagon now sits in storage in New Berlin.

Alderman Nik Kovac, whose district includes the East Side, actually worked at the wagon when he was a boy. First elected in 2008, after the wagon had already been mothballed, he would like to see it reclaimed. "I am still hopeful we'll find a way to make Downer Avenue the kind of place that can support charming uses of public space," he says.

But Mike Eitel, founder of Urban Playground, isn't optimistic. "It would be nearly impossible to bring the wagon up to health code and would involve a major investment," he says. "I am happy to give it away to anyone who will take it off our hands."

Penfield, however, says it was still in good shape when he sold it. "It's really a shame," he says. Unless some rescuer steps forward, the wagon may live on only in Updike's book. ■