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Small town in the city

Booming Andersonville retains the feeling of a longtime, close-knit community

1 2 [next](#) | [single page](#)



By Lauren Viera, Tribune reporter

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What makes a neighborhood work? Is it the people? The history and culture? Diversity? Or perhaps its status as a destination?

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Post the question to any number of proprietors who keep shop on the 5000 blocks of North Clark Street, and oddly, their answers are more or less identical: When a neighborhood feels like a small town, it's working.

They should know. They're speaking on behalf of Andersonville, the North Side neighborhood that started as a modest Scandinavian settlement after the Great Fire of 1871 and boomed in the early 20th century to boast the largest concentration of Swedes this side of Stockholm.

Like so many developments, the initial draw was location, location, location — in this case, a farming area far enough from downtown's post-fire regulations against building wooden houses. The Swedes knew how to work and live off the land, and the more who settled in that stretch a few miles north of downtown, the more attractive it was for others to immigrate.

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These days, Andersonville draws in part for its residual Scandinavian heritage (there are little clues everywhere, from the decoratively painted wooden *dala* horse to a Swedish flag welded from neon), but mostly because of that small-town aura that it has managed to maintain.

For the folks who live and work there, such as Simon's Tavern owner Scott Martin, it's got the requisite perks.

"An old man a long time ago said, 'What makes a good neighborhood?'" Martin says. "He named all of these things: a church, a bakery, a butcher shop, a good bar. I think (Andersonville) has all of the old-fashioned neighborhood features in it. You don't have to drive anywhere; you can walk and find everything. I think there's a really big cooperation among everyone who works and lives there too."

Martin, like so many retail and service providers in the neighborhood, lives within spitting distance of his work. He resides six storefronts up the street from Simon's, above Svea, his parents' restaurant. He was raised a few miles away, in a house at Roscoe and Paulina streets, "the house my mom grew up in," he says.

So that's the bar.

There's a bakery, too, if we're following the old man's list. Aptly

named Swedish Bakery, it opened in the late 1920s, predating Simon's by a few years while the prohibition of alcohol was sorting out a repeal.

Like Martin, Swedish Bakery operations officer Dennis Stanton is a proud member of a family-run business. His German mother, trained in Europe as a baker and decorator, has been running the show since she purchased the bakery from its original Swedish owners in the 1970s. Stanton's brother aids in decorating, his sister handles sales, and a staff of 45 supports the demand for all those sweets.

Stop in Swedish Bakery on any given morning, and there's a line so long you're required to take a number. And people wait. There's a Jewel grocery store up the street, but people wait.

"We change, the neighborhood changes," Stanton says, addressing how the bakery has survived Andersonville's fairly recent boom — and boomed with it. "We basically draw from the neighborhood, but also from all over the North Side of the city. Only about 20 percent (of our customers) come from our ZIP code. People travel here to shop here."

Sometimes it's just once a year, for the holidays. Bill Brown and Grete Kvelland make the annual trek from Forest Park to the bakery for its *limpa* (traditional Swedish rye bread) — even though Kvelland is Norwegian.

"There are less Scandinavian stores than there used to be," she laments, pausing outside Erickson's Delicatessen, the couple's other pit stop. Still, they make the trip: If you want Scandinavian goodies, this is the place.

Others continue to visit long after they've moved — sometimes to other states. Bobby Kokott, 47, hasn't lived in Andersonville since 2001, but returns seven or eight times a year to maintain clientele relationships via his [massage therapy](#) practice. "This is my neighborhood," he said earlier this week, window-shopping the new releases at Women and Children First bookstore. "I love that I can go in a shop and still see people I know. I love that I still run into people (I know) on the street. I don't know why I love it here so much. I just do."

Another Andersonville anomaly: Its residents buy art. Regularly, repeatedly, from the same artists.

Michelle Peterson-Albandoz has run Las Manos Gallery since 1994, before the neighborhood's emergence as a furniture and design destination.

She says the gallery is "off the grid," in terms of being out of reach from gallery-centric 'hoods like River North, West Loop, [Pilsen](#) and [Bridgeport](#).



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But that's the advantage.

"It's wonderful to be in a neighborhood like this where there are no (other) galleries," Peterson-Albandoz says. "It's saying: Artists are here; here we are in this really intense commercial area, and we're this strange little gallery that seems to thrive."

Thrive it does, partly because of the relatively affordable prices. Peterson-Albandoz says she sells a lot of work within the \$500-\$2,000 range, and that her clients have collected her and her colleagues' works since the beginning.

"They come in every month to see what we're doing next," Peterson-Albandoz says. "In 17 years, the work has changed quite a bit."

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Peterson-Albandoz cites the neighborhood's multiple furniture stores as beneficial. Across the street, Scout "brought a high sense of design into the area," she says, commending shopkeeper Larry Vodak. "He parades people across the street all the time and shows people our art."

Visual arts are just one aspect of the neighborhood's creative energy. Quest Theatre Ensemble calls Andersonville home, and the Neo-Futurarium, home of "Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind," the longest-running show in town (which consistently draws a line around the block), has been in the neighborhood for most of its 22 years as a company. Marketing director and ensemble member John Pierson, who has been with the company for 15 years, brags that the Neo-Futurists helped usher in the neighborhood's "new wave" of excitement. But is it part of a true arts community?

"I sometimes think we're in our own world around there," Pierson says, referring to the company's location on Ashland Avenue, off Clark Street's main strip.

But, he says, artistic dialogues are open. A few years ago, the neighborhood's theaters collaborated for a progressive production of "Alice in Wonderland," for which each venue staged a chapter of the play. Multiple venues participate in the neighborhood's annual arts festival and art walk in October,

and a collaborative Film Fest is in the works at Chicago Filmmakers, the nonprofit media arts organization that has been on Clark Street for 11 years. The organization landed in [Andersonville](#) after short stints in [Lakeview](#) and [Wicker Park](#), and it stuck, according to Chicago Filmmakers Executive Director Brenda Webb.

"I felt that here, more than anywhere else we've been, we fit with the feel of the neighborhood," Webb says. "It has a small-town quality to it. There's definitely a sense of community, and I think a lot of that is channeled through Andersonville's Chamber of Commerce. People know each other; they look out for each other. ... Just the integration of the arts in the community is really great."

That community boasts an amazing Persian spice store, a handful of Japanese sushi joints, a brand new Dutch restaurant and then some, but it hasn't forgotten its roots.

At the Swedish American Museum, which counts Svea and Ann Sather among its immediate neighbors, exhibitions and programming such as Midsommarfest and the coming St. Lucia Festival of Lights serve as seasonal reminders of the neighborhood's history.

"I do think the Swedish ancestry or heritage helps the community have a root," says Karin Abercrombie, the museum's executive director, "but it could have been the same if it was Polish, German, etc. I think that having a history is something that ties everyone together. The community works very well together."

And then, she unwittingly quotes her neighbors: "It's sort of a small-town feeling."

lviera@tribune.com