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Artist Maria Friske's five murals along Pembroke Street depict Swillburg's history, which has been filled with people, places and pigs.

NEIGHBORHOOD FOCUS: Swillburg

BY COLLEEN M. FARRELL

It's easy to know you're in Rochester's Swillburg neighborhood today, but that wasn't always the case, residents say.

Pictures of pigs now grace the community's sign posts and plaques, but back in the 1800s, the pigs were real. Swillburg earned its moniker from George Goebel, who ran a pig farm and collected garbage to feed his "swill." Pig farms eventually made way for houses as the city rapidly developed.

The neighborhood has steadily worked to reclaim its identity and unique character. David Chappius recalled recently that when he and his partner bought their Pembroke Street house eight years ago, Chappius thought it was in the city's South Wedge. A real estate advertisement called the neighborhood Upper

Monroe.

All that's changed since the addition of Swillburg's black and white street signs — at once noticeably different from the city's blue and white ones. They include the neighborhood logo, which is, of course, a pig. Signs at neighborhood entrances announce: "Welcome to Swillburg." And pig logo merchandise is for sale, too.

"Most people in our neighborhood have begun to know what neighborhood they live in," Chappius said.

One of the goals of the Swillburg Neighborhood Association, formed about 30 years ago, was to do just that:



GRAPHIC BY LAWRENCE SEIL

Brand Swillburg and make it well-known.

"We want people to know they live in Swillburg and be proud of it," said

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Rooney's Restaurant (above) on the corner of Henrietta and Allmeroth streets, is a popular neighborhood eatery. (Right) A monument dedicated to musician Cabell "Cab" Calloway, who once lived at 14 Sycamore St. (Bottom right) Another section of artist Maria Friske's murals.

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Chappius, who is president of the association.

Neighbors credit the association for keeping the area, home to a little more than 3,000 city residents, attractive. Bordered by South Clinton Avenue, Meigs Street, I-490 and Field Street, Swillburg would have looked much different today had some residents not fought a plan to put the expressway through it in the 1980s. Late resident Otto Hendenberg led those efforts, and a small park now bears his name. Concerts are held in the gazebo there, as well as an annual children's carnival. It's also a popular destination for dog walkers.

The association, which made up entirely of volunteers, maintains a number of neighborhood gardens, a newsletter and Web site. It organizes block parties and Swillfest, a country line dancing event.

A Brockport native, Chappius said the neighborhood he grew up in was close-knit. He's found the same thing in Swillburg.

"It's nice being in the city, he said. "It's nice being so close to everything, including the expressway and being

close to downtown and not having the parking headaches of downtown."

The neighborhood is home to a "hodge podge" of housing styles, Chappius said.

"We really have everything," he said. "We have houses that are 600 sq. ft. to houses that are over 2,000-sq. ft., which is really cool."

Some date to the 1900s. Others were built in the 1980s after initial plans for the expressway left vacant lots.

Resident Jan Hickman said the neighborhood was a little tired-looking when she moved in 30 years ago. That changed once new houses were built, she said.

"There's a lot of cooperation that goes on in this neighborhood," Hickman said. "It's like a small village in many, many ways."

In 1990, Swillburg's median home value for owner-occupied housing was \$90,700; in 2000, it was \$96,100.

Chappius said he expects home maintenance to become a challenge as people's finances get tighter in the current economy. The neighborhood association is working with the city to help maintain properties through code enforcement.

"Our neighborhood association would like the code enforcement to be stricter," Chappius said. "Housing is a

big asset for us ... and people don't want to see their investment decline in value, but your investment's only as good as your neighbors."

The group also has worked with NeighborWorks of Rochester to help residents fix up their properties. Field Street, one of Swillburg's major thoroughfares, recently was resurfaced and sidewalks were installed.

Both Chappius and Hickman said the neighborhood's diversity is one of its chief assets — all different ages, ethnic backgrounds and income levels call it home.

Other points of pride include a famous son, musician Cab Calloway, whose family lived on Sycamore Street for a time and a series of murals by artist Maria Friske that depict Swillburg's swine-filled past.

Hickman, however, said she is most proud of the people she calls neighbors.

"My own little corner of Swillburg has had some turnovers of home ownership and everyone who leaves is sad to see them go and everyone who comes in — it's a real pleasure to get to know them," she said.

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