The Gunderson Family

S.T. Gunderson and Sons represents a firm started by successful Norwegian immigrants. Severt T. Gunderson came to the United States in 1848 at the age of nine. At 18 he went into business as a builder, and quickly acquired important timber and mill holdings, all of which were destroyed by fire in 1875. Severt started a second business manufacturing doors and sashes, which he operated with his son Seward. This business was also destroyed by fire. In 1885 Severt and his two sons formed the firm of S.T. Gunderson and Sons, “homebuilders” and real estate investors. Severt and wife Emily had two sons, Seward and George, both of whom worked in the family business. Seward joined his father in the lumber business in 1883 and became the managing partner in 1893. George’s career began in his father’s lumber company in 1881. He was later the manager of W.J. Frawley and Company, lumber inspectors.

The Gundersons established several subdivisions in Chicago and Oak Park between 1889 and 1925. The earliest subdivisions were on the west side of Chicago. The first Gunderson development in Oak Park was the Gunderson and Gauger’s addition, platted in 1890, located on Home and Wenonah avenues between Harrison Street and Roosevelt Road. Gunderson owned this land for 15 years, waiting for a five-cent railroad fare to Chicago before commencing construction. With his own funds, Gunderson constructed a station of the Metropolitan elevated train line at nearby Maple Avenue for the convenience of the new residents. The 59 houses were quickly sold once construction began in 1905. This area is referred to as the first Gunderson development of Oak Park.

First Gunderson Subdivision

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Second Gunderson Subdivision

The second Gunderson development in Oak Park, located between Harrison and Madison Streets, and Gunderson and South Ridgeland Avenues, was constructed shortly after the first Oak Park subdivision. Gunderson located this subdivision directly north of the Metropolitan Garfield elevated train line, with a station on Gunderson Avenue that connected Oak Park to Chicago. The firm located two branch offices in the core of the neighborhood—one at South Elwood Avenue and Harrison Street, and one at South Elwood Avenue and Adams Street. This second subdivision was prominently promoted in the local newspapers, with weekly advertisements in the local Oak Leaves. The second subdivision included 208 single-family homes and 22 two-flats.

Gunderson Two-Flats

Gunderson originally subscribed to the beliefs of numerous Oak Park residents and did not support the construction of apartment subdivisions in his neighborhood. Gunderson concluded “that so large a proportion of our urban population is housed in the cubby holes of the modern apartment is a grave menace to the future of the race.” Advertisements for the Gunderson subdivision frequently promoted home ownership over renting. The New Book of Standard Gunderson Homes referred to the renter as “a piece of driftwood, subject to many buffeting gales, while the homeowner is a stanch ship, upon the same sea of life.” One of the early ads for Gunderson Homes touted the importance “to realize that this is a community of homes — no flats, no apartments — nothing but artistic homes.” The warranty deeds conveyed to the purchaser of a Gunderson home prohibited the future erection of flat apartment buildings on the home’s lot.

Gunderson’s opinions had changed by 1915 when he began constructing two-family units.
homes at the northeast edge of the second Gunderson development. Gunderson’s audience did not change — he was attracting homebuyers, not renters. The advertisements for these properties spoke of making the purchaser “a rent receiver instead of a rent payer.” The ads recommended that the purchaser should live in one unit and rent out the second.

Seward’s own son, Miles, lived in the two-flat building at 530 South Ridgeland in 1922. In 1920, S.T. Gunderson and Sons built their last apartment building in this development.

What is an Historic District?
An historic district is an area within geographically definable boundaries, possessing a significant concentration of properties united by past events or aesthetically by plan or physical development that has been designated as an Oak Park Historic District pursuant to Village ordinance. Most buildings in an historic district contribute to the significance of the area without individually having the credentials of a Landmark. These buildings are referred to as Contributing Resources. They help to maintain the historic integrity of the neighborhood. Individual properties designated as Historic Landmarks are Contributing Resources within a district. An historic district can have buildings that do not contribute to the significance of the district. These buildings, referred to as Non-Contributing Resources, usually are less than 50 years old or have been significantly altered in the recent past.