Numbers tell one part of the story

By JOHN GURDA

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She wanted, said the reporter, to write a "nuanced" story about race in Milwaukee. Her editor had noticed the community's high ranking on a recent segregation index and asked her to investigate. Since I'd written about the subject, would I mind showing her around?

Not at all, I replied, and that's how I came to spend a morning with Stephanie Simon. Raised in the Boston area, educated at Yale and based in St. Louis, Simon roams the Midwest for the Los Angeles Times, reporting on everything from agriculture to welfare reform.

We began downtown, of course, and followed a lazy route through the heart of Milwaukee's north side, driving all the way to the open fields on the city's border with Mequon. Simon commented on the vitality of our downtown, admired the lakefront and expressed surprise at the quality of our public housing. For the rest, she was content to ask questions and take copious notes as we transected multiple layers of history.

When I dropped Simon off at her next appointment on N. King Drive, I gave her a copy of "The Making of Milwaukee," my history of the community, and expressed hope that it would provide some helpful background. The morning was pleasant, and she seemed like a competent professional.
The article that resulted from her overnight visit was anything but "nuanced." It appeared on the front page of the Dec. 30 Los Angeles Times under an egregious headline: "The Old South, Up North."

Simon began her story with a description of the open housing marches of 1967 and declared that nothing of substance had changed since then.

She went on to compare Milwaukee (unfavorably) with Trent Lott's South and issued a point-by-point listing of the prevailing inequities, "even access to home mortgage loans." (The lending gap exists solely because white households here have abnormally good credit.)

Her tone became less strident near the middle of a very long story, but Simon had made her points in the opening paragraphs.

That's where numbers will get you.

Milwaukee's ranking on a segregation index carried us to the front page of the largest newspaper in America's second-largest metropolis. Thousands of readers were treated to a cartoon of Milwaukee as Montgomery, Ala., circa 1954 - a place of racial repression, unrelenting poverty and bull-headed sheriffs.

Milwaukee, in truth, is no more Montgomery than Los Angeles is Paris, but a perception is afoot that no convention bureau campaign can put back in the bottle.

I have since expressed my disappointment to Simon, not because she made my hometown look bad, but because her story was filled with simplistic conclusions based on a cursory examination of suspect data.

Most segregation rankings rely on the "index of dissimilarity," a tool that compares numbers for an entire community with those of individual census tracts. The city of Milwaukee's population, for instance, is 37% black and 63% white. Any deviation from those numbers means that an individual tract is more or less segregated.

The first problem with the dissimilarity index is that a completely uniform mixing of any city's population is a social, political and historical impossibility; people always cluster where they're most comfortable.

The second is that the index fails utterly at the smaller end of the scale. Waukesha, for example, appears as "integrated" because there is so little difference between the black populations of the city as a whole and any particular census tract.

Not two weeks after Simon's story appeared, a research team from the
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee proposed a different model. They established a common-sense integration threshold of 20%, either black or white - surely high enough to guarantee social interaction. Next, they applied their yardstick to individual blocks - the level most of us call home - rather than to entire census tracts.

Lo and behold, metropolitan Milwaukee instantly climbed past the midpoint on the integration index.

I find the study's basic rationale compelling. The results confirm two of my most firmly held impressions: that the South is far better at integration than North, and that Milwaukee, in terms of racial separation, is somewhere in the middle of the pack.

When I've toured the east side of Cleveland, the south side of Chicago or the Roxbury section of Boston, I've wondered that any study would classify Milwaukee as a world apart. The simple explanation is that it's not.

The UWM study is unlikely to lay anything to rest. Skeptics in other cities may look at its place of origin and dismiss the new model without examining its true merits.

On the local level, there is a certain type of self-flagellating liberal who has a perversely vested interest in our poor ranking. That group will be angry, dismissive or both.

Another group with a professional interest in Milwaukee's image - politicians and corporate leaders among them - will probably congratulate themselves and return to business as usual.

The debate will continue, and the UWM team deserves praise for giving it a new frame.

But a concluding word of caution is in order. Milwaukee, I'm firmly convinced, is no more (and, importantly, no less) a stronghold of racism than any other Northern city.

What is different here, and what gets hopelessly tangled with charges of segregation, is the undeniable economic gap between the races. That gap has its roots in the late start and explosive growth of the city's black community in the 1950s and '60s; African-Americans began on the entry level a full generation or two after their counterparts in other cities.

The gap widened dangerously during the massive deindustrialization of the 1980s; blacks here bore the heaviest share of the job losses.

And the gulf is practically perpetuated by the cycle of children having children who reach adulthood to find an impossibly high economic
Those are America's problems, painfully apparent in Milwaukee.

It is those problems that demand our attention. Milwaukee is not by any means "The Old South, Up North." We are a community of unusual diversity, a gathering of people who live together by choice and circumstance and who share a common fate.

It is our economic disparities, not our social dynamics, that will shape that fate most decisively. Whatever damage careless reporters do to our national image, the local realities are more important.

Milwaukee suddenly went up on the integration index? Pardon me if I don't feel like celebrating.

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