

A HISTORY



OAK PARK, *Michigan*

"the city with a future"

CITY OF OAK PARK

The area of Oakland County which now includes the City of Oak Park was first surveyed in 1817. The surveyors reported to Territorial Governor Lewis Cass that ". . . the lands were irreclaimable and must remain forever unfit for culture or occupation, and their obvious destiny must be to remain in the possession of wild beasts." Located in the southwestern corner of what Governor Cass was to name Royal Oak Township, the five square mile area of Oak Park is now one of the most densely developed communities in the state, with a State Equalized Valuation of \$176,246,730.

Governor Cass disagreed with the opinion of the surveyors and decided to observe the area personally. He left Detroit with a party of friends and traveled north about twelve miles. Forced to stop because both men and horses were exhausted, they established a campsite under a large white oak tree:

*As the Governor lay on the ground and looked up into the dense foliage of the tree, he thought of the great Royal Oak in Scotland (among whose branches Prince Charles, the Pretender, hid from his pursuers after the battle of Culloden) and it seemed to him that it must have been just such a tree as this, so they christened it the "Royal Oak," and it was from this incident the name was given to both the tree and the township.**

Records show that the earliest settlers were a Mr. White and Mr. Henry Stephens, who arrived in 1822. Several thousand acres of township land were deeded by the government in 1836 to Douglas Houghton, Henry G. Hubbard and Thomas H. Hubbard, jointly. Mr. Houghton's death resulted in his land interests in Royal Oak Township reverting to the Hubbard family, who retained it until 1908.

In 1840, a few brave pioneers settled in the corner of the Township that was to become Oak Park. It was known as the "Marsh Lands," because it was swampy, low, covered with woods and inhabited by small birds and animals that made it a famous hunting ground. Accordingly, the area presented many difficulties for human habitation.

The 28 pioneers drained the swamps, cleared the land, built homes, barns and corduroy roads in "building bees." This first settlement, which was located in the area of what is now Nine Mile Road between Coolidge Highway and Greenfield Road, continued to grow slowly. People could get to and from Detroit by an ancient Indian trail that eventually became Woodward Avenue, named for the judge who planned the streets of Detroit.

*From a speech by Richard W. Marshall, former Mayor of Oak Park, November 10, 1957.



OAK PARK

“The city with a future”



In 1846, the settlers decided they needed a school for their children. Barney Clinton, one of the settlers, gave half an acre of his land for the school; two other settlers, Christopher Lando and John Granzon, hauled lumber from a nearby sawmill. The school, which was finished in 1848, was a small frame building furnished with crude log desks, lighted by oil lamps and heated by a wood-burning box stove. Water for students was brought from a neighbor's well in a bucket by the older boys in the school.

Nearby communities began to send their children to the school, and by 1890 there were 65 children attending. One of its most illustrious alumni was the late Congressman George A. Dondero, who was to say a few years before his death that “some of my happiest memories are from the days I walked to and from the old Clinton School. We hunted in the woods, watched peat fires, and played in the swamps, sometimes in water up to our ankles.”

Swamp fire was a danger to the school and to the settlement as a whole. Fed by the extensive peat bogs, fires were common in the spring of the year and often burned for months. Residents joined with volunteer firefighters from Ferndale, Royal Oak and Detroit to fight the fires with water drained from the swamp.

The first major development of Oak Park came in 1914. A large portion of the land was sold to the Majestic Land Company, which subdivided and promoted the development of its holdings. It named its subdivision the “Oak Park” subdivision because of the abundance of oak trees. A state limitation on the selling of bonds by townships restricted the construction of streets, sewers and other community facilities.

Beginning about 1920, some of the residents of the subdivision campaigned for the incorporation of a village in order to become eligible for badly needed improvements.

In March, 1921, determined citizens met in the grocery store of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Schrader, where they planned the formation of a village government. They formed the Progressive League of Oak Park Subdivision, a group that was to play an important part in the history of Oak Park. However, there were no minutes kept of that meeting.

The Progressive League *did* appoint a committee to determine what improvements would be of most benefit to the taxpayer. Their first decision was to study the road tax laws and find out how the subdivision could get the necessary funds to improve and extend Oak Park's roads. It took until 1923 to accomplish it. By that time they were fighting for a drain that would help to carry off storm water so that the streets wouldn't “disappear under a lake” every time it rained.

By 1924, Nine Mile and Ten Mile Roads had been paved and the Detroit Edison Co., after long dicking with the Progressive League, brought electricity to Oak Park. Soon after Michigan Bell extended telephone service to the eastern portion of the subdivision.

In 1924, the Progressive League incorporated as the Oak Park Community Improvement Association. Deciding that street signs were a necessity, the Association bought lumber, cut, painted and printed the signs. By August, 1924, every block was properly identified with its own sign.

In 1926, with the new drain nearing completion and an impressive list of accomplishments to their credit, the Association decided that it was time to incorporate the subdivision as a village. Ferndale had reached the same decision and tried to talk Oak Park into joining their city, but the voters turned them down flat. The subdivision then petitioned Pleasant Ridge to become part of Oak Park, but were in turn refused.

After many meetings with legal, engineering and financial advisors, a charter and code of ordinances were drafted. It provided for a village form of government with a president to be elected for a one-year term, two commissioners who would be elected for two-year terms, two commissioners to be elected for one-year terms, a treasurer to be elected for a two-year

term, and a village clerk to be elected for a one-year term. Salaries were not high: the president and the commissioners were to receive \$2.00 for each meeting, but not to exceed \$35.00 for the year. (Inasmuch as they met every week, they averaged only 48 cents a meeting). However, the charter provided that when the population of the village reached 1,500 their pay would be increased to \$5.00 a meeting, not to exceed \$60.00 a year. More residents would also mean more tax money to pay the higher salaries.

On March 14, 1927, the Honorable Fred W. Green, Governor of the State of Michigan, approved the charter. The charter commission set May 3, 1927, as the date for election for acceptance or rejection of the charter and for electing village officers.

There is no record of the number of votes cast (there were 98 registered voters), but the charter passed. Charles R. Raine was elected first Village President by virtue of receiving the largest number of votes. James Fisher was easily elected a two-year commissioner, having the next highest number of votes. However, Chester Brill and Clarence O. Kirby each had an equal number of votes and had to toss a coin to decide who would be a two-year commissioner and who would serve for one year; Kirby won. William W. Cameron was elected as the other one-year commissioner. Harold Webber was elected part-time treasurer and Fred G. Yehle became part-time clerk.

The first meeting of the Commission was held in the home of its president on May 16, 1927. Later the Martz and McLaughlin Real Estate Company offered their offices, including three 26-foot lots, as the Village offices in lieu of all Village, County, and State taxes on the property. The Commission would also be responsible for keeping the building painted and in good repair.

By 1928, the Commission was desperate for more office space. There was no money for a new village hall and the Commission could not spend village funds to add to a borrowed real estate office. However, a particularly resourceful village manager, Glendon J. Mowwitt, hired the previous August, came up with an ingenious answer. He found two abandoned real estate offices and an old village voting booth.

In November, a "beautiful" (to the manager and the Commission) sleet storm coated the entire countryside with two inches of ice. The city officials rounded up a group of public minded citizens and the DPW, put skids on the buildings and slid them right down to the village hall. One building became a private office for the manager and the other offices eventually became the police station. The voting booth served as both office space and voting booth. These "borrowed" buildings were destined to be the village hall, and later the city hall, for the next 20 years.

The years 1928 and 1929 were particularly busy ones for the village and its new Commission. The village initiated an ambitious program to develop sewers and water mains. Further, new ordinances had created planning boards and zoning boards which necessitated added personnel. Subdividers, excited by the prospect of a building boom for Oak Park, were adding streets, sidewalks, electricity and other improvements that called for more supervision and inspection by the already overworked and underpaid village employees. Another policeman had to be hired to handle rapidly growing traffic problems brought on by sightseers from Detroit, drunken drivers, young people making "lovers' lanes" out of empty roads and hunters who took advantage of the still large population of small game in the woods.

Despite angry protests, the Village Commission passed the 1929 budget calling for expenditures of \$52,210. By the fall of 1929, the struggling village had fallen on hard times. President Raines and his Commission were involved in a number of scandals arising from charges by irate taxpayers of misuse of funds, illegal collection of taxes, too many law suits against the village for nonpayment of salaries, excessive construction costs for water mains and sewers, a power play by the President to take absolute control of the village, the firing of most village employees by the President for "incompetency," and the illegal election of one of the commissioners who

was not a citizen of the United States. Raines was also accused of making the village the laughing stock of neighboring communities by his activities. Raines faced a recall election and won it by a small majority.

Oak Park was also facing its share of the nation's economic difficulties. Unemployment was high and the County was forcing the village to take care of its own welfare cases. There were more than \$30,000 worth of uncollected taxes on the books and the village had already borrowed \$9,000 against them. Nevertheless, the village was still unable to meet payrolls and the interest on bonds. Anger and unrest grew so great the taxpayers pressured the Commission to investigate the possibilities of annexing the village to Detroit.

It wasn't until 1932 that Detroit expressed an interest in the annexation. By that time Detroit wanted the property for expansion and a bus route to the zoo. They knew that the village was penniless, with thousands of dollars of bonded indebtedness, and expected Oak Parkers to jump at the opportunity.

The pioneer spirit that had settled the area and built the village caused a rebellion. Residents might squabble over political matters and the way the village was run, they might be facing seemingly insurmountable financial problems, but they wanted no part of Wayne County or the City of Detroit. Oak Park was "here to stay," surviving through more storms, payless paydays, bankruptcy, depression, discouragement and frustration, and long and bitter political fights that deeply divided the community. There were several attempts to force the village to revert to township status to end the tax problems. Local county and state officials all agreed that it was the only sane course the people could take. Sane or insane, all such attempts were blocked and Oak Park remained a village.

Good things were happening during these years that helped to balance the adversities. Oak Park was the first municipality to start a fight against the State to recover that portion of State gasoline taxes collected in the village that was not actually needed to pay for the operating and maintenance of state highways. Oakland County also joined the fight. When the Detroit papers took Oak Park's side, the whole state joined the village's cause. Oak Park won the case and achieved a new source of revenue.

In 1932, the Village Commission granted permission for an airport to be built at Ten Mile Road and Coolidge Highway. Huntington Woods and Pleasant Ridge joined to fight against it, and angry Oak Park citizens threatened a tax strike and a law suit. When the State approved the Commission's plans, Oak Park's taxpayers went to circuit court and won an injunction that killed the airport. From then into the 1950's, however, every Village Commission and (later) every City Council continued their attempts to get an airport in Oak Park. Citizens had to continue fighting not only their own local government, but airline companies, the State of Michigan and the Federal Government as well.

The 1932 attempt ended with the land being put to much better use than an airport. The defeated Commission agreed to cooperate with the Ford Motor Company in turning all of that property and other acreage in the village into gardens where the unemployed could grow food. The village donated the use of the land and Ford plowed, disced and dragged it; the land was then divided into lots 50 by 90 feet, each numbered and marked. Watchmen were on duty 24 hours a day to prevent theft. Unemployed people from Oak Park and surrounding communities farmed 700 acres of Oak Park land.

During this period Oak Park's police force was rated "best in the state." This was achieved despite the fact that they had to provide their own cars and guns, and had to spend a disproportionate amount of money from traffic violations to earn enough money for the village to pay their salaries.

The volunteer fire department was also winning kudos from all over the state for their efficiency. Because the village had no money to pay for equipment, the firemen raised their own money and provided all their own equipment, including a fire truck. Swamp fires continued to plague the

village until 1950, when the swamp areas were drained and covered with the construction of business and industrial buildings.

By 1934, the population of the village had grown to 1,079 which was spread over an area of 5.2 square miles. The Commission decided it was time to try to charter the village as a city, which would alleviate the need to pay township taxes and would add to the village's revenues. The charter commission failed to get elected.

Financial troubles and other difficulties continued to plague the village of Oak Park until 1944. The war had brought new industry to the village, which in turn brought new residents and new taxes to the treasury. The village was beginning to pay off its debts and was even able to repay some of its long time, loyal employees (who had gone payless) by giving them small raises and paid vacations. Real estate brokers and builders bought land at state land sales that had been forfeited for inability to pay taxes. Expecting a real building boom, they were buying large parcels for as little as \$40 a lot. These lots would eventually sell for more than \$1000 a lot.

Oak Park began to grow rapidly; new homes were springing up where the year before most of the village land was still wilderness. The Commission appropriated \$55,000 to start a new city hall.

In March, 1945, petitions were again circulated to recharter the village as a city. When the June election results were counted, Oak Park had voted to become a city and had elected as charter commissioners John Malloy, Victor Ketterman, Harry G. Cousins, Fred M. Baker, Charles Reibel, Fred Feole, James Fisher, Sr., Chester Kushler and John Naey. The charter which was drawn up was heralded as the best city charter in the United States and received national commendation. On October 29, 1945, the new charter was accepted by a vote of 283 to 106. John Malloy was elected Mayor and new Councilmen elected were James Fisher, Sr., Fred Yehle, Sr., Paul T. Commerford and Harry G. Cousins. Jens Nielson was elected justice of the peace and James L. Eichen, constable. The new council took over in November, 1945, and in December hired Ernest Neuman as City Manager. He also served as city assessor, police and fire chief, superintendent of public works, and superintendent of welfare. For all of this he received the munificent salary of \$4500 per year.

The building boom picked up and by 1946 houses were going up by the blockful. The old remaining farms were subdivided and the boom continued until the early 1960's, when there was almost no vacant land left in the city.

With 153 years of recorded history behind it, Oak Park will celebrate its 25th birthday as a city on July 4th, 1970. From a tiny farming settlement of 28 dauntless settlers, Oak Park has grown into a thriving city of approximately 40,000 people in an area of something over five square miles. It is so densely developed that there is very little open space other than carefully planned parks. People have been attracted to this well-planned city because of its efficient government and its exceptionally fine school system.

The Oak Park School District is justly famous for the quality of its teachers, staff and its educational program. Between 1950 and 1963, Oak Park added nine schools to the district's original Clinton school house, including six elementary schools, two junior high schools and a senior high school. The latter school sends 85% of its graduates on to institutions of higher learning all over the nation.

Looking forward into the 1970's, Oak Park is about to implement a new master plan that will improve several areas of the city and add to the tax base of the new solvent treasury. Oak Park will continue to have hard fought political battles, but scandal and bitterness are hopefully a thing of the past.

The people of Oak Park are hard at work to improve the environment of their city, the already extensive services to local residents, the educational program of their schools, and a new venture in working with young people. Oak Park is a good city in which to live and raise a family.

M-Th. 10-9
Fri. & Sat. 10-5.30
Sun. (Oct. - May) 1-5

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