

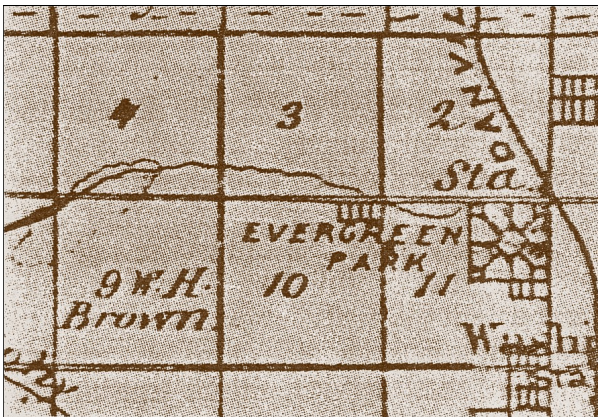
# BLACK OAK AND AFTER

## VILLAGE ADOPTS NEW NAME, GOVERNMENT

*Issue prepared by Gordon Welles, edited by Gerald Anderson*

### BLACK OAK, OAKLAWN, AND OAK LAWN

The earliest known name for the area which became the community of Oak Lawn was Black Oak Grove, later abbreviated to Black Oak or Black Oaks. A German Methodist Society of Blue Island, San Ridge and Black Oak was founded in 1854, suggesting that the name was in use at that time, but no confirmed residents of the area have yet been shown to be members of the church. First official mention appears in the Worth Township records of 1856. Franklin Chamberlain, former Town Supervisor, was paid the handsome



*1876 map view of Oak Lawn still shows the wooded section which caused the area to be called Black Oak Grove. An early subdivision at the center of Evergreen Park can be seen to the east. Line in center of map is 95th Street.*



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fee of one dollar in July, 1859, for work on a bridge in "Black Oak Grove." Chamberlain's home was located near the corner of 95<sup>th</sup> Street and Raymond Avenue. The bridge in question spanned 95<sup>th</sup> Street near 54<sup>th</sup> Avenue allowing travelers to cross the north branch of Stony Creek as they moved from east and west. In fact, for many years the Worth Township section of 95<sup>th</sup> Street was known as Black Oak Grove Road.

It is fitting that Stony Creek should figure in the early recorded history of the locale. Its waters made possible the large stand of oak trees, stretching diagonally to the southwest from 94<sup>th</sup> Street to 98<sup>th</sup> Street along the banks of the creek, which became the outstanding geographic feature of the area.

One of the unresolved questions about the name concerns the change from the informally accepted Black Oak to Oak Lawn. The story is closely associated with the coming of the railroad, a major event in the community's history. Colonel Ralph Plumb, supervisor of a downstate coal mining venture and a founder of Streator, Illinois, entered into a special agreement with several Black

Oak citizens in 1879. The Chicago & Strawn Railroad, a “captive” corporation of the large Wabash, St. Louis & Pacific line, was organized that same year to provide the parent system with a rail connection to Chicago. Plumb’s relationship with the Chicago & Strawn is not precisely understood by the author. However, he is known to have been active in several railroad ventures, often in the capacity of a major shareholder. In any event, he was in a position to promise special considerations to the small settlement. He arranged to have the route of the Chicago & Strawn pass through portions of Worth Township sections 4 and 9 and to have a depot, offering passenger, express and telegraph service, built there. In return, the local residents, principally John Simpson, Franklin Chamberlain and their respective family members, promised Plumb selected lots within the area’s first proposed subdivision to be composed of a portion of their collective farm properties. It was assumed that with the location of a depot here, nearby land would grow in value,



*First official survey of Worth Township, 1836, shows a large stand of timber at the heart of Oak Lawn. the two lines intersecting to it is the present intersection of 95th Street and Central Avenue. Note also the swampy area south of the wooded section (now Oak Lawn Lake) and the course of Stony Creek. Courtesy: Illinois State Archives*

benefitting all parties to the agreement. The first subdivision, not named in the agreement, was to be dubbed “Oak Lawn”; its plat and description were entered into Cook County records July 6, 1882.

Uncertainty surrounds the source of the first use of the name. Based on existing evidence however, the above mentioned local residents have the strongest claim to its origin, at some point between their concluding the agreement with Plumb and late 1880.

According to available court records, the community was generally known as Black Oak at the time of the agreement signing in November, 1879. With the establishment of the postal station at the depot in late 1880, the first recorded attempt at formal adoption of a community name is made. Stationmaster and postmaster Henry Crouch was able to successfully submit the name “Agnes” (in

memory of his wife) as the designation for the train stop, although there is no evidence to suggest that her name was ever associated with the settlement itself. The designation survived until

January 27, 1882, at which time the post office and depot became known as Oak Lawn. As this date preceded by several months the registration of the subdivision in the County records, it initially appears as if the railroad, through its close association with the mail service, might legitimately claim to be the originator of the name. However, the logic of the situation and an additional piece of evidence lead to another conclusion.

The railroad had no stake in determining a name for the community beyond Henry Crouch's wishes. Although no name for the projected subdivision was mentioned in the 1879 agreement, it would seem unusual that the local settlers would accept a name other than one of their own creation. The answer seems to be that the designation "Oak Lawn" was generally promoted by the local subdividers as one suitable not only for their own area but for the entire community which was expected to flourish as a result of the railroad's presence. Their successful lobbying presumably led to a change in the designation of the post office and train depot. Evidence for this interpretation is on the tombstone of John Simpson, who passed away in December of 1880, a year after signing the agreement. The inscription lists his place of residence as "Oak Lawn," predating the postal designation by over a year. It is assumed his family was expressing the wishes of Simpson in putting the newly-coined name over his grave. At the very least, the name was under serious consideration by certain residents, if not the entire community, at that time.

The community's name was the center of still more attention in later years. At the appointment of the Village's fifth postmaster, Henry Krueger in 1895, the official post office listing changed

from Oak Lawn to Oaklawn for reasons unknown.

Over the next half century both spellings were used. Although the single word spelling was used by postal authorities until 1962, the village incorporated in 1909 with the traditional two words as its official name. Apparently, the railroad always retained the two word spelling. After 1909, the original version quickly gained favor, but until local postmaster Otis Dunn successfully petitioned Washington for a change at the behest of several Oak Lawn citizens, the alteration of 1895 was still causing confusion.

## **INCORPORATION AND THE FIRST GOVERNMENT**

Oak Lawn's adventure in local self-government began just over seventy years ago, when the century was young and the management of public affairs was simple and direct. During the interim, our world has changed in many ways. As a result of these changes, we have demanded that our local government assume new responsibilities for a larger number of people. The sophisticated organization which is today the Village of Oak Lawn would scarcely be recognized by the pioneering public officials of our community.

## **ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST**

Unfortunately, documentary evidence of public or private discussions relating to the incorporation of Oak Lawn has not been discovered. In spite of this deficiency, it is still possible to describe some of the prevailing social forces which would have figured in the debate. Contemporary accounts of the period reveal that the burgeoning metropolitan area was quite concerned with the relative merits of creating new governmental units.



The explosive growth of Chicago, particularly among its southwest boundary, was one of the main reasons for the eventual incorporation of Oak Lawn. On June 29, 1888, 120 square miles of unincorporated land populated by 308,000 people was annexed by the city. This area included within it the town of Lake and the settlements of Morgan Park and Beverly Hills. Because of this, nearby Evergreen Park and Oak Lawn were forced to consider their options.

To be sure, annexation had its advantages. The inhabitants of the recently absorbed areas recognized that Chicago offered police and fire protection, as well as the prospect of reliable water and sewer systems which no other communities could match on their own. On the other hand, the relinquishment of sovereignty to the city was not always viewed as beneficial. Long and bitter public arguments preceded most of the period's annexation referendum votes. Chicago was already a large city with its share of vices. The thought of becoming a part of all this must have inspired terrible images in the minds of rural folk who watched helplessly as their former way of life was eclipsed by the hustling, bustling urban society that was Chicago at the turn of the century.

Although the anxious outlying areas had no way of knowing it at the time, the 1880's and the 1890's were the climax of the city's geographic growth. To the southwest (with the exception of Mount Greenwood in 1927) Chicago's boundaries would extend no further. Growth of the public transportation system had been responsible for much of the earlier activity; efficient horse-drawn, cable or electric trolleys branched out like tentacles from the city's center, attracting with them housing construction and new residents. For the

most part, the latter were oriented toward Chicago. They depended upon cheap, fast transportation to get to work "downtown," allowing them to live in less expensive quarters outside the city. When the issue of annexation was raised in the neighboring unincorporated areas served by the transit systems, the new residents (who quickly outnumbered the old-line settlers) had no compelling reason not to formally become a part of the city. Most considered themselves Chicagoans already.

In contrast to the annexed areas, Evergreen Park and Oak Lawn did not have streetcar service (or even much in the way of streets!) at the time the issue of annexation would have been raised. Train service to Chicago was enjoyed by both communities, but it did not attract residents to other areas the way in which streetcars did. Perhaps the people of that time and most importantly the traction companies did not consider the region likely to grow because of its distance from existing trolley lines and the center of the city. Also, the Panic of 1893 and the depression which followed it may have put a damper on the march of Chicago into unincorporated areas.

Moreover, it appears that by the 1890's continuing into the early twentieth century, the growth of small- and medium-sized local industry would have kept much of the existing population from looking to Chicago for employment. Although individuals did commute from Oak Lawn to Chicago during this period, many other opportunities were available. In addition to retail stores and taverns, Evergreen Park boasted factories producing uniforms, boxes, matches and other items. Chicago Ridge was also developing into a manufacturing center. The availability of local industrial

employment, as well as the continued viability of farming, were factors contributing to the independent attitude of the area.

### A POSITIVE RESPONSE

Evergreen Park, feeling pressure from Chicago on two sides, declared its intentions first. In 1894, the majority of voting citizens approved a petition to incorporate. Undoubtedly, this action reduced pressures on Oak Lawn, providing a buffer zone that allowed its residents an opportunity to plan for the future with less threat of imminent annexation. With Chicago effectively blocked by the incorporation of Evergreen Park, what reasons did Oak Lawn residents have to do anything about local government?

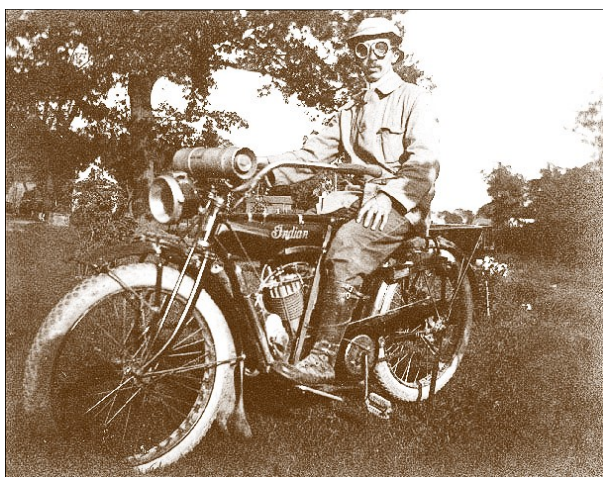
Certain problems still had to be addressed. One of the most persistent difficulties suffered by organized communities was a lack of fire and police

protection. Like neighboring villages, many of Oak Lawn's early dramatic moments center around its fires. Informal ad hoc bucket brigades were normally no match for anything but a minor blaze. William Brandt (1893) and August Behrend (1912), two turn of the century residents, could do nothing but look on in agony as their homes and business establishments were destroyed by flames.

There also was the need for police protection. Chicago's outlying areas became havens for those engaged in all manner of illegal activities. They could operate with little fear of interference or apprehension in the relatively "wide-open" unincorporated communities. On a less serious note, the popularity of the picnic groves in Oak Lawn and nearby settlements drew large crowds which sometimes proved unruly, particularly if their activities included the drinking of alcohol. The immediate call for badges by the Village Marshall and Trustees after the incorporation of Oak Lawn in 1909 illustrates the need to demonstrate the presence of a legal authority with powers of arrest and punishment.

Perhaps of greater importance was the desire to establish service with public utilities in the community, and to make certain Oak Lawn obtained other public improvements. This could only be done through a local government body operating as an agent for its citizens. Although Oak Lawn may not have been interested in becoming as "worldly" as Chicago, it was not inclined to deprive itself of advances in modern technology which could make life a little easier.

In fact, it was the desire for such improvement which may have proved the deciding factor in Oak Lawn's decision to incorporate. Northwestern Gas, Light and Coke Company (now Illinois



*Harry Fletcher, Oak Lawn's first policeman, c1915, astride his Indian motorcycle. Fletcher appears ready to apprehend motorists speeding through the village's "wide open spaces."*

Gas Company) had made arrangements with the Village of Evergreen Park to lay gas lines for residential cooking and lighting in 1909. Apparently, the company promised to do the same for the Oak Lawn area if the community was incorporated by that time. Certainly the offer would have given impetus to public discussion of the opportunity. At any rate, the Village of Oak Lawn was

in existence and prepared to approve a right-of-way for the line in August of that year, when the matter appears in the Village minutes.

## THE INCORPORATION OF OAK LAWN

All of these factors came to a head in 1909 when residents of Oak Lawn petitioned the Cook County Court. They needed to demonstrate that there were at least 300 people in the area bounded by Cicero Avenue, 95<sup>th</sup> Street, Central Avenue and 87<sup>th</sup> Street, and submit a document signed by 30 legal voters to establish the first step in incorporating the village. The petition also called for a referendum to decide the issue. After the petition was approved by the county court, the referendum was held on February 4, 1909, in Larsen's Hall on 95<sup>th</sup> Street. The vote was supervised by Worth Township, while County Court Judge Lewis Rinaker and Township Justices of the Peace Joseph Arns and Jonas Madsen certified the results of the election, which showed 59 in favor of incorporation, with four opposed. At the same time, Judge Rinaker declared that an election of officers was to be set for March 9, again at Larsen's Hall, and to be conducted between 8 o'clock in the morning and seven o'clock in the evening. Notices to that effect were to be printed and posted in public places at least twenty days prior to the election.

Local residents Harry Hilgendorf, Archie Utt and Frank O'Brien were appointed by the Court to serve as judges of the election; Curt Plumb, Harry Phillips and Alfred Singleton were to serve as election clerks. The nominations for office, filed with County Clerk Joseph Haas, resulted in a ballot which listed James Montgomery as the sole candidate for Village President and William Aulwurm as the lone candidate for Village Clerk. Frank Harnew, Johnson Wilson, William



*Larsen's Hall (Oak Lawn Family Shoe Store), 1959.  
The first floor served as an early community meeting place.  
The election creating Oak Lawn's Village Government  
occurred here in 1909.*

Krueger, Carl Benck, A.W. Armstrong and Alfred Singleton were candidates for Village Trustee. With all of the positions uncontested, very little of note occurred prior to the vote. The election results did show that H.C. Marr received five write-in votes for Trustee and that William B. Gaddis received four for Clerk, but both men were greatly outdistanced by the declared candidates.

Almost as soon as the results of the first election were finalized, it was time to begin preparations for the next. According to State Law, the initial election of village officials was valid only until the third Tuesday in April of the next odd-numbered year at which time the village organization was required to hold another election. Thus, as the Board of Trustees of the Village of Oak Lawn met for the first time, March 15, 1909, (at Larsen's Hall) a bit less than five weeks remained before the next call to the polls. Therefore, among the first items of business was the appointment of new election judges and clerks and authorization for the printing and public display of election notices.

In the midst of preparations for the second vote, the "founding fathers" did have an opportunity to discuss a few issues, which shed some light on possible motives for incorporation. Both Fred Schultz and William Brandt, who operated saloons within the incorporated limits, were required to purchase liquor licenses, originally at a fee of \$500 per quarter. It was also decided that no tavern be located within 200 feet of a church or school, that they close by midnight and no dance hall be directly connected with a tavern. On the subject of picnic groves, the Village Board was no less severe; a \$50 fee would be charged by any non-Oak Lawn group which wished to use

the groves and serve spirits. However, no charge would be levied on school or church affairs. Also, every facility used as a dance hall was charged three dollars per event. Other items up for consideration early were dog taxes and control of public decorum at Oak Lawn Lake. The trustees directed that all bathers be clad in a suit covering the body from the shoulders to the knees.

Public improvements other than the introduction of gas to the Village also figured in early agendas. Sidewalks, either of concrete or cinders, were a high priority, as was the bringing of electricity to Oak Lawn from Evergreen Park (1910).

In retrospect, a number of factors spurred the residents of Oak Lawn to incorporate into a Village. The threat of an ever-growing Chicago, which gobbled up huge tracts on unincorporated residential communities, and the need for organized local government to establish modern services and improvements, provided the impetus to create the Village of Oak Lawn in 1909.

## **POLITICAL FACTIONS**

While the original election appeared to be a bipartisan affair; the second vote presents an entirely different picture. Three nominating petitions were filed with the County Clerk, representing what appeared to be three separate political factions vying for power.

The strongest of the three groups, labeling itself as the Citizens Party, put forward a slate of candidates similar to that which was elected almost unanimously a few weeks before. Once again, James Montgomery was listed as candidate for President with Singleton, Benck, Armstrong, Harnew and Krueger running for Trustee positions. Charles Schultz was now candidate for Clerk. William Aulwurm notarized the petition, so



we assume he stepped aside voluntarily. Harry Hilgendorf was put forward as candidate for Police Magistrate. The remaining trustee nomination went to Joseph Covington, former schoolteacher, school district trustee and Civil War veteran.

Although it is difficult to say with any certainty, it appears as if Frank Harnew was the dominant force behind this group, as his name figures prominently on the nomination petition. Judging from his subsequent prominence in public affairs (Village President 1913-1916, 1927-1933; Trustee 1909-1912) it is not unreasonable to assume that his voice exerted considerable influence in the community.

Henry C. Marr, a public-spirited citizen who garnered five write-in votes in the first election spearheaded the creation of a rival Peoples Party who offered candidates for Clerk and Trustee. In addition to Marr, contractor Harry Phillips and Charles Sahs were listed as Trustee nominees, while William B. Gaddis, on the strength of his carrier write-on votes, endeavored to try again for the clerk's job.

The third group calling itself Independent and under the direction of Lester McKee, listed the aforementioned as candidate for Police Magistrate, with Johnson Wilson running for re-election as Trustee.

Very few surprises occurred on election day. With one exception, the entire Citizens Party slate was swept into office. Lester McKee, in successfully battling Harry Hilgendorf for the position of Police Magistrate, was the only candidate among the rivals able to buck the tide.

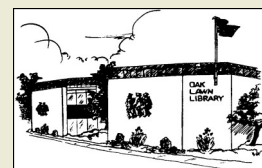
### SOME CONCLUSIONS

Two observations concerning the election are in order. The contentiousness demonstrated by the three-way struggle for power in the newly-created

government proved to be a harbinger of events to come. Oak Lawn's reputation for hard-fought, often bitter, political campaigns stretches back as far as the first regular election.

Secondly, the principal participants in the first general election, including candidates, election judges and petition signers, formed the nucleus of the ruling hierarchy for the next 30 years. In addition to Frank Harnew, James Montgomery (Village President 1909-1912; Trustee 1915-1918, 1922-1929) and initially unsuccessful candidate William B. Gaddis (Village Clerk 1912-1913, 1949-1952; Village President 1917-1920; Trustee 1914-1916) were to figure significantly in the Village's future. Archie V. Utt served as Village Clerk from 1916 through 1927, and many others involved in the initial elections were to distinguish themselves in the service of Oak Lawn.

"THANKS"



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