



Trinity High School Donates a Century of Yearbooks to OPRF Museum

By Frank Lipo, Executive Director

Earlier this year Trinity High School donated more than 60 yearbooks to Oak Park River Forest Museum, including its very first yearbook published in 1921. The donation also book-ended a century with a copy of the 2020 Trinity yearbook.

Included among the yearbooks was a June 1922 souvenir booklet marking the first Commencement Week of Rosary House High School, as it was known then; it features photos of the 28 young women who were the first students to graduate.

While the collection of The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest has grown across its first 50 years by unexpected and unsolicited donations of photos, books, objects and other materials, this important donation demonstrates that the collection also grows when staff and

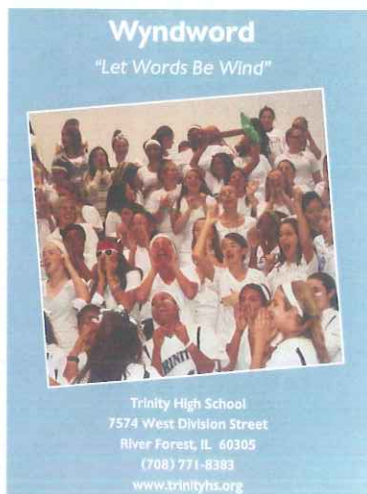
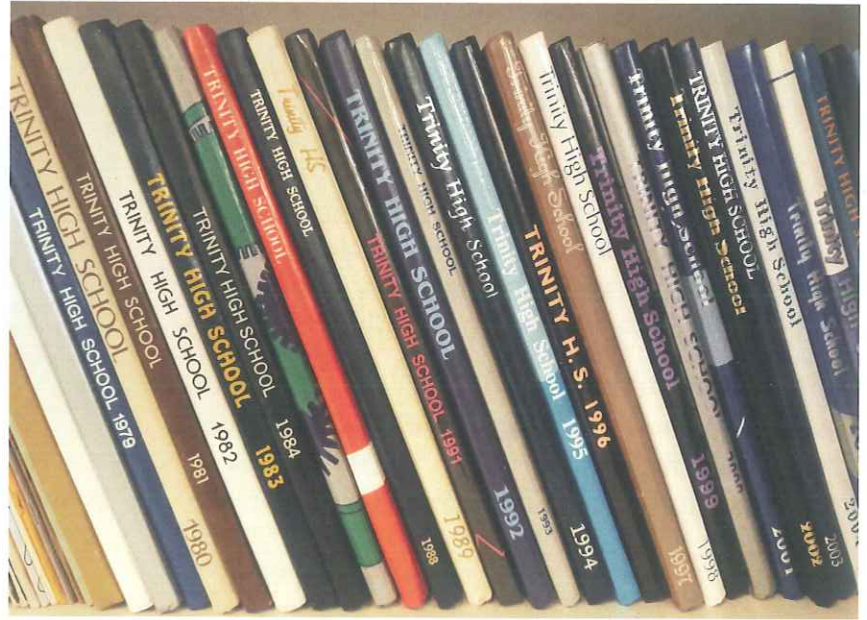
volunteers reflect on gaps in the collection and reach out to the community with specific inquiries seeking donations of important materials.

Since its earliest days, for instance, the Historical Society has been gradually growing its collection of the *Tabula*, the Oak Park River Forest High School yearbook, and now has a nearly complete set with multiple copies for most years. But we realized that we only had a couple of Trinity yearbooks in the collection and decided to reach out to broaden the collection so we could better tell the stories of Trinity High School and its locally unique Roman Catholic, all-girls educational model. That's where long-time volunteer Beth McBride came in.

The River Forest resident and proud 1959 Trinity graduate agreed to reach out to the school administration on behalf of OPRF Museum and sent an email early in the year to Mary Beth Lavezzorio, '82, Director of Admissions at Trinity. Lavezzorio thought it was a great idea to share copies of Trinity's surplus yearbooks and patched in Marigayle Watts Harrington '78, Trinity Director of Alumnae. Working with Trinity's archivist, Harrington boxed up 60 books and contacted OPRF Museum to pick them up.

Trinity officials also supplied a list of years the yearbook was not published (part of the Great Depression and World War II era) and years where Trinity only had

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Title page of 2013 Yearbook

one copy and did not have an extra to give to OPRF Museum. These lists will help the museum fill in the gaps over time and refer researchers directly to Trinity for those years that we lack a copy.



Rosary House stood on Division St. at Forest Ave. on the grounds of Rosary College (now Dominican University). In 1926 the property at Division and Lathrop was acquired and the school was renamed Trinity.

In addition to the universal language of yearbooks (e.g., class photos, clubs, academics, plays, concerts, dances and faculty) the pages reveal changes in fashion, language and hot-button issues. The Trinity yearbook also carried various names through the decades, settling on the name *Wyndword* in 1967. Flipping through the pages is a journey through 100 years of daily life at Trinity and vicariously through the printed memories of thousands of graduates who have left their mark at the River Forest landmark and in their lives beyond.



Officers of the first graduating class of Rosary House in 1922

Do you have Trinity High School memorabilia, photos, or yearbooks that give insight into your experience or the experience of friends or relatives? Call us at 708-848-6755 if you are willing to donate or share copies.

2021 Filled with Indelible Memories as We Share the Stories of Our Villages

By Peggy Tuck Sinko, President

I am so looking forward to 2022! But before we turn the calendar page to the New Year, it's the perfect time to reflect on the accomplishments of 2021. Here are a few indelible memories:



The first-ever official Village of Oak Park commemoration of Juneteenth was a joyous celebration via a car parade and picnic in Taylor Park—and OPRF Museum marked this milestone by developing a Black History Bike Tour featuring 16 places where history happened.



Our spring house walk in Oak Park's Hulbert neighborhood safely adapted our procedures and planning to include masks, social distancing, and expanded outdoor presentations, while allowing interior tours. And planning has already begun for our May 2022 walk in River Forest.

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A beautiful October weekend during which we welcomed 200 visitors to OPRF Museum as part of Open House Chicago, many who had never set foot in our facility. And that was only half the weekend!

We finished it off with the 30th annual *Tales of the Tombstones* walking tour of Forest Home Cemetery with a sell-out of more than 200 visitors, guided by passionate volunteers, soaking in the stories of six notables brought to life by talented actors.



A recent memorable “Ask the Historians” Zoom-based program by Oak Park native Bill Dring (*upper right corner in the above screen shot*) about his passion for Oak Park’s Continental Divide reached a live audience of 40. Like all these free programs it was posted to our YouTube channel; Operations Manager Rachel Berlinski’s talk on local Rock and Roll stories (*below*) has drawn nearly 400 viewers there.



These few stories only scratch the surface of the worthwhile work we do every day. Our not-for-profit organization has been telling stories of Oak Park and River Forest for more than 50 years but paradoxically our focus is on 2022 and beyond, sharing stories that matter today and tomorrow! We have so much important and entertaining work ahead and many more stories to discover, document, and share about the people, places and culture that make our communities so special. And the work of collecting, organizing, caring for, storing, and sharing rare photos and artifacts never ends.

We need to continue to tell our stories--your stories--every week, but we can only do so *with your help*. We are an independent not-for-profit organization and we receive no funding from any governmental entity.

Please support Oak Park River Forest Museum’s good work in the coming year with a generous gift to our Annual Fund by December 31, 2021. (Details at oprfmuseum.org.)

Most of all, we wish to thank you for all you do for OPRF Museum. I hope our paths cross in 2022, whether it is at the corner of Lake and Lombard or anywhere else in the communities that we share, even if it is sometimes a virtual meeting!



History Matters

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We welcome your suggestions and comments. Please email us at: oprhistorymatters@sbcglobal.net

River Forest's Forgotten Place: Edgewater Park

By Frank R. Fiorito

There is a fascination about abandoned places. Ghost towns, with their decrepit buildings and deserted streetscapes, provide a visible framework to use in imagining their past. Lost towns, those wiped away leaving no remaining visible signs, free our imaginations to recreate them without restraints.

Edgewater Park is a forgotten place, but was once a colorful and fascinating neighbor to River Forest.

It's not exactly clear when the first house was built in Edgewater Park. The land was subdivided in 1892. Early maps suggest that its first residents arrived sometime after 1895. We do know that by 1897 the population of this very unusual suburb on the east bank of the Des Plaines River had learned the means of coping with the flooding brought on by the spring rains. Its residents readily adapted to living in "Little Venice" by using boats and canoes to maintain access to their jobs. During the flood season, making a commute to downtown Chicago required floating north to the Wisconsin Central railroad embankment then walking along the tracks to the point they crossed Lake Street. From there a streetcar could be ridden for the remaining leg of the trip to downtown.

Difficult a commute as that might seem, it wasn't much easier during dry season. The only access to Edgewater Park was via Division Street which at that time ran west all the way to the river. It was an unimproved country road that crossed the railroad tracks about 400 feet west of where it dead ends at Thatcher Avenue today.

Access was only possible if there wasn't a train blocking the way. Unfortunately for commuters the Wisconsin Central was an active railroad and its lengthy trains would often stop just short of the Des Plaines to take on water at a large water tank located before the bridge. Watering a locomotive could be a lengthy process and meanwhile the parked train blocked access to the road.

Edgewater Park was definitely not "on the beaten path" as Oak Park's John Farson discovered on one of his evening motoring trips in 1903. The owner of

Pleasant Home and Oak Park's bon vivant millionaire had happened to notice a delivery wagon crossing the Wisconsin Central's tracks into the forest that lay beyond. Curious, he followed the road which was bordered by the tracks on one side and the barbed wire fenced boundary of what was then the Thatcher estate. Coming into a grassy meadow on the banks of the Des Plaines, he encountered a subdivision of 13 homes sited on lots with concrete sidewalks in place and seeming to anticipate many



Legendary local photographer/historian/bicycle repairman Philander Barclay captured this image at Edgewater Park during one of the frequent floods, c. 1902

improvements to come.

One of the homes was in the process of construction by George L. Reeves, a carpenter and resident who would later establish an office at Lake and Thatcher. In 1903 the *Chicago Tribune* account of Mr. Farson's visit reported that Farson, reflecting on the difficulty in finding the place, asked Reeves how people were able to get into and out of the settlement. In reply, Mr. Reeves could only offer,

"Blamed if I know. In a balloon I guess!"

The neighbors all seemed to get along and their children attended River Forest's schools. Not that the neighbors got along well all the time. When resident Mr. Schneider got into a heated argument with his neighbor, Mr. Notter, over the latter's clothes line, the issue resulted in Notter spending some time in the custody of the constable. Mr. Notter's belligerence resulted in his being fined \$5 and court costs.

Its seclusion and limited access made Edgewater Park a somewhat mysterious place and open to behavior that tended towards the scandalous. One could rent a canoe there and enjoy the river, but to the consternation of those righteous prohibitionists in the area, it was suspected that one could also enjoy a drink there as well.

It was no stranger to visits by amorous couples seeking privacy while out for a drive. The morals police were regularly interrupting romantic liaisons well into the 1920's.

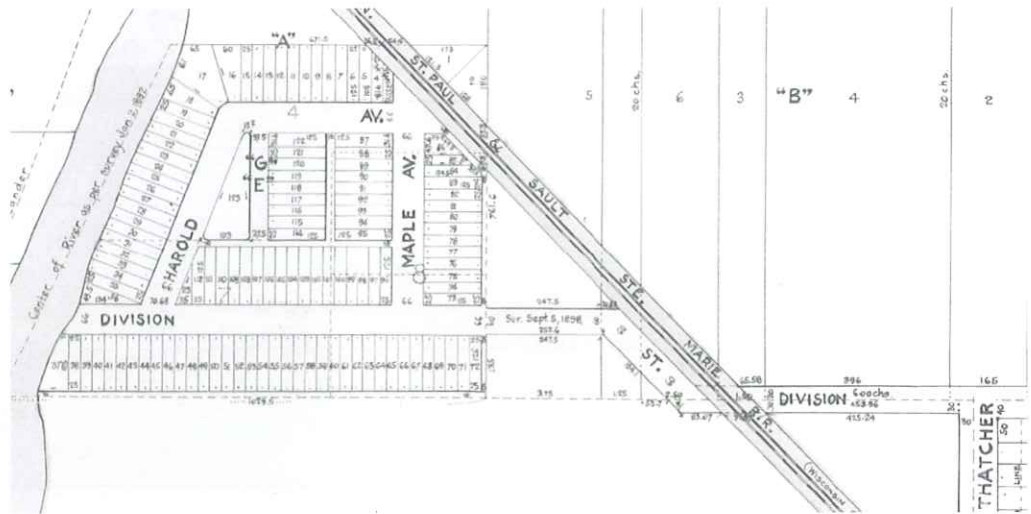
It held an air of danger as well. It was, after all, in the forest. Rabid dogs, suicides, lost children and runaways were all part of its story. Annual flooding was the rule, not the exception, and close proximity to the railroad resulted in the occasional fire as the idling locomotives provided a source of sparks to ignite nearby houses.

In September of 1916, the River Forest Board passed ordinances for underground improvements to the north side of town. These included water mains for Edgewater Park. Though homes, barns, and a general store had been lost to fires due to the lack of water connections and the inadequacy of bucket brigades, the laying of these pipes was objected to by Mr. Buckton Nendick, a resident who would later establish himself as an illustrator of children's books.

We don't know his motivation but, perhaps he was reacting to advancing development that might spoil the serenity of the space or possibly to the likelihood of an increased tax assessment.

1916 was also the year the Cook County Forest Preserve District was founded and by 1917, with Thatcher's woods already bought and paid for, it wasn't long until the problematic Edgewater Park was put on the list for acquisition.


Just as it took 10 years from proposal to voter approval for the formation of the Forest Preserve, regardless of announced intention to do so, acquisition of Edgewater Park would take many years.



Detail from Atlas of Proviso Township published by Real Estate Map Publishing Co. in 1914 showing Edgewater Park as originally planned. Although the area was subdivided into over 120 lots, fewer than a quarter of that number of homes were ever built. (Library of Congress, Geography & Map Division; Washington, D.C.; Control #2018593298.)

River Forest continued making improvements to the subdivision into the late 1920's. Development was continuing and the area was part of a "building boom".

Eventually, Edgewater Park's soggy residents found homes elsewhere and, in the 1930s, the area was fully incorporated into the Forest Preserve.

Today, little evidence remains of this once promising neighborhood. The forest has overtaken the meadow that runs to the river. The homes, sidewalks and streets are long gone, but standing on the banks of the Des Plaines and listening hard you might be able to hear the echoes of the past. 

Housing Crisis Brings Out the Best and Worst in Oak Park

by Kurt Etchingham

The end of World War II saw the United States facing a domestic crisis. The Great Depression had reduced new home construction by over 80%. World War II brought it to a virtual halt. Existing housing had deteriorated badly during the preceding fifteen years, first because of the economic crisis and later because of rationing and diversion of repair materials to the war effort. Now millions of veterans were coming home, hoping to restart their lives; to get married; to start a family; to make a home.

A Congressional study in 1946 estimated the nation would need three million house and apartment units for low to moderate income residents within the next two years. A U. S. Senate report summed up the situation: "The lack of decent housing within the reach of all American families may once have been a national scandal. It is now a national tragedy."

There were an estimated 550 veterans with families living in overcrowded or substandard housing in Oak Park and another 300 long-time Oak Park residents who could not find a place to live in their own hometown when they returned from the war.

Oak Park attacked the problem with the best of intentions. In May 1946 the Oak Park Housing Authority was created to address the crisis. Among the programs the OPHA proposed were: a rent control system to stem the outrageous escalation of rents due to low supply and high demand; a temporary relaxing of zoning laws to allow single family homes to be divided into two or three family residences; an easing of the restrictions on renting coach houses; and, in what soon became the most controversial measure, the construction of temporary housing units on public land for returning veterans and their families.

A Federal Housing Authority program aimed at helping to ease the housing crisis made temporary housing units available at no charge to communities that agreed to cover the cost of erecting the structures and connecting them to public utilities. These government surplus pre-fabricated homes were small, steel-walled 2-bedroom duplexes that had been used during the war for use as temporary housing for military personnel with families. Designed to be erected on concrete slabs, each living unit consisted of two bedrooms measuring about 10 X 12 each, a small living room, a tiny kitchen, a bath, and a utility room

housing a water heater, oil-burning furnace, and utility sink. The total area of each unit was only about 600 square feet.

The Oak Park Housing Authority applied for 55 of these prefab duplexes to house 110 families. The OPHA plan called for the units to be erected on

government-owned land and to be rented exclusively to veterans with families. To qualify for one of these units, the returning veteran had to be (or be married to) an Oak Park resident. The plan specified that these were to be strictly temporary units and that they would be removed within two years of the federal government declaring the housing crisis over.

Public expression of support for the veterans returning from the war was virtually universal, but turning those words into action proved to be more problematic. When the OPHA announced its plans, there was a significant and vitriolic backlash. Many landlords objected to the rent control proposals, some going so far as to take units off the market rather than rent them to veterans at rates below the maximum the market would bear. Others refused to rent to veterans with small children or with jobs the landlord deemed



Temporary housing being erected in Longfellow Park (from Oak Leaves, November 21, 1946)

less than acceptable. A wave of NIMBYism swept across the village, with support for veterans ending where it conflicted with personal interests. Many Oak Park residents thought that relaxing zoning laws, even temporarily, would be detrimental to property values throughout the village. But the most controversial of the OPHA proposals proved to be the plan for erecting temporary housing.

The debate raged over the summer and into the fall of 1946 and it did not show the best side of some Oak Park residents. Handbills, filled with lies, misinformation, and fear mongering, were circulated throughout the village in an attempt to marshal public opposition to the OPHA plans. The claims they made were outrageous: there was a secret federal government plot to take over Oak Park's parks; the Oak Park Housing Authority planned to make the units permanent subsidized housing; they would be occupied by "trash from outside Oak Park"; they would become breeding grounds for crime and violence; children would not be safe playing in the parks; housing values throughout the village would be ruined forever.

A supposed "grassroots citizens' committee" (which was actually organized and led by a group of real estate brokers and rental property owners) showed up at public hearings to oppose the OPHA

plans. They were countered by a coalition of veterans, veterans' fraternal organizations, and citizens who felt a duty to support and help the returning vets. The debate was heated. At one such meeting, George Kautz, a leader of the opposition to the temporary housing, stood up to say that he didn't believe any self-respecting veteran would want to live in such "hovels." An anonymous recently returned soldier and Oak Park resident rose in response to observe that,



These prefabricated WWII duplex housing units that still stand in Charlestown, Indiana, are almost identical to those that were built in Oak Park

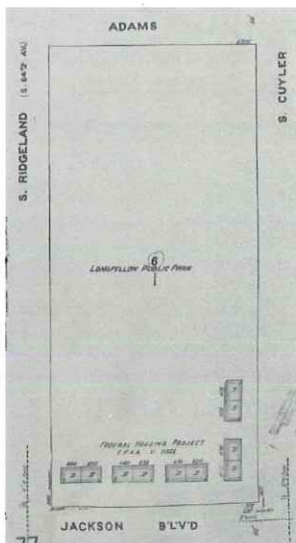
after living in foxholes across France and Germany for a year, those hovels looked pretty good to him. David Clutterham, a Navy veteran and Oak Park native, noted that spending three years serving on submarines had made him used to tight quarters.

Ultimately, the veterans and their supporters carried the day and the OPHA plan for temporary housing moved forward, although the number of family units was scaled back from 110 to 74 (37 duplexes) because of a shortage of federal funding.

Installation of the first units began in November 1946 with five duplexes erected on the south end of Longfellow Park along Jackson Boulevard and Cuyler Avenue. Other locations soon followed: six units along LeMoyné Avenue in Lindberg Park; three units in Carroll Playground at the northwest corner of Fillmore and Kenilworth; seven units in Eugene Field Park, four on the north end along Berkshire and three on the south end along Division; seven units on village-owned land on the north side of Garfield between Highland and Harvey; and nine units on an undeveloped plot of land on North Avenue between Ridgeland and Edmer.

In the end, the fear mongering and panic peddling was proven wrong. None of the predicted social problems arose and the veterans' housing was indeed temporary. The first units to be demolished were those in Lindberg Park in November 1953. The last units removed were the ones on North Avenue and Ridgeland. They were razed in January 1955, less than 8 years after they were erected.

Do you have any photos or memorabilia of the Oak Park temporary housing units? If so, OPRF Museum would love to have copies for our archives if you would like to share them. Please contact Rachel Berlinski at (708) 848-6755.



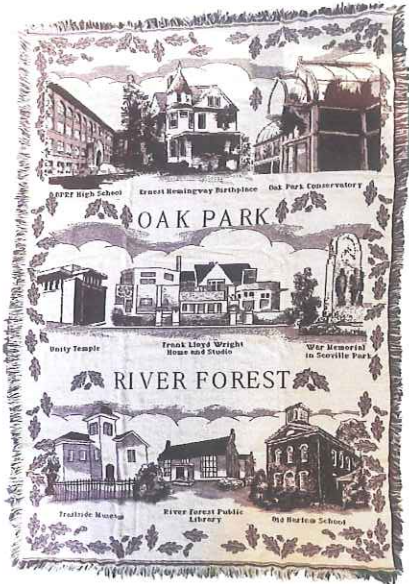
Detail from a 1950 Sanborn Fire Insurance map shows where the temporary housing units stood in Longfellow Park



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