

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF OAKLAND COUNTY TO THE 1960s

Oakland County was formally created on March 28 1820, by virtue of an executive order from Lewis Cass, territorial governor of Michigan. The United States had acquired what would become Oakland County from Native Americans by virtue of the 1807 Treaty of Detroit. Survey and settlement was delayed by the War of 1812 as well as a widely held belief that the Michigan Territory was generally swampy and very poor land for settlement. Lewis Cass and others were determined to counteract that representation. The early exploration and creation of Oakland County was a part of that process.

Nonetheless, migration into the county was slow. It wasn't until the mid-1820s that serious migration began. By this time evidence to counteract the negative reputation of Michigan land had spread. In addition, New York's Erie Canal had been completed and the steamboats had begun operating from Buffalo to Detroit. Migration to Michigan peaked in the mid-1830s and for a few years "Michigan Fever" was rampant. It all came to a screeching halt following the Panic of 1837 and subsequent depression that lasted well into the 1840s.

In this phase of Michigan's settlement, the people who came to the state and certainly to Oakland County were principally from western New York. Given its location in the eastern part of the state and close proximity to Detroit, Oakland County filled up rapidly. The population essentially peaked in 1860 with about 40,000 and grew only very slowly throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was a major agricultural county in the state with very little manufacturing. With the land fully occupied by 1860, new settlers by passed the county and most offspring of the early settlers found farm land elsewhere...or moved to the growing American cities.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century Oakland County was a diversified agricultural area of generally modest sized farms. Grains, hay, cattle and dairy products, hogs and potatoes were standard products of county farms with few people specializing any one thing. After 1850, however, apple orchards and sheep became especially important. Michigan was a national leader in both products and Oakland County was consistently among the top two or three counties in sheep raising, wool production and apples.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century things began to change. First of all, the proximity to Detroit made the county's abundant lakes a natural destination for vacationers as well as the site for many prosperous Detroiters to build weekend and summer retreats. Fishermen, cottagers, resorts, summer camps...all helped change the face of Oakland County.

Second was the growing industrial capacity in Pontiac. As it did in other parts of the country, carriage making, an important business in Pontiac in 1900, morphed into early automobile manufacturing. This resulted in two successful manufacturers that survived the early waves of automotive bankruptcies: Oakland (later Pontiac) Automobile and later Yellow Truck and Coach (eventually acquired by General Motors and renamed GM Truck and Coach). These two companies continued to grow and drew supporting auto suppliers to the area as Pontiac mirrored the rapid growth of its larger southern neighbor, Detroit.

Third, the coming of the interurban and later the automobile gradually began to turn Oakland County, especially the Southeastern portion, into a bedroom community for Detroit. This was especially the case as the auto industry exploded in Detroit after the coming of the Model T. The growth of the auto industry also changed the demographics of the county as more and more workers were drawn to the auto plants

of Ford, General Motors, Chrysler and others. Most of these migrants to Oakland County seem to have come from southern states and included a significant number of African-Americans. Like large manufacturing centers all over the North, Pontiac played its part in the Great Migration.

This pattern essential continued until the Great Depression, at which point the economy took a deep dive...more severe in southeastern Michigan than almost any other part of the country. Pontiac, in particular, suffered a great deal during the 1930s. Under these circumstances, the county, like much of the country, experienced a ten year pause in development.

The coming of World War II ushered in significant changes that made modern America. Led by the Pontiac Motor, General Motors Truck and Coach and Fisher Body plants in Pontiac, the county contributed a great deal to the war production miracle known as the Arsenal of Democracy. Among other things, Oakland County produced over 60% of 2 ½ ton trucks that carried Eisenhower's army onto the beaches of Normandy and across Europe.

War time production and the demand for labor resulted in a resumption of the migration to the county from southern states that had been interrupted by the depression. This included, of course, a large number of African-Americans. The demand for labor forced manufacturers, the United Auto Workers and the Federal government to promote anti-discrimination policies that helped African-Americans gradually achieve greater economic equality than had previously existed. That increased prosperity helped advance the civil rights movement in the region.

The post-war, baby-boom years and the associated demand for automobiles ushered in a period of great prosperity. The emergence of a suburban lifestyle was, perhaps, more evident in Oakland County than in almost any other place in the country. Through the 1950 and 60s, the auto industry fueled the country's economic engine almost unabated and much of that wealth found its way into Oakland County. In the immediate post-war years, the great demand for housing prompted the massive construction of relatively small Levittown-type bungalows north of Detroit. By the sixties, however, continuing prosperity led to the construction of larger ranch, tri-level and colonial style homes built in subdivisions carved out of former farms outside of the densely populated areas in the southeastern part of the county.

Much of this growth was made possible by the Interstate Highway system which began in the mid-fifties and moved to completion in the mid to late sixties. In Oakland County, I-75, I-696 and I-96 made it practical for people to work in Detroit and live virtually any where in the county.

Another feature of the suburban explosion was the growth of shopping centers around the county. Beginning with Northland in Southfield, they changed the way people shopped, putting great pressure on downtown retail districts and ultimately destroying the character of many "downtown" districts.

As the Sixties wore on, however, things were about to change in the United States, Oakland County and within the auto industry, the economic foundation for much of the county's prosperity.