

Centennial Reflections

*Essays from the
Oakwood Historical Society*

How Oakwood avoided annexation with Dayton

By Harry G. Ebeling

How did Oakwood retain its' status as a first-tier suburb, independent of Dayton? When you think about it, three square miles nestling right at Dayton's doorstep was a challenge, especially in the 1920's when things were bustling in both communities. Dayton was expanding in all directions and by 1925 had adopted a policy of annexation to expand its tax base and attract business and professional leaders. The Montgomery County Historical Society covered the era in its Journal in a 1990 article which referred to Oakwood rather unflatteringly as "a stockade on the urban frontier".

In 1924, Dayton created a Plan Board, and urged by the Chamber of Commerce, retained a consultant and adopted a policy of annexation of a 6.75 square miles of township land which also included Oakwood. (Ed. Note – retained a consultant – some things never change) A battle plan was adopted in 1926 and City Manager Eichelberger sent out fifteen invitations to "prominent Oakwood gentlemen" to meet to discuss the possibility of consolidation. Mayor Oscar C. Olt received one, and sent Councilman Lowell Rieger as his representative. Charts and data were prepared for a presentation and the group agreed to meet again with an expanded list of 29 people. The sales pitch on six charts and fact sheets emphasized mutual dependence and claimed benefits. It stressed that Oakwood could maintain a separate school system which had been a main bone of contention. They agreed that Mayor Olt should call a meeting at town hall to discuss the issue publicly. The meeting was never called.

Dayton pursued six unincorporated areas and after negotiations annexed them in 1930, Dayton's attorney, Mason Douglass, urged returning to the Oakwood discussions and again an informal campaign of meetings was scheduled. Learning of the plan in advance, Rieger had attorney Harry P. Jeffrey, a resident, attend the preliminary get together to find out what was planned. Many participants spoke against the proposal, even threatening to move if consolidation were adopted. Jeffrey reported back to the Council, which discussed the matter and told Rieger not to attend.

At a second meeting, six of ten invited guests attended. Among the supporters of the consolidation were residents Robert Elder (President of Elder & Johnston), Frederick Patterson (President of NCR), and Oscar Reemelin (head of electrical division of DP&L), who all acknowledged that it would be a hard sell. They thought that Oakwood should have a series of small meetings on the subject. The battle lines seemed to develop between the westsiders and the "plateau dwellers" of the east side. Six weeks later a group of 47 predominantly eastsider residents purchased a full page advertisement in "The Oakwood Tidings" opposing the consolidation. Dayton pressed for an official meeting, which was flatly refused. Eichelberger released his written response in the Dayton papers in which he decried the intransigence of Oakwood.

Undaunted, Dayton held two more meetings at which such leaders as Fred Rike urged a petition to force a vote. Nothing happened and in September Council voted to close the door to further discussion. Later that year, Mason Douglas scolded Oakwood on a local radio station. Three months later Oakwood, now boasting a population of 6,467, was chartered as a city, doubtless pushed by the annexation efforts, and the matter was ended. The author of the article concludes with some dated ruminations regarding the east/west divisions, and summarized with, "The stockade held, and the majority of Oakwood gloried in their independence".

A look at the city map outlining annexations, shows that 22 acres were annexed in the northwest corner of the city, encompassing the old Kramer Winery property, some parcels on West Schantz Avenue, the Beth Abraham Cemetery and Sugar Camp in 1928, just before the rejection of Dayton's bid.

This was not the end of speculation about Oakwood's size however, because just days after the formal acceptance by the Secretary of State of the new status as a city, The Dayton Daily News carried a story about a rumor that Oakwood had its eyes on expansion. The new borders were to be Stroop Road on the South, the Pennsylvania Railroad on the east, and Southern Boulevard on the west, which would include the "fashionable Short Hills". It was said that the new city was casting a desiring glance on Southern Hills, formerly Carrmonte, which could include Community Golf Course. This would have created a problem for the City of Dayton which owned the courses and also coveted the area.

The rumor allowed the newspaper to recap the history of Oakwood as largely a history of the development of Oakwood's water supply.

The Oakwood Power & Light Co. was created with private capital around 1905, and sold to the village in 1919. The water tank formerly on the Wright Brothers property was torn down and the new one built on Ridgeway Road replaced it when the city took over the water supply. The article goes on to recite that "The romance of Oakwood the city reads like a chapter of the history of the gold rush off '49.... Per Capita assessed valuation of Dayton property is slightly less than \$200, that of Oakwood a little under \$400". Robert T. Houk, Sr. interviewed for the article, recalled the discussions at the meeting where incorporation as a village was decided, that a proposal to dedicate a strip of land one foot wide on the northern border to prevent encroachment by Dayton was considered but not thought necessary. Judge John A. McMahon was called for legal advice, and seemed to favor it, but the city fathers thought that isolation from the then-distant city was not necessary.

In anticipation of the incorporation of Kettering in 1954, Oakwood petitioned the County Commission in 1953 to annex 22.8 acres of Van Buren Township which took in Runnymede Road and Deep Hollow dominated by the Nelson Talbott estate, Janet Gardner and five other properties. Although turned down previously, it was granted in March, before the Kettering vote.

In the years between 1928 and 2006, there were three annexations along the western border. With the acquisition of the Old River playing fields of some 20 acres and the desire to make Sugar Camp adequate for development, Oakwood annexed 3.05 acres along the old canal bed adjacent to the project for street purposes. Oakwood owns but has no plans for annexing the Old River property, and owns but cannot annex the baseball field and the water well property on Irving Avenue, being not contiguous to the city.

