

Centennial Reflections

*Essays from the
Oakwood Historical Society*

The history of the Oakwood Community Center

By Harry G. Ebeling

Among the many services we enjoy in Oakwood are those provided by the department of Leisure Services. Beginning in 1919 as The East Oakwood Club in the building at Patterson Road and East Schantz Avenue, this branch of our city is of rather recent origin. Now known as the Oakwood Community Center (O.C.C.), it was originally envisioned by developer Walter Shafor as an attraction for buyers to his adjacent Park Hill Plat. John H. Patterson saw an opportunity for people of the growing community to have a social club much the same as a country club. Shafor used the services of architect Ralph Rossell who designed many of the houses in Park Hill. In 1921, Patterson donated \$4,000 to buy the land and a non-profit corporation was formed to take title to the property and assuming a \$25,000 mortgage. The agreement was that local citizens would raise \$2,500 toward the building which he would match. They not only did so, but also raised another \$2,000, and Patterson chipped in \$500 toward furnishings. The property consisted of four acres, sufficient for the building, four tennis courts and a playground.

The club established committees to plan events which consisted of Saturday dances for youth and Tuesday dinners for adults, Bob Nevin, Sr. recalled in an oral history that the dinners were prepared by a donated domestic servant, Georgia, and her husband, John. The music for dancing was by "The Harmony Four." It was the place to go and be seen in the 20's. Other programs provided daytime entertainment and recreation. The early history of St. Paul's Episcopal Church recalls that the club was rented for a brief period for a weekday church school. A non-sectarian Sunday school was also conducted there.

The club was a victim of it's own success. The subtle hand of John H. Patterson was gone after 1922. In 1928, a petition was circulated by local residents to stop the dances because of the noise late at night. The corporation deeded the property to the city in 1928 and went out of business. The city, not bringing in the recreation business and faced with the Depression, did nothing with the building in the 30's, but did maintain the playground and tennis courts. Tennis boomed as a sport in Oakwood and became a signature part of our lifestyle.

During WWII it housed the local draft board and was looked after by Police Chief Farler who rented an apartment on the Schantz Avenue side. After the war, a group of young people obtained permission to use the basement for a wrestling ring built with volunteer labor and donated materials. In 1947, the Oakwood Community Council, a group of 21 members representing church, school, and civic organizations tried to obtain control of the building as a youth center. City Council rejected the request by a 4 to 1 vote and the issue became political. The group put up three candidates, Ruth Mayne, Charles Graham, and Robert Smith for city council in the 1947 election. Earl Storms, council president, declared the entire thing a "political football," and said that the junior high

gym was available for such things. The challengers lost but a committee was created to investigate the matter and reported that there was a need with no substantial opposition. So, in 1949, the council entered into an agreement and lease with the Y.M.C.A. providing for a co-educational program.



Director Gil Martin with youngsters on front steps of Oakwood YMCA (circa 1960).

The "Y" prospered under Directors Kenneth Simpson and Gil Martin with paid memberships, donations, and support from the Central Y, including \$80,000 for capital improvements in 1958. In 1969, William Gardner and his wife, joined by the E.T. Gardners, offered a gift to the community in memory of their son, William, Jr. (Billy) who died unexpectedly at age 17. The Gardners specified 28,500 sq. ft. in the park, adjacent to the tennis courts, and a "Z," shaped pool, bathhouse, snack bar, and office. The usual public concerns were expressed and counter-proposals were suggested, but after four months it was added to Oakwood. A community recreation committee was created to oversee the parks, including the new Creager Soccer Field.

By 1986, the Metro Y wanted to get out of the suburban branches it had been sponsoring for 36 years. There were deferred maintenance issues which it could not handle. The city took over the facility, including the pool in February 1987 and committed \$86,344 to repairs.

The Y paid for recreation and pool equipment. The newly established Leisure Services Department took over the operation of the building, pool, and program. The interim director was Jerry Neff, who had a 15 member advisory board.



The original tennis court had turf surface and no fencing.

In the first year, the city spent \$60,000 in repairs to the building and it was estimated that it would take another \$100,000 for remodeling and adding restrooms. In January 1989, after spending \$350,000 on the structure and equipment, it was dedicated and new programs were initiated under the director, Marilyn Court. Over the years classes have been added for seniors and sports teams have been sponsored. After several years, Diane Hoover became the Director of the Department of Leisure Services with responsibility for activities in all the parks while continuing her role as horticulturist.

The staff has grown to five full time and four part time employees with 40-50 working in the summer pool and sports programs. There are Junior and Senior High Teen Boards as well as annual events such as the Family Festival, the scarecrow competition, and the holiday lighting of the boulevards. The biggest increase in the responsibility of the department has been the addition of the leased facility at Old River Park which attracts soccer players and organized tournaments.

Oakwood city government has come a long way in size and in its undertaking of services for this citizens since Walter Shafor and John H. Patterson.