

A Brief History of Our Community

From an oral recollection told by Mr. John King - December 1992

I have lived in this subdivision for over thirty-two years. I have been very active in trying to maintain the residential quality of the subdivision and uphold the legality of the deed restrictions as they were originally conceived and written. While doing research to uphold those restrictions I have learned a good deal about our community's history.

The area was platted in 1914 and is the oldest platted subdivision in Oakland County. The early history goes back to the 1840s or so when various parts of the subdivision were homesteaded under the Federal Homestead Act. In the last years of the nineteenth century there were several small farms on what is now our subdivision.

About 1900 or thereabouts, a group of local investors decided to purchase the entire area that is now the subdivision and make it into a model dairy farm. The products were to be sold in downtown Detroit. The venture was not a success as far as I can tell.

In 1913, Mr. Judson Bradway, a prominent subdivider in the area, together with some other investors purchased the entire parcel which is now known as Bloomfield Estates. In 1914 the group laid out about 125 two acre building sites and advertised them for sale. The building and deed restrictions were set up one year later, in 1915.

Mr. Bradway was unusually farsighted in creating the Bloomfield Estates Subdivision and safeguarding for future generations the land for use as residential only with the careful use of deed restrictions. He also masterminded communities such as ours in other locations.

Building started about 1918 on some lots in the area and the new owners formed the Bloomfield Estates Improvement Association. In this early history of our community several attempts to strike down the original deed restrictions were successfully opposed and to this date, despite a number of major lawsuits, no deviation has been allowed to the requirements of the deed restrictions.

Nothing much happened in the subdivision until 1925 or 1926 when the State of Michigan decided to widen Woodward Avenue to eight lanes from Birmingham to Pontiac. At that time the Grand Trunk Railroad ran up the eastern side of the old two lane Woodward Avenue and there was a two lane interurban railroad in what is now the middle of the road. Some of the old rails of the interurban are still in place in the right-of-way.

The state condemned a new right-of-way for the Grand Trunk, at its present location parallel to Kensington Road, from Royal Oak to Pontiac, and gave it to the railroad in exchange for the right-of-way the company held on Woodward Avenue. This restructuring caused several lots in the subdivision to be lost to the railroad, modified or landlocked.

It's interesting to note that before the railroad moved, there were some twenty passenger trains per day stopping at the Birmingham station and one could get on a Pullman car and go anywhere in the United States from Birmingham. Also, there were some forty to fifty freight trains a day utilizing the same Woodward line.

Going way back in history, our entire area was once underwater. After the last Ice Age, we were first a lake, Lake Maumee, and then a bay of Lake St. Clair, before the water receded. Water and ice formed our area and left numerous bogs, ponds and small lakes.

Our pond, originally called Bloomfield Lake, has always played an important role in our community. Early maps show the pond and the adjacent common area clearly. It likely provided water for fire protection in the new subdivision as city water did not come to the area until 1962.

Also at the head of the pond there was an earlier attempt made to set up a mineral water bottling works of some kind. A small plant was located directly across the street from the pond on what is now Charing Cross Road. This enterprise did not succeed but the casing for the well, from which I believe the mineral water was to be pumped, was still in place several years ago and may still be there.

In the early 1930s, during a WPA project, the pond caused quite a stir. With funding from the Government Work Project office and some limited Association money a work crew was hired to clean out and deepen the pond and build a stone wall around it. While digging the crew found the remains of a young mastodon and with the help of the Cranbrook Institute the bones were

successfully removed to the University of Michigan where they were put on display. (See accompanying story: The Bloomfield Hills Mastodon)

But that was only part of the excitement. The peat and rich organic soil being removed from the pond were sold to the Bloomfield Hills Country Club for golf course maintenance and one of the members of our Association was accused of taking the money from the sale for his own benefit rather than the good of the community. He became enraged and destroyed many early records of the Association so there is a considerable lapse in the recorded history of the neighborhood.

The golf course at Springdale Park has a bit of an interesting history. Originally it was a picnic area donated to the township by a long forgotten benefactor. It wasn't developed into a golf course until later. When Birmingham and Bloomfield Township split up, Birmingham received the area as part of the settlement. Additionally, three of our subdivision's original lots on Strathmore Road were seized for back taxes owed during the Depression and the acreage was ceded to the park.

In many ways it has been the legal battles that have defined our subdivision. From the earliest residents grouping together and forming the BEIA to the continued struggle to maintain a particularly wonderful area. We have always fought the good fight and won.

Except once. In 1950 the Association opposed the installation of High Tension electrical lines on the Grand Trunk right-of-way. While technically not a item covered by our deed restrictions the residents felt it was a safety issue. A federal court did not see fit to stop the process because of our environmental objections. But I bet they would today.

All other actions have been settled or decided in our favor. Most problems occur from lack of familiarity with the deed restrictions and involve homeowners wishing to change setbacks, side lot distances and so forth. Generally the owners willingly modify their plans to conform to the rules; sometimes legal action must be taken.

Not all actions are small and neighborly however. A major action occurred in the 1960's around lot number two. This is the lot to the right of the pillars as you enter Charing Cross Road from Woodward. A church group attempted to have the restrictions overturned so they could build a church on one lot and then purchase another lot for the parking area. My wife and I took a very active part in researching the history of the area and the subdivision for the Association's defense. We won the case in Circuit Court. The ruling was appealed to the Supreme Court which upheld our deed restrictions and our position.

In another instance, we had a case where the Woodward Avenue half of a split lot that fronts on Longmeadow was owned by children of a former resident of the subdivision. They sued on the grounds that our deed restrictions were too restrictive, and that there had been other deviations in their enforcement in the subdivision.

Again I was named as a defendant on the part of the Association and we expended a considerable amount of funds. I testified at great length in the Circuit Court as to the history of the subdivision and how the deed restrictions had never been broken in any respect. Again we won a major case in the Circuit Court. The verdict was appealed to the newly created Court of Appeals which likewise found in our favor. The Supreme Court refused to review the case on the grounds of our previous successes.

Because of these major cases and numerous smaller ones, we have a very strong legal precedent which has been established for the viability of the deed restrictions and for the spirit with which they were created.



(Editor's Note: The Board would like to thank Mr. King for his years of service and dedication to our community and for his time and help with this historic overview. The Association maintains records of the subdivision and they are accessible though our Historical Records Committee.)