

POST-WAR DUNE ACRES

DUNE ACRES HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Some aspects of post-War Dune Acres have been written about in previous occasional papers -- the Park Purchase plan, development of the West End, changes in mail delivery. This paper will look at that time again, touching briefly on those matters and a number of others, but from a more focused point of view. In retrospect, the years between the end of World War II and about 1960 stand out as a distinct period in Dune Acres history, and that is the point of this paper.

The Town had been incorporated in 1923, and through World War II was chiefly a summer resort, with life centering on the hotel, restaurant, golf course and beach. There were only 9 or 10 houses open through the winter, and mail was delivered only from June 1 to September 15, as late as 1946. Then, in the "long decade of the '50's" ("long" because we use that phrase to describe the period from 1945 to 1960), Dune Acres expanded rapidly both in terms of its organization as a town and geographically as the West End was developed and outlying areas were brought within the town limits through annexation. The atmosphere was one of steady growth. Then came the '60's. The great conflict came to a head over how land on Lake Michigan was to be used -- for industry, for conservation, or for residences. Residential use as in Dune Acres had very low priority in this battle of giant forces. Through the '60's and '70's, Dune Acres was pushed and pulled and sometimes nearly destroyed by the effects of industrialization, the demands from conservationists, and even from a lawsuit which alleged the Town had no legal basis for its existence. All in all, the "long decade of the '50's" was different from the time before and after.

The population after the War was small, but growing. In the 1940 census, there were 46 year round residents (adults and children); in 1950, there were 86; and by 1960, the number had grown to 250. In 1950, there were 50 houses, by 1960, close to 100. The effect was still of small clusters of houses scattered through an extensive wood. Even with growth, the sense of community formed in the summer colony days before the War persisted. The hotel and restaurant were gone, but the town Social Committee had been formed and promoted a vigorous social life. There were regular pot luck dinners at the Clubhouse, and at Christmas, the gala, bang-up Black Tie dinner at the Spa.

The community spirit was demonstrated in 1952 when almost 200 acres of woodland and marsh lying on both sides of Mineral Springs Road, running South of East Road were purchased by public subscription (see map attached, and Occasional Paper #5). The land was in two parcels owned by developers, one in Chicago, the other in Valparaiso, who proposed to plat them as subdivisions. The Town itself did not have the taxing or bonding capacity to buy the land so a committee of property owners was formed to raise the purchase price -- altogether over \$50,000 (several hundred thousand dollars in 1997 dollars). Once the land had been acquired, a committee was set up at once to raise still more money to establish the present playground along East Road. Very shortly, a tennis court, playground equipment, a baseball diamond and a basketball backboard had been constructed.

Somewhat earlier, an ordinance had been passed which allowed the hiring for the first time of deputy marshals. Deputies were added as the Town could afford them, but 24-hour coverage, 7 days a week lay many years, indeed decades, ahead. In the summer of 1958, traffic rules were established, and two years later, the now familiar Dune Acres windshield stickers were added. It was all immensely more efficient than in the early days -- but not completely fool proof. For a time around 1960, for example, there was a sign at the gatehouse which read, "Please come to a complete halt. The marshal has cataracts and cannot see well." Not long after that a newly hired deputy who insisted on wearing a loaded revolver shot himself in the foot. He sought employment elsewhere in a less dangerous position. But despite all such tales, the marshals and deputies were responsible figures on whom the residents relied for much more than guard service. Art Johnson, and his

successor as marshal, Russ Brocksmith, are fondly remembered from those years. In that time, too, Bob Greer became an indispensable figure in town life. His equipment kept up the roads, cleared snow, prepared building sites, put in steel walls on the beach against the rising Lake. No one since has quite provided the all round support that he gave the Town and the residents until he retired in 1977.

One may remember from a previous paper (#5), that in 1958 the Post Office proposed to deliver mail to individual houses and that required the naming of the streets and numbering of the houses. Names were chosen in local meetings, and then put into a Town ordinance -- there were no streets, however, but rather roads, drives and lanes, according to size and function. General Telephone greatly expanded its equipment and service, but on a scale of 1 to 10, it had not reached 10. One customer called the company and said, "I wish to make a complaint." The operator replied, "Oh dear, we get a lot of those." On the other hand, the operators were local and not responding from Enid, Oklahoma, or Rock Hill, South Carolina. Better guard service, telephones, maintenance of the roads were falling into place as Dune Acres became more organized. And, very importantly, the West End opened up; West Road was built and the land lying along West Road, Hill Drive and Summit was platted (see #5).

With the whole Calumet area booming, the Dune Acres Plan Commission (established in 1951, as was the Board of Zoning Appeals), became concerned about what could happen to those lands adjacent to the town but outside its limits. To the south and west of the Town limits were vast stretches of land that seemed a target for developers. On either side of Mineral Springs Road lay wetlands and woods that could be exploited for commercial or industrial purposes, in prospect a highly undesirable intrusion between Dune Acres and Highway 12. The Plan Commission turned for advice to one of the top men in the field of planning, whose office was in Chicago -- Dennis O'Harrow, Director of the American Society of Planning Officials. Although Dune Acres was hardly even a village in terms of population Mr. O'Harrow recognized its great beauty and unique qualities and agreed to advise the Town. The Plan Commission had hoped to gain control (not ownership) of development between the Town and Highway 12 and perhaps even along Highway 12. O'Harrow's advice was to annex these lands, except for those on Highway 12, and pass zoning restrictions for them. The Commission's goal was to zone the whole area residential, making the use compatible with that in Dune Acres. But O'Harrow had extensive knowledge of what would or would not be approved by the courts and advised the Commission that that kind of single-use zoning within an entire town would never be approved. The courts would require a commercial area and, even worse, an area zoned for industry. His judgment was that if the Town did nothing, these developments would take place anyway and haphazardly. It would be better to annex the lands, zone them in a way to get legal approval and set standards for commercial and industrial development that Dune Acres could abide. This is in fact what was done. The lands to the South Shore right of way and west to include parts of what is now the site of NIPSCO and Bethlehem Steel were annexed. A Master Plan was adopted for Dune Acres in 1959 which included areas in the annexations zoned for commerce and industry. If followed through, this could have brought substantial changes to Dune Acres. But the Town was saved by the march of events. When the National Lakeshore was established, those areas were included in the new national park. There was one provision of the 1959 Master Plan which did survive: the required width for a building site was raised from the 80 feet of the original platting to 100 feet.

By the end of the 1950's Dune Acres had become a fully organized municipality. It was, though, a distinctive municipality, with a Town Social Program, a guarded entrance, and with far more parkland than residential areas. Above all, it was a true community, commanding the loyalty and devotion of its growing number of residents. That was to prove vital as the Town faced crisis after crisis in the 1960's and 1970's.

Dune Acres Historical Commission
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(Based on the Records of the Town Board meeting, vols. II-IV, on material from oral interviews with Gertrude Conklin, Barbara Smith and Robert Greer, and on "The Park Purchase Plan" by Richard Smith, all in the Dune Acres archives.

