

DUNE ACRES HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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The founders of Dune Acres were a group of young business and professional men who had prospered in the new city of Gary, established by the United States Steel Corporation in 1906. Chief among them was William A. Wirt, Superintendent of the Gary Public School System. He had shown unusual enterprise and creativity in organizing that system, introducing, for example, innovations in curriculum and in scheduling the school day. The Gary system was famous throughout the country for its experimental patterns.

Wirt's enterprise and creativity did not stop with his work for the Gary School System, however. On December 9, 1922, a news story appeared in the Gary Post which reported that "William A. Wirt, superintendent of schools, has secured a 99 year lease, with the privilege of purchasing at any time at \$600 an acre, two and one-half miles of Lake Michigan beach, about 12 miles east of Broadway, on the Dunes Highway." The article went on to describe plans for the development of the land which "Eventually...will be incorporated as a village ... [which] will be known as Dune Acres."

Associated with Wirt, both in Gary and in Dune Acres, was Colonel A. P. Melton, a city planner who had been brought to Gary by U. S. Steel to lay out the new city. He now turned his talents to laying out the town of Dune Acres. We have him to thank for the winding roads and the preservation of open spaces. Wirt and Melton organized Dune Acres, Incorporated, with three Gary business men as additional officers and directors. One of the three was the realtor Harry Hall, grandfather of Richard Rearick, and great grandfather of David and Tim Rearick, present residents of Dune Acres. A leading role was also played in the earliest years by H. B. Snyder, Sr., founding owner and publisher of the Gary Post (later the Gary Post-Tribune). Snyder was the father of present resident, Beegee Snyder. Each of these men resided in Dune Acres in the early days: William Wirt at 77 East Road (presently Straus), Colonel Melton at 4 Shore Drive (Niksich), Harry Hall, next door at 6 Shore Drive (Swygert), and Snyder at 22 Oak Drive (Martino).

One senses an unusual combination of enterprise and vision in these men who established Dune Acres. The most active role was played by William Wirt, and he found a talented right-hand man in his wife's nephew, Alden Studebaker. Wirt needed someone to supervise construction of the roads, utilities, and water lines and also to build the houses -- the first houses in the town were all built by the Corporation.

Alden Studebaker arrived in Dune Acres by motorcycle on Armistice Day, 1924, to take over the "honcho" role. He built a house for himself, (at 32 Crest Drive) in 1925, and married Naomi Chellberg (of the Chellberg farm family) in 1926. They had two sons, Henry and Arthur, who were born and raised in Dune Acres. Studebaker worked for the Dune Acres Corporation until the Depression set in in the early '30's. The Corporation then sold their construction material and equipment to him, and he worked as a general contractor until the beginning of World War II. Almost all of the houses constructed in Dune Acres through 1941 were built by Alden Studebaker, and he was also the designer of many of them.

Building the original roads was in itself a complicated challenge. These roads were usually built on a base of hauled-in clay, which was then given a top coating of stones or crushed rock. The stones used for the top coating were brought by the South Shore Railroad to a Mineral Springs siding, hand shovelled off into trucks and hauled across the swamp. The road across the swamp kept sinking since it rested on peat, and additional material had frequently to be placed on top. By the mid-thirties, the road had become so bad that massive action was called for: forty carloads of stone were brought in and the road finally stabilized. It was still at risk from time to time, however, from hazards such as beavers who built dams nearby, causing the road to flood.*

Preparation of roadbeds within the town required heavy machinery, not bulldozers as one might expect, but machines pulled by huge draft horses. Horses were also used to pull big slips full of gravel from the beach for the manufacture of cement blocks. The horses and slips, also "Fresnos" and wagons, were used in excavating for houses, as well as for road building. The Corporation owned a number of draft horses. They were pastured in a fenced-in area on Fern Lane, which was at that time platted to continue through from Ridge Drive to East Road. (This part of Fern Lane was vacated in the early 1960's.) The horse pasture was in the low flat area behind the Koehler, Hubbs, and Jenkins residences.

This area had other uses, too. A small storage shed was located there, and for a while a cement block operation was carried on at this site. The Corporation also had a large construction shed (about 20' by 50') on East Road, near Lupine Lane. This building had an office in it, and for a number of years in the mid-thirties one of Studebaker's employees, Gus Anderson (usually known as "Old Gus"), lived there.

Alden Studebaker had, from the beginning, made his own cement blocks. At first many were made right on the beach. Later, gravel from the beach was brought to the site on Fern Lane, and an employee was kept busy full time making blocks. These early blocks were hand tamped by Old Gus and the other workers, who were all from the local area -- mostly farmers.

In 1937 Studebaker moved the cement block operation to a mini-industrial area located just outside Dune Acres, but adjoining the rear of Lots 68, 69 and 70 on East Road. This land was leased from a Mr. Tackett (who built the house where the Wheelers now live). A new plant was built on this site, and a machine with a motor driven power tamper and belt feeder was installed. Henry and Arthur Studebaker have described the operation of the plant, which "could be operated with as many as two people up to five -- depending on how fast you wanted to make the blocks. The top production rate was two per minute, or 120 per hour. One thousand per day was the record."

* This was a particularly difficult problem during the early '60's, when the Bethlehem Steel plant was under construction. Apparently a number of beavers, forced out of their regular habitat, took up residence in the swamp near the Mineral Springs Road, and their dam-building activity caused frequent flooding problems. Residents were divided into pro-beaver and anti-beaver factions. The anti-beavers won, and the dams were destroyed -- one did, after all, need to get in and out of town. The victory was not without a struggle, however -- it was even rumored that some of the pro-beaverites had helped the beavers build their dams back at night!

At first the plant was used primarily for making blocks for Studebaker's contracting business in Dune Acres. Before long, however, the blocks were in demand by outside builders also, and the plant functioned on a larger scale. A public school in Hebron, a number of homes in Michigan City, and a garage in Valparaiso were built from "Studie blocks" - a name by which local workers still refer to the cement blocks from the Dune Acres plant. The last year of any significant production was in 1947. The plant was destroyed by a forest fire in 1949.

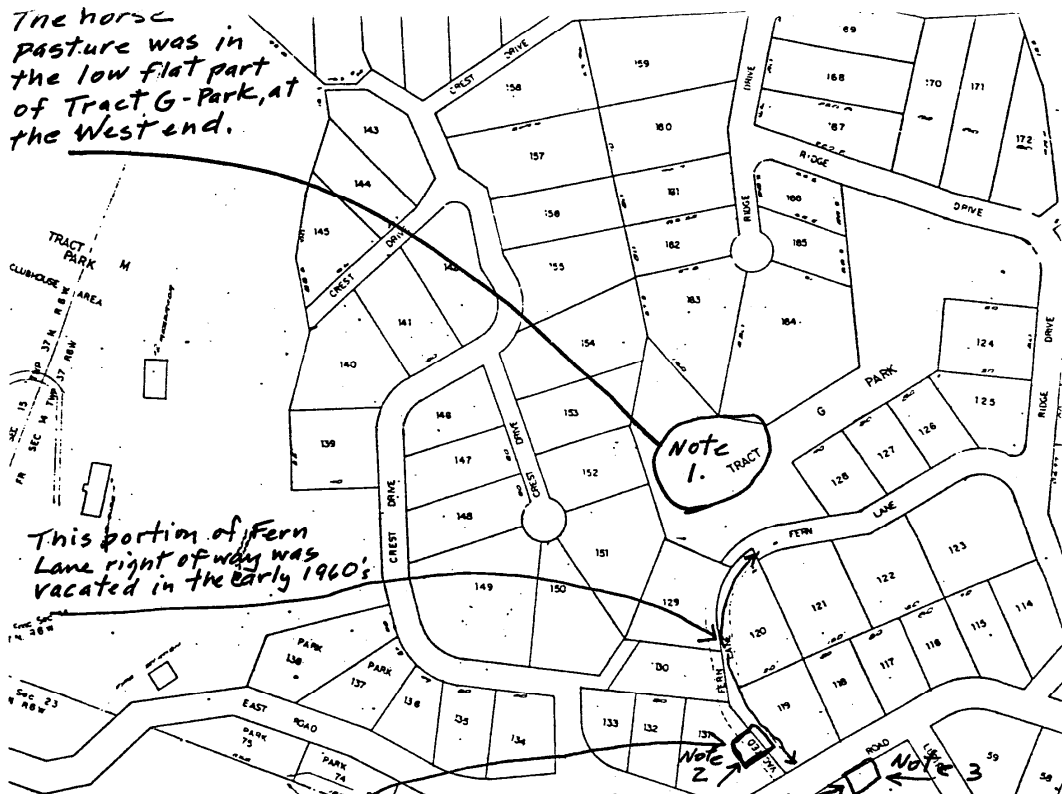
All of the log houses in Dune Acres, except for the Clubhouse, were built by Alden Studebaker. The logs came from Oregon and had to be precise in shape and taper to fit together properly. The logs were hauled from the South Shore in a specially devised rig, piled along the road at the building site, then lifted into place by a "gin pole", a pulley device about twenty or thirty feet tall. For houses at higher elevations along the ridges, for example along East Road, Circle Drive and Beach Drive, railroad tracks were built on which carts carried the logs and other materials to the top, power provided by a one and one-half ton truck.

No houses were built in Dune Acres during World War II. During this time, Studebaker gradually slowed down, turned to farming and left the Dune Acres building and maintenance to others. Bob Greer took over the snow plowing and road maintenance contracts during World War II, and when the town expanded west of Mineral Springs Road after the War, he built the roads. By then Dune Acres was a well established community.

Dune Acres presented special challenges to a builder, and Alden Studebaker showed great ingenuity in meeting them. He put in the "infrastructure" and built the original houses. Alden Studebaker was a suitable match for his equally remarkable uncle, William Wirt, and for other Dune Acres pioneers.

The Historical Commission wishes to acknowledge the help of Henry and Arthur Studebaker in preparing this paper. Much of the information comes from a taped conversation with them on July 15, 1990, now in the Commission Archives. They have also contributed clippings and other information about their father's work to the Archives.

The horse pasture was in the low flat part of Tract G-Park, at the West end.



This portion of Fern Lane right of way was vacated in the early 1960's

Note 2. The initial block making area, (after right on the beach) was in the Fern Lane right of way encroaching on Lot #131. There was also a small storage shed on the SE corner of this site near Lot #119.

Note 3. This is the site of the Dune Acres, Inc. construction shed.

MAP OF THE TOWN OF DUNE ACRES, INDIANA
 DUNE ACRES RESIDENTIAL AREA
 DUNE ACRES INDUSTRIAL AREA

Note 1. TRACT

Note 2

Note 3

Note 4

SCALE

NEW VILLAGE IN DUNELAND, PLAN OF WIRT *Part 12-9-1922* Gary Man Leases Lake Shore Property

William A. Wirt, superintendent of schools, has secured a 99 year lease, with the privilege of purchasing at any time at \$600 an acre, two and one-half miles of Lake Michigan beach about 12 miles east of Broadway on the Dunes Highway. The property is located north of Baileytown and Mineral Springs about one mile west of Weverly Beach. The owner of the property is Henry W. Leman of Chicago.

This tract of land contains about 600 acres and is covered with a magnificent forest of pine and oak trees, with the exception of 100 acres of rolling meadow land with good soil for a golf course. The property also contains seven of the ten large dunes, or so-called mountains, of the proposed National Dunes Park. These dunes are from 140 feet to 185 feet high and for the most part are covered with the large pine and oak trees.

There are over five miles of well marked wagon trails on the property and at five or six different places an automobile can be driven on these unimproved trails to within 1,000 feet of the beach.

A beautifully wooded bluff about 30 feet high runs parallel with the shore line back about 150 feet from the water's edge. It is proposed to offer this bluff and the attractive locations along the trails for summer homes.

About 300 acres, including the beach and large dunes, will be set aside as parks and preserved in their natural state. The remaining 300 acres will be subdivided but closely restricted and limited to 600 half acre lots. Streets will be paved, sewers built and electric light and water systems installed the coming spring. Provisions are also being made for a club house, golf course and harbor for small power boats. Col. A. P. Melton, city planning and municipal engineer, will be the resident manager of the property and will have charge of the engineering work and all improvements.

To Incorporate Village

Eventually the territory will be incorporated as a village and the parks, harbor and golf course will be municipal. The village will be known as Dune Acres and Mr. Wirt believes should be as fine for all year homes as Evanston, Winnetka, Kenilworth, Lake Forest and other north shore villages. The bluff is similar to that of the north shore and in addition there are the dune mountains and the wonderful sand beach.