

Four villages: Forever linked, forever apart

Why East is east, West is west and there technically is no 'Dundee' in Dundee Township

By Dave Gathman
STAFF WRITER

When businesses in East and West Dundee advertise, most give their location as simply "Dundee." Mail comes addressed to "Dundee." As the people living in the two have become more and more alike, many wonder why the villages remain separate.

In fact, since Carpentersville and Sleepy Hollow also touch the Dundees, and you sometimes can't tell what village you're in without a road map (do YOU really know which stores inside Spring Hill Mall are in the village of West Dundee and which are inside Carpentersville?), some might wonder why all four of Dundee Township's village don't just merge together.

But the two Dundees began as ethnically different — one full of Scots and Yankees, the other full of German immigrants. And as those differences have faded, simple practical frictions over such issues as tax base make it undesirable for one or the other to merge. To say nothing of old gripes and a desire by the voter to be the determiner of one's own fate.

Carpentersville, meanwhile, grew up with a different downtown nucleus a mile to the north. At first it was virtually a "company town" for the bustling, industrial Illinois Iron & Bolt Co. By the time it outgrew that phase, the gigantic 1950s housing development called Meadowdale had turned Carpentersville into the township's 300-pound gorilla. With it holding twice as many residents as all three neighboring villages put together, any village that merged with "C-ville" now would be swallowed up whole.

Sleepy Hollow, by contrast, wasn't born until 113 years after the two Dundees and Carpentersville. And its founder created it, in a way, just because he didn't want his big lot, big-ticket, curbless and sewerless country housing development to be bound by the more-urban laws and building codes of neighboring

West Dundee or Carpentersville.

The Scots and the Germans

The Dundees' roots go back as far as Elgin's, and nearly as far as Chicago's. When soon-to-be-famous detective Allan Pinkerton moved there in 1844, what was then called just Dundee had a fourth as many people as that city over on Lake Michigan.

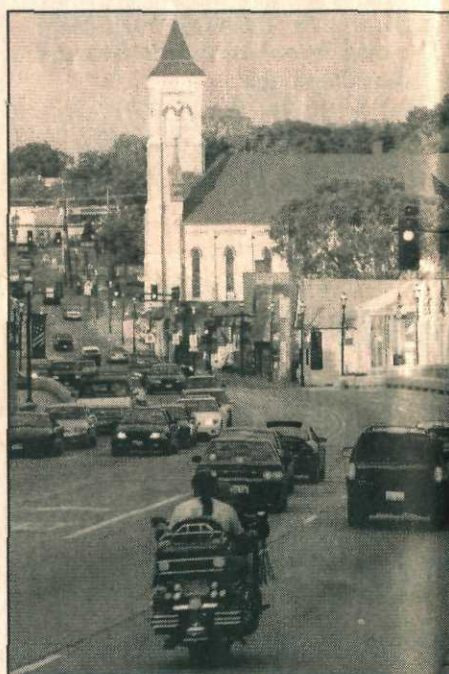
Settlement began almost simultaneously up and down the Fox Valley about 1834. Army veterans who had come through the area to fight the Indians in the Blackhawk War two years before spread the word back home about the valley's rich soil and the water power that could be harnessed by building dams and waterwheels along the Fox.

If cultural and economic gaps seem destined to divide East Dundee from West Dundee, both villages can be traced to the same founders. It was the east bank that was favored by the early Potawatomi Indians, who often camped south of the present villages, between Duncan Avenue and the river.

Jesse Newman and Joseph Russell, two natives of Virginia, arrived with a wagon from LaPorte, Ind., in October 1834. They set up camp atop the bluff, near where the Circuit City store now stands.

Returning to civilization for the winter, they came back to Dundee for good in spring 1835. The Newman family built a cabin on the bluff while the Russells founded East Dundee. The Russells' first cabin was about where the footbridge connecting the Fox River Trail with South End Park now stands.

But Dundee Township historian Irma DuPre wrote that John and Nancy Oatman could be called the father and mother of West Dundee. This clergyman and his wife arrived in 1835 after founding Eureka, Ill., and helping start Ronald Regan's alma mater, Eureka College. The prolific couple produced 16 children and left many descendants who still



East and West Dundee may be linked by the Main Street bridge, above. But voters have repeatedly refused to combine the two villages into one "Dundee."

live in the area.

The first town meeting was held at the raising of the Oatman house. Those present drew lots for the honor of naming the town. The winner was Alexander Gardiner, a Scottish immigrant who named it after his hometown of Dundee on the Firth of Tay.

"West" was not added to the name until decades later.

Ironically, back in Scotland, the original Dundee is a big industrial city and the original Elgin is a small rural village. In Illinois, pretty much the opposite is true.

West Dundee was settled largely by people who had come from New England and New York, farmed, then retired to a life in town. At first, DuPre writes, its people were richer than East Dundee's. Its people tended to be older and the village had little industry.

Growing east

DuPre says the title "father of

East Dundee" should be given to John Oatman's son-in-law, Thomas Deweese.

Apparently a fiery Irishman, Deweese headed for Dundee on foot after hearing about its beauty from a veteran of the Black Hawk War. DuPre writes that Deweese greedily staked out the entire area as his possession and extracted money from any future settlers — in one case, only after a brutal fight in which Deweese and several other men were stabbed.

While West Dundee was oriented toward farming and retirement living and spoke English, with its "Hoosiers" and "Yankees," East Dundee grew into a working-class German town.

What later became the Chicago & North Western Railway reached the village in the mid-1800s, and Haeger Potteries grew prosperous making bricks to rebuild Chicago after its great fire. Waves of German immigrants moved in to take jobs at Haeger or at the Illinois Iron & Bolt Co. in nearby Carpentersville.

The river area was nicknamed "Dutch Flats" (because the German settlers called themselves "Deutsch," the German word for "German"), and it was said that every yard there had a potato patch.

Social and worship life centered around the German-speaking Immanuel Lutheran Church, the only one in town.

Today, the same kinds of people live on both sides of the river and East Dundee's median-family income is just \$1,300 less than West Dundee's.

But economic differences persist. Now West Dundee has Spring Hill Mall, with all its jobs and tax dollars. East Dundee gets many of the mall's disadvantages, such as increased traffic and more business competition, without the rewards.

East Dundee has a business district, mainly on North River Street,

but it is small compared with West Dundee's. On the other hand, East Dundee has become famous for its night life, which includes some of the area's most famous restaurants and beer gardens.

Carpenter starts his town

Carpentersville grew up about 20 years after the Dundees and at first was virtually a "company town" for the Illinois Iron & Bolt Co. and its Star Manufacturing subsidiary (housed in the industrial buildings around where Main Street crosses the Fox, including the one now occupied by Otto Engineering).

The village was named after J.A. Carpenter, who took control of the water mills in that area by the time he was 23 and took over the iron

and bolt works in 1868.

By the late 1800s, when all of Carpentersville and the two Dundees had only 5,000 people, Illinois Iron & Bolt employed 2,000. It made farm machinery, flat irons, thimble skeins, presses and buggy-seat springs.

The dawning age of cars and tractors made many of its horse-age products obsolete.

II&B's business declined, and by the 1970s it had gone out of business.

But by then the coming of the gigantic Meadowdale housing developments and Meadowdale Shopping Center had turned Carpentersville into a very different kind of town, thanks to a visionary developer named Leonard Besinger. (see page K6)

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C'ville's empire builder

Leonard Besinger built 'a town for the workers' who never expected to own a home of their own

By Dave Gathman
STAFF WRITER

CARPENTERSVILLE — Some towns are shaped by giant personalities — people with a vision who single-handedly turn that town into a different world from what it was when they found it. Dundee Township had one such giant: Leonard W. Besinger.

By building the Meadowdale housing development and shopping center in the 1950s and 1960s, he accelerated the perhaps inevitable process of suburbanization by 20 years or more. He increased the population of the township sixfold. He turned Carpentersville from one among three equal villages into a municipality that accounts for two-thirds of the township's population and most of its manufacturing.

The changes he wrought dwarf the impact of Spring Hill Mall. They make creation of the village of Sleepy Hollow look trivial.

But most amazingly, he did not build his empire in isolated countryside. He built it in a village that was already 120 years old, separated from suburban sprawl by 20 miles of farmland, populated by hundreds of people who could not stand the thought of what he was doing and fought him all the way.

The importance of his project was not lost on Besinger. Reading some publications his firm put out when Meadowdale was growing apace, one might be excused for thinking one was reading a 19th century French account of the French Revolution.

"The people of Carpentersville, until the advent of Meadowdale, maintained a sleepy little village of moderate income families which had laid dormant since (Angelo) Carpenter passed away," said in his Meadowdale Pictorial, which circulated among the development's new home buyers in 1956.

"The Mode of Life was likened to the United States of 1915 in Carpentersville, East and West Dundee," the paper said. "These towns were divided into two separate classes of people — the rich, and those who worked for the rich people of the area, who had inherited businesses from their ancestors and thereby were not progressive and not willing to change or try anything new."

"The workers, therefore, were forced to go along with the trend — that is, until the coming of Meadowdale."

Ah, but enter the hero of the working man — what the Meadowdale Pictorial referred to as "a very optimistic and crazy builder" who "acquired this vast holding on which he envisions a whole town."

From ponies to houses

Besinger was born in Chicago in 1907. By age 12, he had entered the building contractor business with his father.

Putting up houses in Arlington Heights, Park Ridge and Flossmoor, Besinger apparently did well financially. By the 1940s, he owned a 300-acre "gentleman's farm" in



A slow gondola ride caps a day of summer fun last year at Santa's Village amusement park, which draws families from all over Northern Illinois to East Dundee.

what is now northeastern Carpentersville. Here he kept his "hackney ponies," the Meadowdale Pictorial said.

But on May 15, 1949, a fire raged through the stable, killing 25 ponies. Besinger rebuilt, but the stable burned again on Nov. 27, 1951.

"This time, I decided to forget about raising horses and sell the land," he said in an interview in 1956, which is quoted at length in Dundee Township: 1835-1985.

His first idea was to build an industrial park on the site. He talked to Public Service Co., which had just completed a survey of the industrial potential of each of its towns. The survey showed that Besinger's area lacked none of the essentials needed for industry except a solid base of workers to be employed there.

"Since I had planned to buy Chicago property and build homes on it with the money I received from the sale of the land, I thought I might just as well build on my own property and sell the manufacturing land" later, Besinger said.

He bought another 875 acres owned by Chicago developer Walter McIntosh, who had been developing "country club" high-income housing since the '20s. (The local remnants of what McIntosh developed are now in Lakewood Estates subdivision in East Dundee and Carpentersville).

Another 820 acres came from the Curtis Candy Co., which had owned a farm near Illinois 25. Soon Besinger had assembled some 2,600 acres.

A shocking headline

On March 1, 1953, residents of the "old towns" were shocked to see this headline in the Chicago Tribune: "Big Residential Center To Rise in Fox Valley; Plan Town of 15,000 near Elgin."

At first, Besinger's plan was to incorporate his own village and build a self-contained community from scratch, as Floyd Rales would do a few years later in Sleepy Hollow. It would be called Meadowdale, the name of his pony farm.

But many of the 5,000 people already in the Dundees and Carpentersville had other ideas. The prospect of quadrupling their area's population overnight, no doubt with strangers pouring out of the big city, held little fascination.

Some objectors who lived nearby incorporated their own village, calling it Middlebury. This meant that

under state law, meadowdale would be too close to the other village's border to incorporate. Meanwhile, East Dundee and Carpentersville fought to keep Besinger from discharging treated sewage into a creek through their villages. With so many uncertainties, the Federal Housing Administration refused to insure mortgages in Meadowdale.

Besinger finally decided that "if

you can't beat 'em, join 'em," and so did the fathers of Carpentersville. Meadowdale was annexed to that village and began going strong.

Riding the G.I. Bill

Besinger made no secret about whom he was aiming to bring into his development. It was the World War II or Korean War veteran and his wife, with several children. They lived in Chicago. They rented a row house or an apartment. They had never expected to be able to buy their own house.

But now they could, because the G.I. Bill provided government mortgages, and Besinger's prefabricated building techniques provided what he called "the first development around Chicago to offer so much house at a realistic price." A veteran could buy a Meadowdale house for \$10,000 to \$12,000, paying \$20 down and \$58 a month, including taxes. Most houses had 60-by-120-foot lots, no basements and carpets instead of garages.

He advertised massively in Chicago, publishing whole newspaper-like advertising supplements extolling the glory of suburban life and allaying fears that conditions out there might be primitive.

Chicagoans loved it. In his first year, Besinger sold 700 lots. He could get only 120 mortgages. But another 700 sold the next year.

Besinger estimated in 1956 that 98 percent of the buyers were veterans and 93 percent still worked in Chicago. In 1958, their commuting became simpler when the new Northwest Tollway suddenly made the Loop an hour away.

New stores for a new city

A new "city" needs its own business district. In May 1957, Besinger opened Meadowdale Shopping Center, which he said was "the largest number of stores under one roof in the world." It was anchored by Wieboldt's department store and, included the enclosed Wintergarden ice skating rink, until that burned in 1963.

During the '60s and '70s, the shopping center became a major competitor of downtown Elgin as the region's shopping hub. Later, as enclosed malls became the thing, it too suffered heavily from the competition brought by Spring Hill Mall. Wieboldt's moved out in 1983 and the center's managers undertook a costly improvement program to modernize.

"Meadowdale subdivision has become virtually a city," the Chicago Sun-Times reported in 1960. "During its seven-year history, a 54-store shopping center, eight new grammar schools, a junior high school and a senior high school have been constructed. There are nine churches."

Besinger lived year-round in Carpentersville until the mid-'70s, when he retired to Florida. He died in Elgin's Sherman Hospital on Aug. 9, 1982, just hours after he had toured some remodeling at his shopping center from his seat in a wheelchair.

To recognize his empire-building role and numerous donations of land for the public good, one of Carpentersville's busiest streets and the park district's former senior center were named in his honor.

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