

A Town Where People Pull Together

In 1920, a young couple treated themselves to an evening at a moving-picture theater in Brooklyn. Following the silent film, they marveled at a story depicting real life in a small Midwestern town. The town was a place they had never heard of. But the pictures of neighbor greeting neighbor and children with friends in abundance evoked a longing for that kind of hometown.

“In Brooklyn they were merely two insignificant human atoms... But there on the screen they saw a town where folks had a chance to know other folks; where men and women could escape the specter of loneliness; and where boys and girls could find friends and recreation...

“Oh, if we could live in a place like that!’ whispered the young wife.

“Well, if we ever get the chance,’ said the husband, ‘we’ll live right there in that very town!’”

Within a few months an opportunity in Chicago came along and the couple took it, moved to Winnetka and set about making it *their* hometown.

Getting People Together

This story was related in a 1922 article in American Magazine, entitled “A Town Where People Pull Together.” At the time, Winnetka was becoming renowned for the community spirit fostered by Community House as well as for its excellence in municipal government and community development. The moniker, “Winnetka, the town where people pull together,” was cited by Winnetka’s leaders and admirers alike. It effectively explained how Winnetka succeeded in implementing impressive civic improvements, and it crystallized a guiding principle of how we wanted to relate to one another as neighbors.

Perhaps the man who understood best how getting along is crucial to getting things done was the Reverend J.W.F. Davies, the driving force behind Community House. In an extensive interview for the American Magazine article, Davies related an experience in his first church of only nine members:

“I had four factions among nine persons. But the problem was just the same as if the totals had been larger. It is the same in a family, a club, a business organization, or a town...

“I found that the important thing was to bring the different groups into contact with each other over matters in which they were mutually interested. So long as they ‘flocked by themselves,’ they thought only of their differences. When

they came together, and had something they could *enjoy* together, they found they were pretty much alike after all.”

Community Spirit Built Winnetka

At Community House and through the many other local organizations, Winnetkans got to know one another. There were Neighborhood Circles, dancing clubs, language classes, sports clubs, churches and civic groups ... the list goes on and on. Roughly 90 percent of village residents were members of one organization or another. Plus the town came together for social events and holiday celebrations.

Residents generously devoted themselves to volunteer activities. Volunteerism is the lifeblood of a town like Winnetka. Look around at all the clubs, sports leagues, churches and charitable organizations we take for granted today. They were all built by citizens who took ownership of their village and worked to make it the hometown they wanted to live in.

Poignantly, Winnetkans stepped forward to serve the civic needs of this growing town. They organized groups that worked to fill gaps in Village services. They served in appointed positions of the Village Council Committees, bringing their expertise and perspective to bear on the crucial decisions to be made. Their efforts are lauded to this day and set an enviable standard for community service.

During the 1920s Winnetka was deeply engaged in efforts that would define the physical structure of Winnetka as we know it today. Then, as now, no issue was too small for public controversy. But the fabric of Winnetka’s community spirit was strong. And Winnetka was fortunate to have the guidance and leadership of talented, civic-minded individuals who helped build consensus on major issues. We have much to be inspired by in this town where people pulled together.