

## **Sheridan Road's Bumpy Past**

I wonder how many of us in Winnetka got our first glimpse of this village on a pleasant drive along Sheridan Road. Since its earliest days, Winnetka has seen its population swell as families journeyed north along the lakeshore to discover their new hometown.

In 1836 Erastus and Zernah Patterson, emigrating west from Vermont, drove their wagon north on a native trail along Lake Michigan. Yet as they made it to the top of the hill where Christ Church stands today, they paused. Amidst this peaceful forest setting overlooking the crystal waters of Lake Michigan, they found their new home.

### **From native path to driveway**

What we now know as "Sheridan Road" has a storied past. Shortly after the Pattersons arrived stagecoach service between Chicago and Milwaukee was introduced. This regular traffic attracted businesses, such as the Patterson's tavern and John Happ's blacksmith shop.

The path became a dirt road. During wet weather, travelers cursed the mud; during the dry weather residents cursed the dust. New methods of paving were developed but small towns did not have the resources to maintain this important thoroughfare.

In 1889, a group of men assembled by Daniel H. Burnham, Chicago's visionary planner, foresaw a pleasant "driveway" along the coast of Lake Michigan, ultimately connecting Chicago with Milwaukee. But the road from vision to reality is filled with many ruts and bumps – and Winnetka proved to be a big one.

By 1911 nearly ten thousand motor cars chugged along all or a portion of the route on a pleasant Sunday. Yet while the weather was pleasant, the ride was filled with bone-rattling jolts, gaps in the path, and hazards.

### **Bumpy road to the future**

The Sheridan Road Association organized in 1911 to take on the project. The supreme challenge was to assemble legal jurisdiction over the thoroughfare under a single legal body.

In 1913 the state legislature passed a law permitting the Lincoln Park Board, with its extensive road works operations, to take jurisdiction over roads that lead to it, but the transfer would have to be approved by a majority of the property owners who front the road and by each municipality through which the road passes. Plus there could be no gaps.

*Every* municipality along the way had to approve the transfer of authority, or the project would fail.

In 1912, the Association paid to rehabilitate Glencoe's portion of the road to demonstrate the plan's advantages. A year later, Glencoe was the first north shore community to hand over control of its road.

In Evanston Archbishop Feehan generously dedicated rights to a 100-foot wide strip of land for the road at Calvary Cemetery.

Some jurisdictions such as Rogers Park and Highland Park preferred to construct their own improvements before the handover to the Board. But in 1914 expectations were high that soon the key towns of Wilmette, Kenilworth and Winnetka would sign on. Three years later a great procession of cars did indeed drive from Chicago to celebrate the completion of the road, but it stopped before the Winnetka border.

### **Winnetka's Sheridan Road Defeat**

Winnetka was not the only locality with concerns about the legal details and daily realities involved. But it was the only one to put the decision to a referendum vote. By a single vote, the referendum was defeated.

In Chicago, frontpage news articles marked Winnetka's great blow to this grand project. But in Winnetka, folks were quite subdued. The Messenger newsletter editorial noted the defeat with great disappointment, calling it an injustice to itself and its neighbors. Subsequent letters from the Park Board dispelled the misconceptions circulated about any intention to destroy Winnetka's ravine, a key concern for some.

But in the end there was no opportunity to work through the issues. By a single vote majority the matter was settled. The village council minutes include a terse entry that the council discussed the referendum results and instructed the village engineer to make plans to rehabilitate Sheridan Road.

Today, Winnetka's Sheridan Road is under the jurisdiction of the Illinois Department of Transportation. Two upcoming projects will improve the stormwater system in the ravine area and renovate the road. The concerns of the 1914 referendum seem pointless today. Motorists can enjoy a leisurely drive along this "Riviera of the west" through Winnetka and northward. Perhaps some will decide to become our new neighbors.



Thousands of motor cars chugged along Sheridan Road. Their speed could top an alarming 20 miles per hour. Local magistrates would stand along the road with an officer to stop speeding vehicles by stretching a rope across the road. PHOTO COURTESY OF WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.