

Frank Windes and Public Works

Winnetka owes a great deal to the people who make things work here: The crews, who maintain our village and run behind-the-scenes operations. The engineers, who through the years have found solutions to the pressing needs of each era. A century ago this was a big challenge.

Out of the Mud

For three decades, from the time the first automobile arrived in Winnetka around 1895, street construction was a constant activity. As our population grew from 1,800 to 12,000, new roads were carved westward from Lake Michigan. Dirt roads, which became mud pits in rainy weather and dustbins during summer, gave way to macadam pavements.

This method of construction involved compacted crushed rock sealed with a cementing agent. The inventor of macadam, John McAdam, is also renowned for professionalizing the field of road maintenance and management. As vehicle speeds increased, water-based sealants were upgraded to a tar-based compound, giving rise to the term we still use today: *tarmac*.

Motorists vs. Engineer

1915 Council records are filled with issues related to constructing streets, sidewalks, sewer pipes, water mains and gas lines. By then kerosene street lanterns had been replaced with gas lamps and then electric lights. Sidewalks, at first wooden structures, were replaced with concrete paths.

Frank Windes, Village Engineer to both Winnetka and Glencoe at the time, designed crosswalks to traverse macadam streets by arching a five-foot-wide brick walkway, from a base flush with the macadam road surface to a height of 2.75 inches in the middle. This design accomplished two goals: effectively draining water from the path and regulating the speed of vehicles along the road. It also raised the anger of motorists who frequently raced down Sheridan Road and were jolted out of their seats by the speedbumps.

In 1905 four motorists brought suit against the Village of Glencoe to force it to remove its "bumps." Within a month, the suit came before Judge Mack who inspected the crosswalks and concluded that the "bumps" were designed so that motorists only experienced a jolt if they were exceeding the 15 MPH limit. He ruled that the Village had every right to construct crosswalks. At this, newspapers around the world took note of Frank Windes' "proper cure for automobile speeding."

Frank Windes – Visionary Engineer

Perhaps the figure in Winnetka's history whose vision has had a signature impact on Winnetka over the past century is Frank Windes, Winnetka's first Village Engineer. As a young boy, this homegrown hero spent hours in the family's hen house crafting woodwork projects for family and friends. He attended manual training school instead of getting a high school diploma, but went on to the University of Michigan to study engineering. Back at home he put his newly expanded skills to work in his community, setting up offices on Birch Street and doing survey, architecture and engineering work around the region.

Frank was deeply familiar with Winnetka, so it is not surprising that some his hometown's biggest issues attracted his scrutiny. In 1906, just as the North Shore electric train was to be extended through Winnetka, Frank presented his designs for depressing train tracks below the streets. While this concept was heralded as the most effective solution, it would be 35 years before the "big dig" would begin and his vision become a reality.

Similarly, flooding and peat bog fires in the Skokie Marsh posed a large-scale problem requiring a big solution. Frank's vision for his cherished childhood wilderness combined the necessity of draining the peat bog with the dream of a fine recreational park. It too would take decades to become a reality, but Frank was there to see it completed.

Frank Windes was honored with a brass plaque on the Elm Street bridge that spans the very track-depression project he envisioned. How fitting for this honor to be placed on a bridge. For Frank's gift was finding solutions to bridge the gap between a problem identified and a problem solved.

Franks Windes, served Winnetka throughout his life: as our first Village Engineer (1898 – 1940), the visionary designer behind the Skokie Lagoons and the depression of the train tracks, and as a co-founder of the Winnetka Historical Society. PHOTO COURTESY WINNETKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

