Then and Now

Winnetka is blessed with a proud history. This series of articles has reflected back on a special time in that history in the early 1900s. A time when young families from Chicago flocked to Winnetka, taking us in thirty years from a rustic outpost to a modern village with the full population and amenities we enjoy to day. This is an amazing accomplishment.

There is much to learn from this story, but there are many differences between then and now.

Investment

A century ago, Winnetka was busy carving neighborhoods out of the wilderness during a time of great technological leaps that had direct impact on municipal operations. The advent of the age of electricity, telephones and automobiles had arrived, compounding demands on village operations as they strained to simply keep up with growth.

New water mains, sewer lines, streets and sidewalks. Bigger schools, more parks. Larger fire, police and village administration facilities. Expanded utility plants. All managed by a new professional administration. All paid for by the growing tax base of homeowners and businesses.

Today, we enjoy the benefits of that earlier investment in schools, parks, civic properties and infrastructure. And we now take for granted the high quality of Village services. Still, after a century it is time to re-invest in our infrastructure and it will be today's homeowners who will bear that responsibility.

Planning for the Future

Perhaps the most striking difference between Winnetka then and Winnetka now is in our outlook. The order of the day during the early twentieth century focused on providing for our future. It was a very young perspective filled with aspirations and confidence in our future. Our challenge was to look far enough ahead.

Village leaders understood this and brought in the famed Edward Bennett to craft a vision. But for the average homeowner, this was a stretch. Interestingly, our schools taught the village a lesson about planning. In 1920 when the location for the Skokie School was being debated, this poignant argument carried the day:

> ***Shall We Build for Today? Or Shall We Build With Faith in Winnetka's Future.***
> *The Horace Mann School was built only 21 years ago. It had to be added to in five years. Two other schools have had to be built in the last ten years. And our schools still lag behind Winnetka's need. If we had looked forward far enough twenty, or even fifteen, years ago, we would not have found ourselves in the present difficult situation. But Winnetka then didn't imagine its future. . . . Let us not repeat our mistakes.*

Today we still struggle trying to see a future Winnetka. In part, we are attached to the past. But it is hard to get attached to some vague future concept that marks a change. Perhaps we can appreciate the faith it took voters to accept the jarring plan to place the Skokie School at the far west end of Elm Street. Today we can *see* the wisdom of the plan.

Leadership

What I find most impressive about these stories of Winnetka is how a community of ordinary people, focused on their own families and personal interests, could manage to get some extraordinary feats accomplished. While we were dubbed by one author as a "town where people pull together", the reality was frequently the opposite. The story of Winnetka, then, is one of leaders finding a way to get things done in a contentious environment.

As individuals and as a group, Winnetka's civic-minded leaders were the source of the aspirational vision for our future. They promoted their vision and worked their extensive network of friends to build consensus to get things done. They were well respected and, apparently, endlessly patient. Above all, they were committed to serving the best interests of Winnetka's future.

Today Winnetka faces challenges as great as back then. Will we follow leaders focused on equipping us for the next century? Will we choose to pull together? What will be written about Winnetka's story for the next 100 years?