

Winnetka Comes of Age Under Woolhiser

A few years before Village Manager Herbert Woolhiser retired in 1951, he reflected upon some of the changes that had taken place during his thirty-four year tenure. Confessing that his comments largely focused on Village government affairs, he admitted that “the local government of any community is necessarily closely linked to the life and ideals of its people.”

Woolhiser recalled driving into Winnetka in his Model T Ford roadster on a Sunday evening in early May 1917 ready to settle into his new position and new hometown. However, finding no hotel he turned around and drove back to Evanston for lodging.

Managing a Burgeoning Population

The Winnetka of 1917 was a quiet community of about 5,000 residents in the midst of a sustained influx of families from Chicago that doubled its population in each of three decades from 1,800 to 12,200 by 1930 – roughly the same population we have today.

With growing population came more automobiles. In 1917 there were approximately 600 cars, but by 1951 Winnetkans would own around 4,000 vehicles. As vehicles became faster and heavier, streets were improved with new materials. Clearly the most apparent activity of Winnetka’s Village government for thirty years was the paving of roads.

As Woolhiser moved into his office in the old Village Hall, the Sheridan Road paving project was about to get underway. Unfortunately they had only received a single bid for the job at a price substantially above their estimate, and thus would solicit another round of bids. Further delays were caused by legal hurdles and wartime limitations. But a year later this highly visible public works project would join with Sheridan Road south of Willow and be the cause of a great celebration.

Winnetka’s public utilities needed attention too. 1925 saw the completion of a new water filtration plant. As the population grew and use of electrical appliances exploded so did the demands on the village’s coal-powered electric plant. By 1938 its capacity was expanded from 750 to 10,500 kilowatts.



Empowered by Vision

Shortly after Woolhiser joined the Village, Winnetka began an era of public projects empowered by the 1921 Winnetka Plan, a vision and road map for solving some of the village's most pressing issues.

The Plan's recommendations resulted in projects such as the development of Green Bay Road to reduce traffic on Sheridan Road. When the Community House was rebuilt in 1925, it included an auditorium as recommended by the Plan. That same year our current Village Hall was constructed.

But the core of the Winnetka Plan was to make the case for depression of the train tracks. For years villagers had borne tragic losses at its many track crossings, but were powerless to force railroad companies to fix the problem. Winnetka's village engineer, Frank Windes, had drawn up plans for depressing the tracks as early as 1906. He and Woolhiser prepared for the day that political leaders would be able to rally the support and resources for this most crucial public improvement. But it would take until 1938 to recruit the Public Works Administration, arm-twist the railroad companies, and begin the Big Dig that would provide Winnetka with its most definitive civic improvement.

Another of Frank Windes' visions was to transform the untamed Skokie Marsh into a series of lagoons to address the marsh's problem of floods and fires. The idea was adopted for a Civilian Conservation Corps project and thousands of young men were brought in to work from 1933 to 1940, clearing the land, constructing Forest Way Drive, digging the lagoons and channels, and planting thousands of trees. Winnetkans must have felt under siege with the Skokie Lagoon project to the west and the Big Dig spanning the full length of the village from 1938 to 1942.

Continuity and Patience

In Herbert Woolhiser's thirty-four years as village manager he reorganized Village operations under the new council-manager plan, developed a high quality Village staff and implemented the latest administrative practices. He served with seventy trustees and seven village presidents.

As a long-serving, appointed administrator, Woolhiser could make two significant contributions not possible from elected officials: continuity and patience. The scope and scale of Village operations and projects required continuous implementation of policy over time, vigilance over mundane but crucial details, and far-sighted preparations to avoid crises rather than waiting to react to them.

Woolhiser also brought a fair degree of patience. Through the unique lens of a village manager he had seen generations of Winnetka's families endure two world wars, an economic depression, and local struggles over policy. With his long tenure he had the compassion and capacity to be patient until the time was right for the right idea.

The authors of a study of Winnetka's council-manager government were highly complimentary of Woolhiser and Winnetka. As Winnetka came of age during the Woolhiser era, "the average citizen of Winnetka was proud of his government, proud of the record of the manager, proud of the caliber of the men on the council, and proud of the achievement of the village."