

Neighbors recall Livonia's rural nature

Livonia will celebrate its 150th year with a community celebration on Friday in Roma Hall. To get in the spirit, reporter Mary Klemic found some of the area's long-time residents to hear what they had to say about the Livonia of more than 40 years ago.

By Mary Klemic
staff writer

Once upon a time, Livonia was mostly a rural community, with more corn fields than traffic.

That's the beginning of true stories — those told by present and former residents of Livonia when asked by the Observer to look back over their years here.

It might be hard to imagine farms and big, empty spaces along what are now major streets in Livonia, but that's what was here 40 to 50 years ago. In the words of resident Irene Lawson, who moved with her husband, Jack, to the community 47 years ago from the west side of Detroit, "It was like moving to the country."

The Lawsons, now married 60 years, settled on Richland. The area featured cornfields, gravel roads and "not too many houses," according to Jack Lawson.

"There have been an awful lot of changes in 47 years," he said.

HOW MUCH has Livonia changed? Theodore Sauer, the first resident pastor of St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, remembers the church as a "little white frame" building when he was there in 1941-56. (The building now is the senior citizen center.) The nearby Farmington Road-Five Mile area was the geographic center of the community that featured a grocery store, a hardware store and a few other stores along a two-lane paved road.

"It was much different than it is today," said Sauer, who now lives in Manitowish, Wis. "There were a lot of open fields. When we looked back out of our kitchen window we saw three houses fairly close by, and the (next closest

house) one-third or one-half mile down the way."

"The entire area was open," he said. "It (the pace) was much slower moving."

Among the members of Sauer's congregation were about six farm families and "quite a few" Ford Motor Co. workers, he said. At that time, smaller Ford plants were operating in the area.

Livonia was a township then, and the township hall was in Plymouth. The community didn't have a hospital. Residents went to hospitals in Northville, Pontiac, Ann Arbor, Highland Park or Detroit. The local newspaper offered one family a lifetime subscription for \$10. Livonia didn't have a high school, so some students went to school in Detroit.

LIVONIA'S RURAL atmosphere was a drawing card.

Blair and Mabel Leslie, celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary in October, moved from Detroit to a house on Stark some 45 years ago.

"There were farms across the street from us," Mabel Leslie said. "You should see it now, it's all built up." Jerry and Dot Buxton came to Livonia because the city was selling parcels for little farms. It was September 1941, and they had been married for seven years.

"We had drawn a picture of our home on a piece of tissue paper, and we set out to build our house," Dot Buxton said. "We bought one lot for \$425 then

bought another one. We started to build with two tents, three dogs, two handshovels and \$200."

THE BUXTONS planted about 30 apple trees. When Dot Buxton took her children to the Eloise complex in Westland to see the dentist, she would pick up a bale of hay dropped off along Middlebelt for the family's horse. She hauled water from Inkster Road in a horse and buggy.

"We were very much pioneers," Dot Buxton said.

"There was nothing out here when we moved," she said. "We had a horse, we had a cow, we had pigs, we had chickens, we had ducks. It was all farm parcels."

A bank refused to give the Buxtons a mortgage to finish their house. The house was built by Jerry Buxton, a carpenter who also helped build Madonna College and what is now the Ladbroke DHC race course.

"They said, 'What in the world do you want to move out in the country for?'" Dot Buxton said. "Now I've got a bank within a block and a half of me."

TRAFFIC WAS sparse in those days. "I was working at General Motors Diesel in 1938," Jack Lawson said. "When I'd leave home at 6 a.m., there would be one or two cars on Plymouth Road going east. It's a lot different now."

For entertainment, residents took part in garden parties, attended dances at the school or went to movies.

The rural atmosphere that attracted these residents years ago may be gone, but most still like the community.

"I guess we liked it at that time," Mabel Leslie said. "The air was so nice, like on a farm."

"We liked it out here," she said. "I'd hate to leave our place, at our age. I like Livonia."

Energy efficiency is theme of conference

"Closing the Gap: Marketing Energy Efficiency" is the theme of the fourth annual Community Energy Management Conference set for Oct. 29-30 at the Southfield Holiday Inn.

Charlie Wing, host of the Public Broadcast Station television series "A House for All Seasons," will present the keynote address "Selling Energy Efficiency."

He will also share his insight on closing gaps in a typical home with energy conservation improvements, rating home energy systems, and construction techniques for low cost, energy efficient homes.

The conference will feature more than 30 workshops on topics which include: finding working capital and investors for energy management services, techniques for marketing energy technologies, using volunteers effectively in community energy projects, and mustering political and financial

support for community energy conservation projects. Michigan-manufactured energy products by the Office of Michigan Products Promotion/Michigan Department of Commerce will be on display.

The conference is jointly sponsored by the Energy Administrative/Michigan Department of Commerce, the Small Business Association of Michigan, Michigan Municipal League, Michigan School Business Officials, Michigan Association of Energy Management Professionals, Michigan Community Action Agency Association, the Bureau of Community Services/Michigan Department of Labor, and the U.S. Department of Energy.

Registration materials are available. Contact the Energy Hotline at 1-800-292-4704 for a registration packet.

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