

# City Born In Turmoil, Strife

Few cities in America have had a more exciting history than the City of Livonia in the 20 years of its existence.

Born in turmoil in 1950, the 36-square mile area that once was rich farm land and the "cheese capital" of the world has experienced:

1--The greatest growth of any area in the state over the period from 1950 to 1970.

2--The largest industrial fire in history with the burning of the GM Hydromatic plant on Plymouth Road.

3--An internal political fight in which a city attorney haled the entire city council into court over a salary battle--and won.

4--The hectic days when the city attorney threw the community into turmoil with charges and investigations that included testimony from hooded witnesses and the claim that the cemetery at the corner of Six Mile and Middle Belt was a burial ground for the Chicago and Cleveland underworld.

5--The excitement of a claim that a jockey had been murdered at the race track and buried in full regalia only a few feet deep in the same cemetery.

6--The only bank robbery in which the police ran away from the scene when the young officer on duty remarked, "Those 45's can make big holes in you."

7--A citizens' revolt against the proposal for a city park on a 25-acre parcel of ground now owned by the school system on the west side of Merriman Road between Five and Six Mile Roads.

PRIOR TO 1950 when the coming of the race track and first large industrial plants set the wheels of change in motion, Livonia Township shared a common heritage with all communities that emerged from the heavily wooded wilderness of the old Northwest Territory.

The Northwest Territory, established by the famous ordinance of 1787, was the mecca for the thousands of people pushing westward from the original 13 colonies.

The new frontier lured adventurous trappers and dedicated missionaries, who were followed by the pioneer families who cleared the land, built homes and began the task of tilling the virgin soil.

Like thousands of others throughout the Territory, Livonia's pioneers emigrated from New England and New York. As a matter of fact it was the Livonia, N.Y., office that furnished much of the inspiration in the struggle to get similar identification for Livonia, Michigan.

Livonia Township didn't come into existence until 1835 when the transition from wilderness to farmlands was almost complete. Prosperous farms in the township were producing corn, wheat, oats and vegetables. Fruit orchards were numerous and many farmers raised sheep and dairy cattle.

It is interesting to note that the Chevrolet Spring and Bumper plant on Eckles Road was built on the site of a large peach orchard in the early 50's and some of the trees are still standing.

In the network of wagon trails and crude roads, small settlements began to emerge. Among them were such hamlets as Livonia Center, Elm, and Newburgh. Each of them clustered around a general store, a blacksmith shop and a church.

IT WAS only natural that with the raising of dairy cattle that the farmers turned to the production of cheese, and by 1890 five such factories in the township were producing more than a million pounds of cheese annually.

Built on this economy the area thrived and the story of Livonia Township was one of rural progress. Wagon trails were replaced by concrete highways, general stores disappeared, and blacksmith shops gave way to gasoline stations, as more and more of the farming was done by machine.

In the meantime more neighborhood communities began to make their appearance in the township. Among them were Clarenceville, Rosedale Gardens,

Coventry Gardens, Alden Willage and West Point Park.

In spite of this growth the township boasted a population of only 8,714 in 1950 and its assessed valuation of real and personal property totaled little more than \$6,500,000 and the township government was operating on about \$22,000 a year.

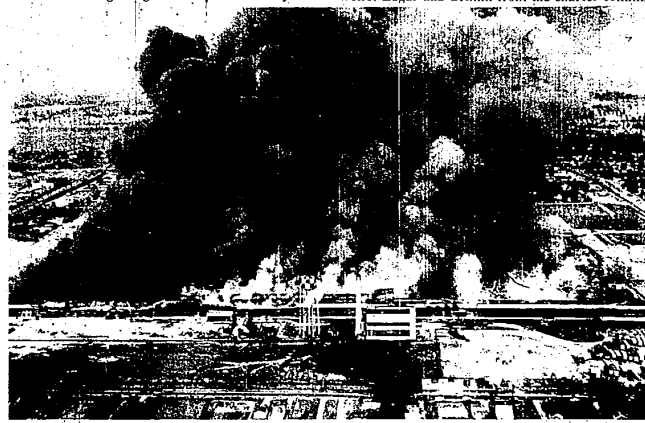
One of the quieter chapters in the history of the city concerns the years between 1940 and 1948. During these years when most other communities were thriving with the stimulant of World War II, Livonia remained a farm community.

But with the end of the war came a great change.

First, General Motors signaled the beginning of the transition to an urban center by constructing the huge hydromatic plant. It was soon followed by the Ford Motor Co. that built the huge parts depot at Plymouth Rd. and Middle Belt.

Then came the race track and the entire complexion of the area changed.

AFTER A LONG, hard campaign designed to make certain of gaining the "race track money," the



WORST IN HISTORY — The City of Livonia was only two years old when this blaze destroyed the GM Hydromatic plant on Plymouth with an estimated loss of \$55 million. It still ranks as the worst industrial fire on record. Aside from the financial loss three employees were trapped and killed while 15 others were injured. A

## Alert Taxpayers Pose A Puzzler

Many questions have been answered and many problems solved in the City of Livonia during the 20 years of its existence.

There is one, however, that never has been answered satisfactorily and it has to do with the wooded area on the west side of Merriman Rd. where the schools are hopeful of establishing an amphitheater.

During the second year of its existence the City of Livonia, through the city council, purchased the 25-acre plot for \$9,000.

With that sale, the plot became the property of the taxpayers.

There, some alert citizens have asked, why did the school board have to use \$50,000 of taxpayer money to purchase something the taxpayers already owned?

The unanswered question of part of the city's exciting history.

1938 to its present population of 118,000. And he has been a prime mover in many city developments, and has served as chairman of the advisory boards at Madonna College and St. Mary Hospital.

Eddie, as you may have guessed, was one of the Minute Men who campaigned vigorously many years ago to incorporate Livonia as a city.

WITH THIS background, plus a powerful memory and unrivaled skill as a story-teller, he is able to bring you a picture of Livonia that unleashes warmth and rings with authenticity.

But, then, this is something that Eddie Edgar does with every story he writes.

Eddie is now a roving editor for Observer Newspapers, but he started his career in journalism more than 50 years ago in Allentown, Pa., just a few miles from his birthplace in Catsaqua.

Leaving high school in the ninth grade to help support his family, Eddie brought little in the way of formal education to his work. But he made up this lack with drive, persistence and an unflagging curiosity.

He hadn't been in the newspaper business too long before the late Edgar Quest, famed Free Press poet, invited Eddie to come to Detroit and work on his paper as a sports writer. Eddie came, worked his way up to sports editor, and stayed with the Free Press 25 years.

Along the way Eddie found time to be bowling co-ordinator for the State of Michigan.

Eddie, at 72, is one of the undisputed deans of newspaper editing and writing in Michigan and the rest of the country as well.

"All I ask," says Eddie, "is that the Good Lord let me breathe and open my eyes in the morning; I'll find the strength to do the rest."

Countless readers in observant hope the Lord will grant Eddie Edgar his wish for many years to come.

residents agreed to incorporate as a home rule city. This was not as easy as it first appeared.

The township officials immediately were challenged in their plan by a group in the southeast section that wanted to incorporate just three square miles as the City of Elm. This plan would have taken in the GM plant, the race track and the Ford parts depot.

All sorts of promises were made, even to the point where concrete streets would be the order of the day and every child would be guaranteed a college education.

This brought on a fight that carried through the Wayne County Board of Supervisors and the courts before the township officials won.

The voters then selected a charter commission that included Harry S. Wolfe, chairman; W.W. Edgar, vice chairman; Carl Wagenschutz, Ray Grimm, Rudolph Kleiner, Fred Weinert, Daniel McKinney, Leo P. Nye and William Brashear.

The charter was written within a 90-day limit and finally approved on May 24, 1950, along with the election of Township Supervisor Jess Zeigler as the first mayor, and a seven-man council that included Wolfe, Edgar and Grimm from the charter commis-

sion, along with Mrs. Nettie Carey, Harvey Jahn, John Whitehead and William Taylor.

Over the first four years the transition moved rapidly. By this time the population had jumped above 18,000 and large developers invaded the area.

SUDDENLY, it was realized that such things as water and sewers were needed. And there was need for both a fire department and a police department. These were started and the Department of Public Works began to function.

The incorporation of the 36 square miles was a courageous stand, but problems started to mount. Through a series of ordinances and some stalwart planning they were met. A new city hall was built at a cost of \$282,000 and the city really was in business.

The fire department quickly was augmented. So was the police department and the city was humming.

At this time came the first signs of unrest as the taxpayers in the various areas started clamoring for sewers and water. The township had started a water department, but it was inadequate to handle the new problems until help came.

Sewers were another matter.

In the clamoring came a new political machine, known as The Monitors, who promised a sewer system that would provide more service. This group argued against combined sewers and concentrated on the sanitary sewer.

It was a popular move and in the 1954 election the Monitors toppled the "Old Guard" and installed Elbert Hartom, a chicken farmer from the northeast section as the mayor. Then things really began to happen.

First, he appointed a chap named Russell Ashmore as the city attorney. Ashmore, in turn, started all sorts of investigations, even to calling "hooded" witnesses in some of his cases.

MOST OF HIS charges had to do with Brookside Cemetery at the corner of Six Mile Rd. and Middle Belt. He charged first that it was being used as a burial ground by the Cleveland-Chicago underworld. Next, he claimed a murder was committed at the race track and that the victim was buried in uniform in the middle of night.

Ashmore swore that he went to the cemetery in the dead of night and dug up the grave himself and saw the uniformed body.

By this time, the city was in an uproar.

Finally, city council set up its own investigating committee with power of subpoenas and started hearings in the new city hall.

None of Ashmore's charges could be proven and the city council asked Mayor Hartom to remove the attorney from office. He refused. The council, acting

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## Much History Written Inside These Old Walls

No building in the City of Livonia has a more colorful history than the old white building on the north side of Seven Mile Rd., a short distance west of Farmington Rd.

Standing there, partly hidden by trees and shrubbery, is a link with the days before the Civil War when Livonia Township was little more than a few houses in an agricultural oasis.

Known as Friendly Acres, it is the headquarters of the Historical Society, but within its walls a lot of American history was acted and written.

Built in 1846 for the Livonia meetings of the Religious Society of Friends commonly known as Quakers, it was constructed of hand-hewn oak beams and the joists are made of 10-inch logs.

IT ALSO boasts a keystone-shaped fireplace that was hand-made and throughout all of its rooms there are signs of American history in the raw.



FRIENDLY ACRES — This peaceful, quiet structure belies a turbulent past. Once, according to words passed down by time, it served as an underground headquarters during the slave days. And it became the

feeding ground for that kind of labor. For many years Friendly Acres was allowed to deteriorate. But the city fathers, sensing its historical value for future generations, restored it in 1944.

It first was converted to a residence in 1860 and then allowed to deteriorate with the ravages of time.

Sensing its value to future generations, the city acquired the property and had it restored in 1944.

In those days it shared honors with the little old red school house that stood on the southeast corner of Six Mile Rd. and Newburgh Rd. This was the oldest school house in Michigan at the time it was razed several years ago.

With its passing, Friendly Acres now stands alone as the most colorful historical site in the city.

## Livonia's Own Writes For You

W.W. (Eddie) Edgar has been given thousands of writing assignments in his 50 years as a newspaperman, but he tackled the writing of this publication with particular relish.

Eddie, you see, has been a resident of Livonia for the last 22 years. What's more, he was vice chairman of the Charter Commission that wrote Livonia's city charter in 1949; served as vice president of Livonia's first city council, and was the organizer and first executive secretary of Livonia's Chamber of Commerce!

He has seen Livonia grow from 8,000 persons in



W.W. (EDDIE) EDGAR