

**HISTORY THROUGH THE EYES OF A  
NEIGHBORHOOD:**

**THE HILLCREST AREA UP TO 1930**

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## INTRODUCTION

When the glaciers made their last pass through Michigan those thousands of years ago, one of their deeds was the creation of the Kalamazoo Valley and the rolling hills that surround it. This paper will be a history of one of these hill regions of Kalamazoo; the Hillcrest area. Hillcrest is that land presently bounded to the north by Howard St., south by the Kleinstueck Preserve, east by South Junior High School and west by Oakland Dr. It contains the present-day Howard, Hillcrest and Maple Street hills.

Like all neighborhoods, its role has changed many times over the years. A vast knowledge of information is oftentimes lost in these role transitions. It is my hope to recover some of this heritage, discovering the stories and secrets a neighborhood has to tell.

## I. THE INDIAN ERA

The name Kalamazoo itself reveals its Indian heritage. The city is located in an area that the native Americans found to their liking. The river was a good one for both fishing and traveling. It was located on the site of one of the river's few good portaging locations. (1) Numerous fertile prairies nearby were easily adapted to Indian methods of farming. Wildlife seemed to abound everywhere.

With such credentials, Kalamazoo quickly became an Indian center. Many trails criss-crossed the area leading to and from surrounding settlements. One of these early trails passed through the Hillcrest area. A well-traveled route, it followed Westnedge Avenue out of downtown and then cut across to Oakland Drive in order to avoid the cliff-like nature of Westnedge Hill. This trail most probably made its way through what is now the Kleinstueck Preserve. After it hooked up with modern-day Oakland Drive, it brought early travelers to a "village on the northwest side of Prairie Round near Schoolcraft." (2) Though the trail's exact route between Westnedge and Oakland is not known. It can be safely said that the Hillcrest region was not an unknown one to local Indians.

Encircled by forests, Indians were able to occupy the area around Kalamazoo with little outside influence for hundreds of years. But slowly the White Man was moving into the region. First in the form of explorers and missionaries and later as traders and soldiers, the new Americans were making their presence felt.

The year 1812 found the young American nation again at war with the British. The Great Lakes became a very important battleground. Local Indians sided with the British and fought by their side in battle. The Kalamazoo area was made part of the action when an American prisoner of war camp and a blacksmith's shop were established here by the British. The war camp was located on the land that is now occupied by the Municipal Airport.

Despite much effort, exactly where the blacksmith's forge stood is still a local mystery. However, all indications place it on a piece of land surrounded by marsh somewhere in or near the Hillcrest region. This is known from a speech that was given at the village's Quarter-Centennial Celebration held in 1855, the text of which survives. The small forge is there described as ". . . distant about one-mile from the present Axtell Farm House (on) a mound shaped spot of land entirely surrounded by marsh . . . a shop in which two men (one French, the other English) labored in repairing the guns of the Indians." (3)

An undated newspaper account from the early part of this century describes the "smithy."

" . . . This pioneer mechanic shop was set up here by the English government and a smith was stationed here to repair fire-locks, prepare bullets, etc. . . . the smithy consisted of a round block upon which an anvil had been placed and the remains of a crude forge built of logs and earth but which had crumbled away in the lapse of years." (4)

Reportedly a popular picnicking grounds for early pioneers, (5) it now appears that its location is lost to history. However, two good theories do exist concerning its former whereabouts. Mr.

Alexis Praus, Director of the Kalamazoo Public Museum and long interested in the matter, recently uncovered a newspaper article which placed the forge in the vicinity of where the Crosstown Parkway Apartments now stand, roughly one mile from the Axtell house. This is where he believes it was.(6)

Another possible location is that of the marsh which sits in the middle of the nearby Kleinstueck Preserve. This site fits the Quarter Centennial description, and a number of Indian arrowheads were found there by Carl G. Kleinstueck in the early years of this century. (7)

However, with the face of the land so drastically altered by roads, buildings, and a substantially lower water table, true verification may now be impossible.

## II EARLY WHITE SETTLEMENT

Just a few years after the Second British War, the immigration of the White man into the Kalamazoo vicinity began. In 1827 or 28, Basil Harrison became the county's first permanent white settler as he made his home on Prairie Ronde. (1) Other pioneers started arriving with increasing regularity. In the decade of the 1830's Kalamazoo had a land boom of unprecedented proportions. It took only a short period of time before the Hillcrest area became caught up in it. The land's Abstract of Title states that a certain Cyren Burdick purchased the Hillcrest parcel of land in 1838 from its owner – the United States of America. Burdick was an important figure in the village's early history, being the proprietor of the town's big hotel, The Kalamazoo House. (2) Burdick purchased the Hillcrest land for the same reason he bought many other pieces of property in the area; he was a heavy land speculator. Burdick died a short time later and the land soon went into the ownership of Hosea B. Huston, the owner of the village's first store (3) as well as the first mayor of the town in 1843. (4) Huston also had the dubious honor of being accused of selling "watered-down whiskey to the Indians" in a county history. (5) Huston bought and sold land much in the same manner as did Burdick. Many years later, his daughter Minnie wrote: "Father often told me how in a few years we would be able to go and live on one of his big farms but those (dreams) never materialized." (6)

Huston soon sold the land and it quickly passed through the hands of several more land investors. As of yet no one was interested in it as a site for a homestead. Hillcrest was merely a vacant piece of land on a hill that overlooked much of the same. The land probably remained in its natural state for nearly fifteen years after it was first purchased.

In the year 1853, the owner of the land is listed as Leonard Babcock, who had bought the land two years previously. (7) In the tax assessment rolls of 1853, next to the legal description of the property, the words "house" and "barn" are scrawled. The value of the land jumped to 500 dollars from the previous year's 150 dollar assessment. The Hillcrest land has its first occupants!

However, the stay is a short one. Perhaps the land was too hilly to effectively farm, maybe the soil was too sandy. For whatever reason, during the next year the house and land was sold to a prominent lawyer from town by the name of John M. Edwards. Edwards had purchased several adjoining tracts of land so that his Hillcrest holdings totaled nearly 80 acres. (8) The County Map of 1861, shows the land in his name and the house built by Babcock standing near the corner of what is now Oakland Drive and Howard Sts.

Edwards, who held the positions of Justice of the Peace and Board of Education President during his lifetime, owned the property for ten years. However, during this time his home residence was listed in the City directories as being on South St. As far as can be determined, Edwards never lived on his Hillcrest property. A man of substantial means, it is possible that he used it as a "country cottage with a hilltop view." In the early months of 1865, Edwards sold the land. Perhaps the proximity of the new Insane Asylum and the subsequent City taxes made it less desirable. However, precisely why he bought the land, what he used it for, and why he sold it are no better than conjectures.

The group of people who bought the land from Edwards were interested in establishing a nursery on Hillcrest's sandy soil. By the summer of 1865, the Bragg and Potter Nursery on Asylum Ave. (now Oakland Drive) was established. (9) In 1968, Edgar M. Potter (1834-1896) became the sole owner of the company and for almost twenty more years the land would be known as Potter's "Asylum Hill Nurseries." He took up residence in the not so old Babcock house which still stood near the corner. There he would live with his wife and five children (a sixth died in infancy) while steadily improving his nursery and orchard.

In 1870, the Federal Products of Agriculture Census listed the value of his fifty-acre farm at 10,000 dollars, a fair amount of money for those days. In that year, the records show that he harvested 200 bushels of Indian corn, 100 bushels of peas and beans, 50 bushels of potatoes, and 100 dollars worth of orchard products. This was all in addition to his nursery business.

The Holland's Kalamazoo City Directory of 1876 featured Potter among its biographies. It stated:

"During the last 10 years the above named gentleman has labored with more than ordinary care in order to approach as nearly as possible perfection in the cultivation of a fine nursery and its stock . . . Besides raising and cultivating an extensive assortment and fine quality of ordinary stock, he is an extensive fruit grower having some of the choicest and most prolific varieties of raspberries and strawberries in the country . . . Peach, cherry, apple, pear, together with lesser plants and vines may be obtained . . . as well as evergreens in great variety." (10)

Four years later in the 1880 Agricultural Census, the records specify that he had farmed in that year 7 acres of corn, 6 acres of wheat, 1 acre of apple trees, 2 1/2 acres of peach trees, 12 acres of nursery and 2 1/2 acres of vineyards. The records show that he certainly was a nurseryman with eclectic tastes. The Hillcrest land must have been a virtual patchwork of farming and nursery crops, changing from year to year.

In 1887, Potter sold his nursery land to a well-known Kalamazooan, Silas Hubbard (1812-94). Hubbard, among other things, was one of the founders of the Kalamazoo Paper Company. A wealthy man, he had extensive property holdings in the area, owning valuable farms, houses, and lots in Kalamazoo and its vicinity. (11)

In 1885, Silas Hubbard's daughter Caroline and her husband Carl G. Kleinstueck (with Mr. Hubbard's help) moved into the Abner Darling residence just south of the nursery. With the acquisition of Potter's land, the Kleinstuecks owned quite an area – all the property between Howard St. and the present Spruce Drive, from Oakland Drive to Stearns Ave. This area includes all of the present Hillcrest neighborhood. Mr. Kleinstueck (being a native of Saxony, Germany) would proudly call it "Saxonia Farms" and his house was soon painted in shades of green and white, the colors of his homeland. (12) With the Kleinstuecks' arrival in the fall of 1885, Hillcrest entered into a new era.

### III. THE KLEINSTUECK ERA

The space of time just covered is confessedly a very hazy one. The newspapers didn't carry much news of the region, no known pictures survive, all the people are long dead and their families moved away. The only resources available are the meager entries contained in census materials and City directories. Simply, very little is known of the early inhabitants of the Hillcrest area. They were just land speculators who came and went and farmers who lived and died, both of whom left little behind. But this obscurity starts to fade as we approach the turn of the century. The empty spaces in our story can be filled in.

As mentioned earlier, the Kleinstuecks moved into their new home in 1885. A fine farm house done in the style of the Italian Revival, it was less than fifteen years old. The previous resident of the house was Abner Darling. Evidently a poultry farmer, Mr. Kleinstueck also engaged in egg production for a short while. (1) Mrs. Caroline B. Crane, a national women's figure and close friend of Mrs. Kleinstueck, would later write a tribute to her:

“The farm was soon changed over to dairying. During the following years both Carl and Carrie worked like slaves and maintained what was at that time a almost unheard of degree of cleanliness and sanitation in the production, handling, and distribution of milk and cream to this community.”(2)

A later resident of Hillcrest believes that much of this milk was sold to the nearby Asylum for the Insane.(3) Mrs. Crane stated that the Kleinstuecks were in the dairy business for 12 years (roughly up to around the turn of the century).

It was during these dairying years that a new form of transportation was being developed that would have a profound effect on the way people traveled and where they lived. This new transportation vehicle was called the “streetcar” and a “line” was soon to run right in front of Carl Kleinstueck's house.

The idea of using railroads for city travel was not a new one; it was first tried in New York City in 1832. However the idea caught on rather slowly.(4) Streetcars would not reach Kalamazoo until 1884.(5) These first ones were horse-pulled, which limited both where they could go and how fast they could get there. Their top speed was only six miles per hour and it was necessary to avoid any steep inclines.(6) Limited mostly to downtown service, only five miles of track were laid down that first year in Kalamazoo.(7)

The big breakthrough in the industry came with the advent of the streetcar's electric version. The electric cars hooked up to an electric wire suspended above the street. Highly acclaimed, these new streetcars made their first appearance locally in June of 1893.(8) That very same month something happened which would have an important effect on the Hillcrest area. The local streetcar company built an electric line all the way out to a piece of land it had recently bought on Wood's Lake.(9) Resorts were very popular in the 1890s with both Gull Lake and South Haven drawing the crowds away from Kalamazoo. The streetcar company bought the Wood's Lake site with the intention of turning it into an amusement park and resort; one that was easily within the reach of the City.(10) For the next thirty years, thousands of people would jam the streetcars during the summer months on the Wood's Lake Run.

In its prime the resort was quite a large establishment. Improvements were made yearly and by the first decade of this century it could boast of having a movie theater, full-sized roller coaster, dance hall, shooting gallery, penny arcade, and a band shell in addition to places for picnicking, swimming, boating, and winter ice skating.(11)

The park was also a popular one for speakers. In 1907, it hosted three-time Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. Several thousand Kalamazooans waited for him at the park after he had missed his train connection in Niles.(12) Three years later the noted American Socialist leader, Eugene V. Debs, spoke in the park's dance pavilion in a last minute move after he was barred from speaking within the city limits.(13)

Erma Bloom of 4231 Oakland is 93 years old and has lived in her father's farm house all her life. She can remember when the Asylum Ave. streetcar line first went in. She was attending the one-room schoolhouse in the Oakwood area that was located on what is now Parkview Ave. The first year she went to school (1892), Wood's Lake had nothing but a cow pasture around it. The following year the streetcar tracks ran down the middle of the street and there was a resort area on the lake called Lake View Park.(14) When the streetcar company bought the land it was reported in the *Gazette*:

“Tuesday began the transformation of the naturally picturesque scenery around Wood's Lake which will change it from a romantic spot to a beautiful place which in the future will be known as Lake View Park . . . an immense pavilion or two with accommodations possibly up to 500 persons will be erected. There are also plans for bathing rooms, steam and rowboats, and a toboggan slide into the lake. In the summertime, top-notch entertainment including parachute drops with balloon rides will be featured.”(15)

All during the summer of 1893, the *Gazette* published articles about the crowds that were flocking out to this new amusement center. On July 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of that year the streetcar company reported that it carried 9,000 people out to the park.(16) This figure represents more than one-third of the City's population at the time! The streetcar people had struck gold.

With the advent of the streetcars the era of the horse and buggy and the long trip into town was nearly eliminated. The Asylum Avenue streetcar line ran out to Lake View Park all year round.(17) It could get the commuter wherever he was going in a small fraction of the time it had taken previously. It was now possible for people who lived in the Hillcrest area and other places like it to live on the fringes of town and go downtown to work in the morning. Hillcrest was no longer restricted to farmers and country gentlemen; the age of the suburbs was born. As one local man put it:

“By them (the streetcars) the whole county can be brought together into one great metropolis. It means that the laboring man can have his home on the airy hills and be at his work in the morning.”(18)

The possibility was there. The Asylum Avenue-Oakwood area could have become a flourishing suburb in the 1890's, but it never did. Maybe the timing was wrong. The '90's were the times of the elaborate Queen Anne style of architecture. Frank Henderson would build his “castle” on West Main Hill and try to lure others into the area but he, too, would be unsuccessful. For years



his mammoth home would stand starkly alone. It seemed to Kalamazooans that Queen Anne belonged in the City. Henderson Park would have to wait and so would Hillcrest.

A further problem was the questionable reliability of winter streetcar service. The tracks would often be snow-covered and impassable during the winter months. Sometimes it would be a week before the tracks were cleared and service made possible. Businessmen couldn't afford such folly.

To the misinformed, the location of the Asylum was yet another problem. Newspapers still ran front page sensationalistic stories about the institution's escapees. Filled with bizarre rumors, there were many Kalamazooans frightened of living so close to such a place.

It was probably a combination of these reasons that kept the Asylum Avenue area from developing into a residential district. Life didn't change all that much for the Kleinstuecks and other farmers who lined Asylum Ave. For Hillcrest this meant more dairy farming, at least until the first year or two of this century. It was then that Carl Kleinstueck pursued an old interest. It was a strange one to this country – the investigation in the use of peat as a fuel.

When Mr. Kleinstueck moved to "Saxonia Farms" in 1885, one of the first things he did was to survey his new property. The *Gazette* later reported:

". . . in a corner of it he found a swamp which was badly in need of draining. The soil was pitch black and free from any stones, sand, or other minerals . . . on this day he sunk a 12 foot pole into this black muck and still couldn't reach its bottom."(19)

When the muck dried several days later he recognized it as peat, the same substance he saw used for fuel while in Germany years before. Because he knew that other forms of fuel were presently cheap, he neglected his findings for some time and became a dairyman.

When the timing was better in 1902, he took a "peat tour" of Europe observing how the substance was mined and processed. When he returned to America he established an experimental peat plant at Gun Marsh in Allegan County.(20) In all, he purchased over 1000 acres in several nearby counties in which to carry out his work. He soon also built a mine on his own property on Asylum Avenue. For nearly ten years he dug peat in what is now the center portion of Kleinstueck Preserve. He built a little railroad track which he used to haul the peat up the hill to his house. His daughter Pauline recalled that the family used peat as their only fuel source one whole winter. "It really worked," she would later say (with a slight hint of amazement).(21)

Though highly optimistic about its possibilities, he never could sell the idea too well to local buyers and he closed down his operations sometime after 1912.(22) The old peat bog in the Preserve still contains quite a large supply to the present day. One can still see the black substance along with a rail or two from the old railroad track.

Mr. Kleinstueck could afford to try his hand at many different things and the household was always an interesting one. Friends would ride the streetcar from town and spend the day in the

gracious company of their hosts. Never a place of dull moments, many stories have circulated down to the present time which bear repeating. Most of the stories are in regards to Mr. Kleinstueck who was the more eccentric of the two.

Mr. Kleinstueck was always viewed as a gentlemanly character of sorts. A lover of the outdoors, his fond affection for animals was well known. He took quite a fancy to wild animals in particular. His daughter Pauline remembers the many creatures which roamed her house and yard:

“We had all sorts of animals, as many as you could ever conceive. If anyone had a sick beast they would bring it to father.”(23)

The animals on the property included horses, a mule, a coyote, foxes and a full grown bear. The bear is a story in itself.

It seems that some local hunters had found a little cub in the woods and brought it into town where it quickly became a conversation piece in a shop window. But it soon began to grow as all such beasts do, and a call was made to Mr. Kleinstueck to see if he was interested in it. Of course he was, so taking a length of chain, he rode the streetcar into town. He picked up the now fairly large bear from the shop owner and proceeded to take it home with him on the streetcar. Being feisty by nature, the bear commenced to claw its new owner. The beast finally made it to its new home but not without inflicting a wound or two and thoroughly frightening the other riders on the streetcar. (24)

The bear lived many years in the yard in a cage or tied to a tree. Every once in a while it would break loose and head straight to its favorite place, the recesses of the back of the kitchen stove. Mrs. Kleinstueck, who was never as big a fan of the outdoors as was her husband, would refuse to re-enter the kitchen until the creature was removed. The bear later had to be killed as a law made it illegal to own a bear within city limits. Not wanting it to end up in a zoo, Mr. Kleinstueck gave it a big bucket of honey and after the bear was finished eating it, he reluctantly shot the animal. (25) It was buried a little way behind the house.

As a great lover of the woods, Mr. Kleinstueck was particularly interested in anything that had to do with Indians. He was born in Germany where such people didn't exist and when he came to this country he grew to a fond fascination of them. For several years he allowed a full-blooded Pottawatomie Indian and his family of five to live in the woods behind the house in a little log cabin. The Indian, Chief Louis Mo Saw, helped Mr. Kleinstueck by working down in the peat mine while his wife assisted Mrs. Kleinstueck around the house.(26) It is also said that the Kleinstuecks often had Indians out to the house; they would drop in while in the area knowing they were fully welcome. When an Indian would over-indulge in alcohol and find himself in the care of the sheriff, Mr. Kleinstueck would on occasion post bail.(27)

An avid collector of Indian and military memorabilia, the house became to overcrowded with guns and animal skins and the like that Mr. Kleinstueck built a western-style log cabin next to his house in which to store them.(28) This was his “Western Museum” and a showcase to friends and family. The stone fireplace and chimney to this cabin can still be seen on the north side of the house.

Other stories deal with Mr. Kleinstueck's "possessive" attitude towards his property. Every day he would walk his property line and look for trespassers. If any were caught they were hauled back to the house and given a lecture concerning property rights.(29) Mr. Cornelius Van Haaften of 1339 Howard St. remembers being a young boy and snooping around the Kleinstueck property. He was greeted with a shotgun blast.(30)

This strong-willed nature is evident in a humorous incident which was reported in the *Gazette* in the summer of 1909. It seems that a patient had escaped from the nearby Asylum. Attendants from the hospital had traced him to the Kleinstueck home. Moments earlier Mr. Kleinstueck had seen the patient, perceived the situation and had placed the individual in an upper chamber of his house waiting for the attendants to arrive. When they did, Mr. Kleinstueck answered the door with a "pleasant smile" and an attendant "laid violent hold of him by the collar." With Mr. Kleinstueck protesting greatly, he was dragged over to the Male Ward before the matter could be straightened out. Rather frustrated by the affair, the paper reported that at one point Mr. Kleinstueck "offered to bring explosives into the game" and that "it was only after much persuasion and argumentation that he was released."(31) However, profound apologies were made and the altercation presumably was soon forgotten. Such were the peculiar hazards associated with living in the Hillcrest area.

If Mr. Kleinstueck was the woodsy, outdoorsman type, it would seem that his wife was the opposite. Mrs. Caroline Kleinstueck was raised in the City. An intelligent and extremely able woman, she was one of the first women to graduate from the University of Michigan where she later attained a Master's Degree.(32) She became a prominent local civic leader and a well-known member of People's Church. Being people of varying interests one supposes that Mr. And Mrs. Kleinstueck complemented each other well. Certainly they were an interesting couple and a rich source of colorful anecdotes. The Kleinstuecks and their descendants have played important roles in local affairs down to the present day.

While "rural" Hillcrest was biding its time, the rest of Kalamazoo was bustling with activity. The decade of 1900-1910 saw an incredible period of growth and expansion in Kalamazoo. The population of the City grew faster in the first ten years of this century than in any other decade from the Civil War to 1950.(33) Kalamazoo's population jumped from 24,404 in 1900 to 39,437 in 1910, an increase of 62%. The main reason behind this increase was the rapid growth of the paper industry.(34) Carl Kleinstueck was part owner of the Kalamazoo Paper Co. and shared in this prosperity.

This rapid population growth made it necessary to build a great amount of new residential homes. In 1904, it was reported in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* that the demand for real estate was the largest in the City's history. It was written:

". . . It is especially difficult for a family with children to rent a home in Kalamazoo. Houses are practically all taken. Children as a rule will not be taken in business blocks, tenements or flats . . . the city promises to grow in all directions."(35)

By the following year a building boom was in progress: “. . . indicators are that 1,000 homes will be erected in 1905, the record of 800 set in 1904, will be exceeded,”<sup>(36)</sup> the newspaper proudly announced.

Curiously however, no building was done along the streetcar line out to the still popular amusement park on Wood’s Lake. Although thousands would travel the route every weekend (jamming the cars far beyond capacity) and a full-fledged housing shortage existed, the area was still sparsely developed. It was not until 1908 that new houses started to go up along Asylum Avenue. One of the first areas to be developed along the street was the Evanston St. area just South of Howard St. This new neighborhood was an important step for the region which had been so tranquil during most of this century’s first decade. It finally appeared that the time had come when the farmland and nurseries along Asylum Ave. would yield to time and be broken up into residential districts. In a few years, most of the land would be platted into suburban neighborhoods. Hillcrest was again entering into a new age.

#### IV. "BACK TO THE HILLS" – THE MODERN ERA

With Kalamazoo's population boom in the first decade of this century came an acute need for new housing. In order to meet its needs, the City spread out into the hill regions around it. The *Gazette* called it a "Back to the Hills" movement and indeed it was. A rediscovering of one's lost ties with nature was stressed. It seemed all the new local suburban plats were "parks:" Henderson Park, Waldo Park, South Park, Shakespeare Park – the list goes on. The *Gazette* tried to explain this new trend:

"There are many reasons for the exodus to the hills. First is the ever increasing desire of all humans to build their homes as far as convenience will allow him from the pavements and the noise of the city to a place where they can hear the singing of birds and have flower beds and many other things impossible downtown. Second, because of the excellent streetcar service which makes it easy for the worker or professional man to reach factory, shop, or place of business. Third, because of the fact that (downtown) residence lots are too high priced for the average man looking for a site to build a home, the lots on the crest o the hill are as yet very reasonable in price."<sup>(1)</sup>

The Asylum Ave. district became part of this movement away from the downtown. Although the area was prime for development since the mid-1890's, no neighborhoods were platted till Oakwood Heights and the Evanston area were mapped out in 1908.

Located by the amusement part on Wood's Lake (by then called Oakwood Park), "Oakwood Heights" boasted of graded streets, gravel sidewalks and water hookups. Over 1,000 shade trees were planted. With only two dollars needed to secure a lot, all 282 of them were sold within twelve days of being put on the market.<sup>(2)</sup> The development of the Asylum Ave.,- Oakwood area had begun with a bang.

Sometime that same year a more modest building project was going up in the Evanston St. area, the land just west of Hillcrest. It was being platted by a man who would become a familiar face in the building of homes up and down Asylum – Orley Haas. He would later develop the Duke, Duchess, and Whites Road areas.

In 1908, a house was built in this Evanston area and the following spring a printer, William Anderson, and his wife Jennie would move in. Mrs. Anderson still lives in the house and remembers that time well. Their little white bungalow enjoyed none of the luxuries of the City that spring. There was no electricity, a kerosene lamp lit the house at night. The only water was the well water borrowed from a neighbor. The toilet was outside in the outhouse. Asylum Ave. wasn't paved of course, it was dirt. After a rainfall it more properly resembled mud. In 1907, the district's mail carrier wrote for the paper:

"Asylum Avenue is the worst roadway for deep holes and ruts that I know of anywhere around Kalamazoo . . . the streetcar tracks are high up in the middle of the road with two wagon tracks on the sides. One is very sandy with deep holes and ruts and the other is fairly hard in places but has such deep holes that horses must be brought almost to a walk to get through without an accident."<sup>(3)</sup>

The road was scarcely better when the Andersons moved in two years later. Mrs. Anderson remembers wading through mud up to her knees as she went to catch the streetcar into town.

The streetcar was extremely important to the Andersons and the handful of people who lived near them in these early years. No one owned a car, she remembers, and the streetcar was the only way of getting around outside of walking.(4) Her husband rode the streetcar to work every morning and they would not have moved into the district if it had not been available. Even with the streetcar making the downtown only minutes away, Mrs. Anderson still considered her home to be “out in the country.” When she told others of where she was moving, the standard reply was: “Why would you want to live out there?”(5) But it soon became obvious that a good number of people didn’t mind.

In 1911, the Waite addition (just south of Evanston) was created when the 76 acre P.S. Waite farm was divided up into 190 good-sized lots. Orley Haas would soon be associated with it.(6) It was in this same year that Carl Kleinstueck decided to sell a large chunk of land that lay to the north of his house. The buyer was interested in developing a residential neighborhood on it. The next year the Hillcrest Land Co. was established and the Hillcrest Plat was designed and laid out.(7) A well-known local businessman, Walter M. Blinks, soon gained control of the company and became the moving force behind the neighborhood. Blinks, who would develop over one-thousand local lots in his lifetime, appointed Don Snooks as his sale agent.(8)

Work on Hillcrest began. Mr. Kleinstueck’s un-harvested cabbages from the year before were dug up, a big row of pine trees along newly-named Oakland Drive were removed, land was leveled, and the streets mapped out and graded. The neighborhood’s deed was written with the following conditions:

“No building to be nearer than 30 feet to the front property line. No dwelling to cost less than 2,000 dollars. For residence purposes only. No dealing in liquor on premises. Septic tanks to be installed and no out-closets built.”(9)

A common practice of the time period, blacks were not allowed to live in Hillcrest.(10)

The paper neighborhood soon became a reality and the results were disappointing to some. Mr. Kleinstueck was upset that the streets were so symmetrical. He would have liked them to follow the contours of the land.(11) Many people complained that the lots (mostly 44 by 132 feet) were too small – they were just like the cramped lots of downtown!(12)

Nonetheless, people started buying up the Hillcrest land at 250 to 500 dollars a lot. A few even started building. Orley Haas bought many of these parcels and proceeded to build houses on them then offering the already completed house and land for sale. In front of these homes he had electric cement street lights installed which were operated from inside the house.(13) No longer operable, several of these streetlights still stand on the upper portions of Maple and Hillcrest Sts. Earmarking those homes built by Haas. Other people opted to buy the land and build a home themselves. An early resident of Hillcrest could do it either way.

The development of the area was commented upon in the Gazette that summer of 1912:

“Just beyond the State Hospital (newly named one year previously) on what a year ago was the Kleinstueck farm is situated a new plat (Hill Crest), less than a year ago on a part of this plat were growing cabbages. On the rest a herd of dairy cows was pasturing. Today it is platted and on it are several beautiful residences ranging in cost from 3,000 to 7,000 dollars . . . the streets have been graded, curbs and gutters have been installed and cement walks laid, the plat also has gas and water.”(14)

Newspaper advertisements cited Hillcrest’s 136 foot location above the City and boasted that it was only a fifteen minute ride from downtown by streetcar. Aided through the efforts of a fairly extensive ad campaign, Hillcrest managed to attract a fair number of buyers that first year.

The City Directory of 1913 shows that during that year there were twelve homes in the Hillcrest Plat and that seven of them were occupied. Two of these houses were on Oakland Drive and the remaining ten were on the first block of Hillcrest St. Howard, Maple, Cherry, Indiana, Illinois (later changed to Brentwood) and Stearns Sts. Were all platted but as of yet had no buildings erected upon them.

The diversity of the plat’s seven occupants, as listed in the 1913 directory, demonstrate the varied appeal of the “sub-urban” neighborhood. These seven residents’ occupations were given as: “. . . a barber, a real estate agent, a molder, a store manager, an elementary school principal, a company president and a male nurse at the State Hospital.”(15)

The following year the plat contained twenty-five residences of which nineteen were occupied. During 1914, the building spread out a bit throughout the neighborhood, houses were no longer restricted to Hillcrest and Oakland. In the occupation listings of that year a trend began which would later become a trademark of the neighborhood. Among the nineteen occupations listed for that year, there were two elementary school principals, two college professors and one high school teacher. Five of the nineteen were educators, Hillcrest being favorably located to the high school, Vine St. Elementary, and the young Western State Normal School (later Western Michigan University).

Building was brisk these years up and down Oakland Drive. The street was quickly becoming a popular thoroughfare. The *Gazette* noted that:

“. . . many imposing homes of the Colonial type of architecture have been erected. Oakland Drive is very popular with automobilists and the passers-by never fail to remark upon the beauty of the homes.”(16)

The Colonial style of architecture was also very popular in the Hillcrest area. About half of its early homes were of this handsome, square style of building. Many of them were stuccoed and quickly became the pride of the area. Another popular choice in building was the Bungalow style. Often shingled, these cottage homes seemed to fit the mood of the times. They appeared to belong in these “country” neighborhoods. The gaudy Queen Anne style of 1890’s was discarded and the movement in home-building was toward simplicity. The Bungalow became the style of the common man. It dotted suburban neighborhoods all over the country in the early part of this century; Hillcrest was no exception.

The neighborhood was a fairly close one in these early years, partly out of necessity. There were but a few houses and no one owned a car; the streetcar provided all transportation. Mrs. Garrett VanEck of 1435 Maple St. moved into the Hillcrest Plat with her husband in 1915. She recalls how riding the streetcar into town in the morning was more than a mode of travel, it was also a social event. It was a time when virtually all the males of the neighborhood were in one place. While waiting to go downtown to their jobs they had some time to discuss their families and other matters of the day. For awhile, most people knew everyone else in the area.(17)

In these early years there was the concern that the neighborhood was out in the country and therefore cut off from the culture and the conveniences which the City had to offer. One of the first buildings to go up on Oakland Drive housed a grocery store, located near the corner of Oakland and Evanston. The concerned ladies of the Oakland area formed a study group which would later become known as the Chrysolite Club. Organized by Mrs. Orley Haas in 1914, with the desire to “promote community spirit,” the group was soon a popular one.(18) Twenty-one women attended its first meeting at Mrs. Haas’ Oakland Drive home in November of that year.(19)

Meeting regularly, the members would discuss literary questions, listen to musical recitals, exchange recipes, and talk about items important to the local community. During these early years they circulated petitions that urged for a postal sub-station in the area, more sidewalks, and for a school building for the local children.(20)

It appeared that during the first half of the century’s second decade Hillcrest was living the American Dream. The occupants of its quaint suburban houses could draw their livelihood from the City by day and retreat to the pastoral attractions of the country in the evening.

But far from the comforts of these new suburban houses and study clubs a war was brewing. The devastation of the First World War begun in 1914 soon put an end to the mini-housing boom in the Hillcrest area. The building industry waited as the nation went off to war. Americans rallied behind President Wilson as each tried to pitch in. “Victory gardens” popped up all over town upon his urging. The Chrysolite Club did their part too. By war’s end the organization had made more garments for the Red Cross than any other local group.

After the war the second wave of building was about to begin in Hillcrest. Like all Americans, Kalamazooans came home from Europe to discover a housing shortage. A local health official proclaimed that “500 extra houses are needed in Kalamazoo at once.”(21) The builders once again had their chance, all throughout the United States new suburban houses were going up. The *Gazette* reported that fifty-six new houses were built in the first six months of 1919.(22) Home-building went forward in 1920 as 900 new houses were constructed in the City.(23) A Home Building Page became a weekly feature in the *Gazette*’s Saturday night edition. The post-World War I building boom was in full swing.

One of the people who purchased a house on Hillcrest soon after the war recalls that when she and her husband moved into their new home there were still only a few houses on the street, nearly all of them had been built before the war. On the bottom block of Hillcrest St. there was only one house and the remains of Potter’s Orchard could still be seen. This resident remembers



having a sweet apple tree in her backyard which bore fruit for many years. Neighbors had fruit trees too, and to this day one can see an apple tree or two in the western part of the plat.(24)

In the 1920's the land surrounding Hillcrest was still quite undeveloped and picturesque. On the north side of Howard St. on land owned by the State Hospital there was a farm which was maintained by the hospital's patients. Mr. C. VanHaaften can recall that there was a barn and some horses there.(25) Where the Kalamazoo Public School Administration Building now stands there was a cornfield with nearby patches of strawberries and pumpkins.

Further down Howard St. toward Axtell Creek, there were acres and acres of celery and pansy fields. The ground was much wetter at the time and the celery grew well in the "muck." The residents of the area were Dutch and worked in the marshy fields near their homes. The Axtell Creek ran through the area and Mrs. C. Berry of 1215 Howard St. remembers taking her small children down its banks to pick the water cress which grew on the little brook's banks.(26)

Howard St. and Maple St. hills were prone to very little traffic and were prime for tobogganing in the winter months. If you knew how to shift your weight properly it was possible to ride a sled from the top of Maple Hill all the way down to Crosstown Parkway. Inside the Kleinstueck Preserve (opened in 1922) kids could roam fifty acres and find such things as the tracks which Mr. Kleinstueck had used in his peat operations. The neighborhood was a virtual paradise for wandering children and adventuresome boys.

With such attractions so close to town, by 1924, the neighborhood could claim 79 heads of families. In June of that year the *Gazette* reported that seven new house permits were issued in the neighborhood during a two-week period; it also spoke of the district's rapid development since 1922.(27)

The new wave of home-builders were a little different from Hillcrest's earlier occupants. They seemed to model the image of the roaring twenties. They built larger houses, often in the freedom of the English Tudor style. Charles Krill would build his English Tudor on a double lot on Maple St. In 1925, H.F. Lincoln built a house on the corner of Hillcrest and Brentwood in the French Chateau motif. Dr. Percy Crum constructed a deceptively large stucco home in the Tudor style on 1321 Hillcrest in 1924. While not as palatial as the Long Road and Bronson Blvd. residences, they still showed the evidence of prosperous times.

During the twenties the neighborhood could boast of some pretty affluent people. Well-known activist Caroline B. Crane and her physician husband Augustus resided on Hillcrest St. near Oakland. Long time history professor at Kalamazoo College, City Commissioner and later Mayor, Ernest A. Balch lived on Brentwood. In 1924, the neighborhood contained eight college professors, two physicians, two dentists, and two lawyers.(28) Many of its residents considered it a professional and semi-professional neighborhood.(29)

During these growing years, the Chrysolite Club found that it had to limit its membership and form a waiting list for prospective new members. In October of 1922, Doctor and Mrs. Frederick Ilgenfritz of Hillcrest St. started the Hillcrest Garden Club which also was forced to limit how many people it could admit as members.(30) It was an era of clubs and organizations. The

neighborhood could claim members in at least ten different clubs City-wide, clubs that bore such names as the Twentieth Century Club, the Art Study Club and the Exchange Club.(31) The prestigious Ladies Library Association counted six Hillcrest women on its membership rolls in 1924.(32)

The neighborhood was quickly filling in. The vacant lots which were so convenient for the local children ten years earlier, were being swallowed up. A new mode of transportation was an important factor in making this expansion possible, a way of traveling which matched the mood of the wild and carefree times. That new way of getting around, of course, was the automobile.

Autos had meager beginnings in Kalamazoo. In 1908, there were only 200 of the vehicles in the City; at an average cost of 1,500 dollars, they were nearly as expensive as a new home.(33) Their role in man's future was at best dubious. An editorial in a 1904 *Gazette* stated:

“It is not unreasonable to presume that when the prices of autos are lowered they, too, will come into more general use. But that the horse will be elbowed out by those or any other device to facilitate travel is impossible.”(34)

But, through mass production and improved technology, the numbers of auto owners grew. By 1918, there were 5,892 cars and trucks registered in Kalamazoo County.(35) The car accident replaced the suicide as the darling of the front page sensationalism stories. Dominating advertising, automobiles were making inroads into the American lifestyle.

Nearly everyone who built in Hillcrest in the post-World War I era owned their own car; some even owned two.(36) This was a drastic change from the streetcar-dependent first residents. As the twenties rolled along, cars became more and more a way of life in America. By 1927, there would be one car for every six people in the United States.(37)

The streetcars were now expendable and only certain trucking companies and milk deliverers still used horses.(38) Both were fighting a losing battle with time, and by the end of the '20's, both were on their last legs. Along with the streetcar, the once flourishing amusement park at Wood's Lake fell out of the public favor. Steadily decreasing in popularity after World War I, it attempted to improve its image by changing its name to Pioneer Park in 1923.(39) Four years later, the resort would be completely closed down.

As the Twenties came to a close, the neighborhood was nearly fully developed. In 1928, the City map showed 166 residences in the area. There were only a few scattered vacant lots, most of them on the bottom portions of Hillcrest and Cherry Sts. For all intents and purposes, the neighborhood looked the same then as it does now.

Things were looking good as the decade neared its end. The Kleinstueck Preserve, donated to Western Michigan Normal School in 1922 by Mrs. Kleinstueck in memory of her nature-loving husband, guaranteed that the neighborhood children would always have a woods to play in. A mammoth tree-planting program in 1927, beautified it even more.(40) The Hillcrest School built on Cherry St. in 1925, was a fine one and a credit to the area. The soft maples planted in the plot nearly twenty years earlier were beginning to look like trees were supposed to, and the various fruit trees from the old orchard sprinkled about added a nice touch.

As the prosperous 1920's ended, life was good in the little "pocket" suburb. With a "chicken in every pot and a car in every garage," little did anyone expect the events of the fall of 1929, and the vast national depression that followed.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through the years the Hillcrest area played many roles. It was a pathway for the Indian and wilderness to the early settler. It provided a homestead for a pioneer family and a nursery and orchard for a later one. A dairy farm, a peat mine, and finally a residential neighborhood, Hillcrest has adapted to change. It has seen characters, flamboyant and ordinary, come and go. The area has seen the horse superseded by the streetcar and the streetcar by the automobile. Some of the stories and secrets have come out – and some still remain.