



*Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society*  
Research Article

# Westacres Subdivision of West Bloomfield Township, Michigan

Excerpt from the unpublished chapter of  
*The Song of the Heron*

As FDR's plans for pulling America out of the Great Depression got underway in 1933, one program in particular probably had the most impact on West Bloomfield Township: the Federal Emergency Relief Acts of 1933 which proposed, in part, the construction of affordable housing for low-income families. Indeed, the New Deal's revitalization programs led directly to the development of the township's Westacres housing project.

The Westacres subdivision of West Bloomfield Township is often recognized as the forerunner of modern suburbanization and residential development, not just for the township but countywide. A revolutionary concept in neighborhood design, the Westacres development was intended to provide affordable housing for factory-wage families and to boost a sagging economy as part of FDR's New Deal.<sup>i</sup> Land in other areas of Oakland County had been subdivided prior to 1936, but mainly by land speculators who anticipated future building. Senator James Couzens and the New Dealers paved the way for modern residential development, but "Westacres was the first in which one company designed, platted, built and sold the properties."<sup>ii</sup>

Clearly, the Westacres subdivision brought about the township's first intensive residential development project and also gave rise to a new phenomenon that would prove popular, successful, and long-lasting in the Oakland County community: the weekend farmer. Oakland Housing, Inc., was formed in 1935 as the development's real estate agent. The nonprofit benevolent corporation would carry out four related purposes: "To construct well-built, low-cost houses for industrial workmen within the annual income range of \$1,200 to \$1,800, who are subject to seasonal unemployment; provide a large enough lot for each house so that the owner may grow a sufficient quantity of vegetables to supply his own family; encourage with loans the residents of the project to

engage in enterprises developed upon the corporation's property which will enable them to make supplemental earnings during periods of unemployment or after hours; and, to assist the residents in a sound and satisfying development of their communal life.”<sup>iii</sup>

According to an original brochure provided to prospective buyers and obtained from original Westacres resident Hugh H. Benninger, the realty agents specifically sought out potential buyers who could and would cultivate the soil to produce adequate vegetables to supply the families year-round, and also provide supplemental income to the factory workers.<sup>iv</sup>

Still, the whole Westacres project may have never been launched if Senator Couzens had not pledged his support—and his \$550,000.<sup>v</sup> Many of President Roosevelt's New Deal projects did not sit well with Couzens; he viewed them more as mere social welfare programs rather than as economic development programs. However, the subsistence homestead projects of the New Deal housing program did intrigue Couzens, primarily because of their similarity to a housing plan he had previously considered, along with Henry Ford, for the Dearborn area.

Couzens had many discussions with Roosevelt and with New Deal relief administrator Harry Hopkins in which Couzens argued that the program would most surely fail if they continued with their “cock-eyed” approach.<sup>vi</sup> Couzens lambasted the plan “to go out in a field and build some houses under the assumption that eventually some industry would come in . . . He felt that it was far more sensible to build the houses somewhere adjacent to where industries already were established.”<sup>vii</sup> He cited the Red House project in West Virginia to support his charge and inquired as to that project's cost, which Hopkins wrongly estimated at \$550,000. (The project's actual cost was

\$850,000.) Couzens proposed that he would give a matching amount of \$550,000 toward the development of a housing community within easy distance of the already-established automotive industry, and later secured the balance of the project's cost through a \$300,000 grant from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, thereby giving birth to the non-profit Oakland Housing Corporation.

Essentially, the Westacres subdivision was a practical demonstration in producing houses to sell under \$4,500, with one acre of land included, to get factory-wage workers and their families out of crowded city dwellings. Construction started on Westacres on September 13, 1935, and the 150-house development was ready for occupancy March 15, 1936. Further, all of the homes were occupied by August 1, 1936.<sup>viii</sup> Couzens would retain an advisory position on the Oakland Housing board, but brought in building experts to design, plat and construct the development. Barton P. Jenks, Jr., of the Federal Emergency Relief Commission, was signed as project manager and supervising architect; E. G. von Storch and R. O. Cuppy were to do the site plan and architectural work; R. C. Perkins was construction engineer; E. Genevieve Gillette, landscape architect; and Newell J. Hill, heating engineer.

Sen. Couzens had many doubts about the specific direction many New Deal projects were taking and declared that the real work that New Dealers needed to accomplish was to “readjust national income, wages, and working conditions so as to provide more of these men with a living income.”<sup>ix</sup> Regardless of Couzen’s reluctant support to the housing projects, the Westacres development was clearly a success. By 1937, the community had 84 school-age children attending the local Union Lake School, while the neighbors banded together to form a civic association that held as its chief

concern the beautification of Westacres.<sup>x, xi</sup> In its early years, Westacres residents worked together to make the development a nearly self-sufficient community. Local organizations included the fire department, Boy Scouts, a cooperative store, the Westacres Credit Union, Blue Birds, Camp Fire Girls, Westacres Community Association, Child Study Clubs I and II, the Westacres branch of the public library, Sunday School classes, and a sewing club, most of which merged in 1943 to become Westacres Activities Association, with Harold Welch serving as president, with dues of fifty cents per month.<sup>xii</sup> The community also supported its own newspaper, *The Westacres Weekly*.

The community feeling persisted even as the effort of World War II required the factory workers to put in many overtime hours. In fact, the association obtained a \$1,000 loan from the Oakland Housing Corporation in 1944 to renovate and improve the Westacres beach. The new beach was officially dedicated July 30, 1944, with a community-wide festival called Aquacade, which is celebrated today during the first weekend in August.<sup>xiii</sup> The completed project included a beach house, break water, raft, water slide, life boat, and picnic tables.<sup>xiv</sup> The association's inability to make the Fall 1944 payment of \$240 on the beach loan prompted a six-year-long fundraising effort to be undertaken by the community. Called "Operation Finance Without a Fin," the group hosted weekly bingo parties, and in 1950 the project was written off the association's accounting books.<sup>xv</sup>

The homeowners comprising the Westacres Community Association embarked on a daring land development project in 1973. The residents first took up a collection from among the membership and used the funds to purchase undeveloped, interior lots within

the subdivision. The homeowners' association then began selling the interior lots (at a cost of \$10,000 to \$14,000 each) in December 1973, with plans to use the profits from the sale of the land to purchase undeveloped lakefront property to be reserved as a permanent recreational area for the entire subdivision.<sup>xvi</sup> By 1978, all the interior lots had been sold; the desired lake frontage had been purchased, and the permanent recreation area was assured.<sup>xvii</sup>

The Westacres community gave birth to another civic organization when nine women started the League of Women Voters of West Bloomfield Township in 1946. The first board of directors, elected to serve during the 1946–47 year, was comprised of Hope Dunne, president; Jean Lewis, vice President; Isabella Mowrey, recording secretary; Nina Miller, corresponding secretary; Emmy Lou Mitchell, treasurer; Georgia Hess, historian; Katherine Cosgrove, nominating chair; Lucy Connor, foreign policy chair; Marie Zimmerman, national program chair; Katherine Parsels, state program chair; and Velma Green, local program chair. The group's name was changed, temporarily, to the League of Women Voters of the Inter-Lake Area of Oakland County, but was changed back in 1949 to comply with new League of Women Voters national by-laws. The group merged in 1969 with the Farmington Area League of Women Voters to establish the League of Women Voters—West Bloomfield-Farmington Area.

In addition to *The Westacres Weekly*, another newspaper was launched in the mid-1930s to serve the West Bloomfield area. The first issue of *The Harbor-Lake News* was published July 19, 1935, by Irene Strong and Kenneth Treacy. The co-publishers married in December 1937 and changed the paper's name to *The Inter-Lake News*. The paper's circulation area included West Bloomfield Township, Keego Harbor, Sylvan Lake,

Walled Lake, Union Lake, and Commerce Township, and was owned and operated by the Treacy family until being sold to *The Pontiac Press* in 1967.<sup>xviii</sup> Today, several newspapers service the West Bloomfield Township area. Daily presses like *The Detroit News*, the *Detroit Free Press*, and *The Oakland Press* each produce Oakland County editions or special sections, while *The Observer & Eccentric* organization prints a West Bloomfield edition of *The Eccentric* twice weekly on Monday and Thursday. The community also receives news coverage from several weekly publications, including *The Spinal Column*, *The Reminder* (West Bloomfield Edition), *The Northwest Gazette*, and *The Jewish News*.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, the Westacres subdivision retained the “friendly, glad to know you, spirit it had when it was first built,” and about a dozen of the families are directly related to the original settlers of 1936.<sup>xix</sup> Of course, some things have changed. Today, the homes which originally cost \$4,400 have an average value of \$178,200, and the annual tax bill has increased from an average of \$36 to \$2,800.<sup>xx</sup> And the community well system will likely be switched to more costly city-provided water and sewer services in the near future.<sup>xxi</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> Robert Ourlan, “Suburban Pioneers, *The Detroit News*, April 13, 1993.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> *Westacres: 1936 to 1986*, a limited edition, commemorative booklet published by the Westacres Community Association to celebrate the subdivision’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

<sup>iv</sup> Hugh H. Benninger and his wife, Catherine Benninger, moved into the Westacres subdivision on January 1, 1941.

<sup>v</sup> Harry Barnard, *Independent Man: The Life of Senator James Couzens* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) 292–294.

---

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> “Westacres: A Housing Development Near Pontiac, Michigan,” *The Architectural Record*, October 1936, pp. 253–261.

<sup>ix</sup> Barnard, *Independent Man*, 293.

<sup>x</sup> *Westacres: 1936–1961*, (*Westacres Weekly*, Westacres Community Association), 4. The commemorative booklet was loaned by Hugh H. Benninger of Orchard Lake Village, one of the original tenants of the Westacres subdivision.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Jenny King, “West Acres: Tight-Knit Neighborhood,” *The Detroit News*, June 14, 1993.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Westacres: 1936–1961*, 6.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup> April Kornmiller, “Subdivision Uses Profits to Buy Recreation Space,” *The Eccentric*, January 10, 1974.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ingrid Tomey, “Westacres: The 50-Year Story of the Little Neighborhood That Could,” *The Detroit News Magazine*, September 7, 1986.

<sup>xviii</sup> The history of *The Inter-Lake News* was provided to Betty Sue DuPree, chairwoman of the Charter Township of West Bloomfield Sesquicentennial Committee, by Kenneth Treacy in a personal letter dated March 12, 1983.

<sup>xix</sup> Robert Ourlian, “Suburban Pioneers.”

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxi</sup> King, “West Acres: Tight-Knit Neighborhood.”