

THE VILLAGE OF METTAWA

A BRIEF COLLOQUIAL HISTORY & TIMELINE

COMPILED FOR THE OCCASION OF THE VILLAGE'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2010

1. IN THE BEGINNING

A vast ocean once covered Mettawa. It receded, a complex landscape of native plants emerged, and tall-grass prairies, and woods of hickory-oak and maple-basswood filled the land. No earthworms lived here then, but the native crawfish evolved to survive on dry land, and muskrats and deer made themselves at home. Sometime, probably within the past 10,000 years, the first people entered Mettawa. They made camps, chipped arrowheads, and hunted and fished our waters and lands. By 1695, Prairie Potawatami Indians lived in Lake County. They

traveled and hunted in this area, with two villages just south of our borders. In 1833, Daniel Wright learned about the fertile ground at Half-Day from two French-Indian traders living in the bluffs near Waukegan, or Little Fort. He became Lake County's first permanent settler when he built his house with Chief Mettawa's help. He was consid-



ered a good friend of the tribe. When his wife was sick, Mettawa sent for a doctor. When a fire burned his buildings, Mettawa helped him rebuild. The U.S. government forced the Indians to leave these lands in 1836, but their memory lives on in the old horseback trails, bent trail marker trees, arrow-head relics, and the name given in tribute by our founders to the "Village of Mettawa."

Left: Daniel Wright. Below: Artist's depiction of Wright's cabin. Photos: Lake County Archives

2. RURAL FARMLAND

In 1839, Mettawa was still part of McHenry County, and the earliest settlers here claimed long swaths of property straddling the "Aux Plein" river along the Milwaukee Trail. They built crude cabins, but civilization followed quickly. In 1844, the Bradleys, Atkinsons and others filed the first plat claims on the newly surveyed acres, and soon

wooden farmhouses dotted the land. This forested area east of the Des Plaines river may have been difficult to farm (due to poorly drained soil with low permeability) but residents could stay current with news published in "The Little Fort Porcupine and Democratic Banner," Lake County's first newspaper, which appeared in 1845. Our area was known as "Little



Ireland," and many residents likely attended St. Patrick's Church, founded in 1844 in nearby Everett (now west Lake Forest). The Rondout School District's first teacher started in 1864 at \$18/month; it counted 46 students in 1917 when the oldest part of the present school was built. By the early 1900s many small farms had become part of large country estates. Yet, dairy farms near the corner of St. Mary's and Rt. 60 continued into the 1980s, and even today many Mettawa residents enjoy agricultural pursuits.

HORSE TALES

REINING Richard Greenberg jump-started the sport of "Reining." He's a national Reining Horse Association Hall of Famer. His World Champion horse, "Hollywood Jac 86," set records by siring offspring which earned over \$1 million.

WESTERN PLEASURE A quarter horse named "Physical Ed" (stabled at Lakeside Ranch) was a five-time World Champion in the American Quarter Horse Association and won many other "Western Pleasure" class titles (1970s-1990).

OLYMPIC RIDING Todd Minikus trained at the Horse Forum (now Springfield Stable). He was on the 2000 Summer Olympic Show Jumping Squad and was named 2001 USA Equestrian Horseman of the year.

BRIDLE PATH ASSOCIATION Many residents remember our community's "breakfast rides," and the neighborly understanding which allowed bridle trails to cross property lines.

MAYORS

- 1960-1981 James "Jim" Getz
- 1981-1991 Ed Fitzsimons
- 1991-1994 Julius Abler
- 1994-2009 Barry MacLean
- 2009- Jess Ray



Prehistory
An ancient ocean recedes. Native eco-systems evolve: prairies, wetlands, woods of hickory, oak, maple, and basswood.

10,000 years ago
The first peoples inhabit this land, using stone implements to hunt.

1695
Potawatami live in Lake County. French establish Little Fort trading post (now Waukegan).

1833
Daniel Wright becomes Lake County's first settler and builds his cabin with Chief Mettawa's help.

1844
First plat claims filed on govt.-surveyed land

1864
First teacher hired by Rondout School District (\$18/mo)

1917 Rondout School built

1927 Mettawa Manor built

1938 Adlai Stevenson house built

1951 Mettawa-area is zoned 5-acre by Lake County

1960 Village of Mettawa incorporated with 118 residents & 1200 acres

1970 Mettawa's population = 275

1975 Bradley road paved

1989 Mettawa Open Lands forms

1996 Grainger Woods Forest Preserve is created

1998 Adlai Stevenson home opened

2000 Ribbon-cutting of the Mettawa Trail

2010 Mettawa celebrates 50 years

3. GRACIOUS COUNTRY ESTATES

In the early 1900s many prominent citizens came to Mettawa for its land and gracious estate lifestyle. Samuel Insull, co-founder of General Electric, bought 120 acres south of Libertyville in 1902, eventually owning 4115 acres on both sides of the river as well as the old railroad along Hwy. 176. Melody Farm's 1200 acres were collected in 1904 by J. Ogden Armour; its greenhouse area included today's Little

Melody Lane/Indian Ridge. Francis Farwell of Lake Forest assembled Deerpath Farm in 1922 before selling it to Edward H. Bennett, the 1909 Plan of Chicago's co-author. The famous Adlai Stevenson II bought 70 acres from Insull in 1935 to build his modern house near the Des Plaines river. Lloyd Lewis built a Frank Lloyd Wright house nearby in 1940. Helen Hayes and Harpo Marx attended Lewis'

housewarming party. Other prominent visitors to the area included Stevenson's friend Eleanor Roosevelt, who rode at the McGowan/Korhumel track (now Whippoorwill Farm). Horses outnumbered people, then. Regular fox-hunts took place through the 1930s, and trail rides still do. The early bridle paths, marked on stones and medallions, were connected to trails throughout the North Shore.

4. THRIVING LAND & LIFESTYLE

After 1945, development rapidly spread through Lake County. Alarmed area residents wanted to preserve Mettawa's land and character. In 1951 Lake County granted their petition for 5-acre zoning, and the Des Plaines River Association formed in 1957 to add community support. But more control was needed. After much hard work by our founders, the Village of Mettawa was incorporated in 1960. Now Mettawa truly could defend the protective 5-acre zoning, and also enjoyed a good relationship with the new Lake County Forest Preserve District. Jim Getz, the Village's first president, served until 1981. That

same year, the MacArthur Woods Forest Preserve was dedicated as a 446 acre Illinois Nature Preserve; it's now one of the Des Plaines River Trail's most beautiful areas. The 257 acre Grainger Woods Forest Preserve includes an equestrian center and vast open lands with rare plants. The Mettawa Open Lands Association supports quality open space and rural land use, and has led restoration of Whippoorwill Farm at Riverwoods/60. Today 5-acre zoning remains, and every resident lives within a mile of a Forest Preserve and close to the Mettawa Trail. For 50 years Mettawa has successfully

maintained most of its 5-acre zoning, and Mettawa's enviable rural lifestyle still thrives. Quiet, innovative Mettawa continues to set the standard for a rural way of life.

Below: Ribbon-cutting of the Mettawa Trail at the 40th Anniversary Celebration in 2000. Photo Courtesy of Cheryl Pytlarz



Sights once seen

Once neighbors could talk for hours on Bradley Road without a single car passing. It wasn't unusual to be interrupted by a runaway horse, lost llama or noisy exotic animals at the corner of Bradley and Old School Road. More than one person was known to be surprised by a pony or flock of sheep showing up at their barn after a night of parties – and forgotten deals. Even the most gracious among us were certainly outdone, however, by a busload of visiting Japanese architecture students. Stuck in the mud, and lost on Little St. Mary's Rd, they thanked their rescuer by exiting their bus and bowing in unison.



Above: Gust Bradley in his house on Bradley Road, from an 1918 history compiled by Rondout School Students

The Mettawa History Project is just beginning. Thank you for all the contributions, current and future, which will help this project come to life.

A special thanks to: Mayor Jess Ray, former Mayor Ed Fitzsimons, Jack and Adrienne Tindall, Moppy Towne, Mike Baird, Jeannie McCole, Gerrie Trelke, Cheryl Pytlarz, Lee Korhumel, George Covington, John Meier, Bill Armstrong, John Koffel and Frederick Phillips. Additional thanks to Kathleen Garness, Steward of the Grainger Woods Nature Preserve, Stephen Christy of the Lake Forest Open Lands Association, and Diana Dreske of the Lake County History Archives.

Most importantly, thank you to Mettawa's founders, and to all those who have supported their foresight and mission with dedication and untold hours of hard work. Those efforts enable all of us to experience the unique rural way of life in this Village that is...

METTAWA, ILLINOIS.

The Mettawa History Project is a work in progress being compiled by Mettawa resident Linda Gardner Phillips.

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