

THE HISTORY OF MATTESON

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Before the town of Matteson was even thought of, early inhabitants occupied our area where Matteson residents live today. Our land was a home for Indians tribes of the Plankeshaws, the Weas, the Miamis and the Illini.¹ The French explorer, LaSalle, was the first white man to come to this area. Because of his peaceful relations with the Indians, LaSalle opened up much of this Indian territory for future settlement. In 1835, the Indians of this region gave up five million acres of land and started their slow immigration westward.²

As the white man settled in this region of land, Matteson began to resemble a community. The village became quite a convenient stop for covered wagons driven by pioneers heading westward for gold. These wagons went westward down Sauk Trail.

Matteson's history is also tied in with the development of the railroad. Transportation such as the train, brought prosperity to Matteson's thriving community. It was in January of 1852 that the first locomotive of the Illinois Central came steaming into Matteson.³ This was a joyous occasion for everyone in the area. Although the transportation helped the village grow, the people helped build the village. If it were not for the ambition and determination of the early settlers Matteson would not exist to this day.

Matteson is named after Illinois tenth governor whose full name was Joel Aldrich Matteson. The founding of the town of Matteson was during

his term in office in 1855.⁴ Joel Matteson's term for Governor of Illinois was from 1853 to 1857. The town is situated at the junction of the Michigan Central, Illinois Central, and Elgin, Joliet & Eastern railroads in Southermost Cook County.⁵ This land served as a wide portion of the countryside. The village of Matteson is now one of the oldest German settlements in Cook County.

A few years before the founding of Matteson, regions of the land were purchased by early pioneers. Such is the case of Fredrick Illgen who purchased 40 acres of land in 1848.⁶ Being the first public land bought in the region, Illgen purchased these 40 acres for 50 dollars (\$1.25 per acre) for the entire tract. A 480 acre tract was bought by John Lewis, Ton Dyer and Julius Wadworth on December 1849.⁷ The government granted them this land which is north of the present location of the Michigan Central.

More land was progressively purchased as immigrants moved to Matteson. A German immigrant named Heinrich Stuenkel, for whom Stuenkel Road is named came to America in 1850 with his wife and 8 children.⁸ He bought 160 acres west of the village of Matteson in Cook County. Another German immigrant whose name is still prominent in the town of Matteson is that of Henry Mahler. On December 22, 1850, Henry Mahler bought a quarter section of land on the corner of Sauk Trail and Route 54.⁹ In the village's Centennial year of 1955, the farm was still in the family's possession, where it was later noticed for its cheese factory.

The main land, the land which the town of Matteson is presently settled on, was purchased by Fredrick Illgen. Mr. Ellwood of Joliet and Joliet and Jacob Rich of Richton were the first to survey and subdivided this land.¹⁰ From here, the development of a new community would arise and along with the community would come great expectations and prosperity.

Matteson is a result of years of years of hard work making life exceptionally rough in the early days. Homes were mostly of the one.

room log cabin variety and Conestoga wagons came periodically to bring food and other supplies because of an absence of stores.¹¹ Houses were well distributed throughout the land at this time with acres of space between them. It is hard to imagine that Matteson was all farmland with no local store until the main part of the town developed. Long wagon trains could be along Sauk Trail, which was originally a pathway blazed through by Indians.¹²

One of the most well remembered men of this time was a peddler Specht.¹³ He peddled his wares first on foot then later by buggy to each house in the area. Specht is noted for his famous medicines and liver pills that his wife made.¹⁴ Once a year he would make his regular stops to each town and became quite a favorite with the children.

Infant mortality rate was high because of the lack of medicine attention in the early 19th Century. However, the first burial in the Immanuel Lutheran Cemetery was the result of an accident.¹⁵ The child was asleep in an cart pulled by oxen, when two men decided to test each one's oxen at a pulling contest. The cart was upset and the child was killed as a result of this incident. Other grim stories have been passed down through generations such as the story about the dead man covered in the wagon car. Two men wagered on what was under the cover. One man guessed grain and the other guessed heads of cabbage and as he put his hand under the cover he discovered the head of man.

As today in some far-away places, Gypsies were well known in the vicinity of Matteson.¹⁶ The children were deathly afraid of the transients a more proper name for gypsies, as they traveled from town to town in their house on wheels. Gypsies proceeded to exist in the area through the 4th generation.¹⁷

The names of the first German settlers in and around the area of

Matteson included those of F.P. Weishaar, M. Emmerich, A. Krudenning, D. Lux, H. Mahler, F. Kliene, J. Blattnet, F. Duensing, and C. H. Greenhager.¹⁸

Charles Ohlendorf erected the first home in the village in July, 1855.¹⁹ In addition to this, he was also the first postmaster of Matteson. His house and store were on the site of the present Rouses Food Market, which used to be called Ecker's Royal Blue Store on 216th Street.²⁰ The business street of Matteson had to be 216th Street just as it is still today.

In 1856, John Fox built a home and wagon shop in Matteson about the same time John Steichelman built and opened to the public the village's first hotel.²¹

Another prominent name in the area and vicinity of Matteson is that of James Freeman Dand Elliott. He lived on his 400 acre Matteson farm after retiring from his lumber business in Chicago in 1838.²² Mr. Elliott was intimate friends with Abe Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. Mrs. Ira McCoy, Elliott's daughter, remembers sitting on Abe Lincoln's lap when she was a little girl. Lincoln often came to their house for dinner during a three year period in the 1850's.²³

Elliott later became supervisor of Rich Township for 2 full terms. Part of his land became an amusement park while he opened with his brother Moses. As many as 30,000 persons were attracted to this park from Chicago.²⁴ Today, there is a Dana Elliott living in a house in woods off of Highway 30 whose great ancestor was James F. D. Elliott.

In 1849, William Arnold came to Matteson and was much in demand as a part-time auctioneer. He opened the Farmers Hotel in 1880 which was described as being "a large, commodious house kept in first class order."²⁵

Matteson soon flourished with more and more people. Trains, schools and churches built a town and formed a community to what it is today. The land to build the first public school on was deeded by Jacob Reihl on October 10, 1853.²⁶ It is presently at the site of the present school

each time the school needed more room.

School Board records date back to September 8, 1860 when George E. Dolton was appointed the first teacher of the one-room school.²⁷ The salary for a six month term was \$148.00 for the Schoolmaster. Soon, by the year 1876, Matteson's population increased to the point where a second store had to be built on the grade school. This Matteson Brade School is now called O.W.Huth Upper Grade Center which was named after the late Oscar Huth. At one time he was superintendent of the school for many years and enrolled were 96 students with 3 teachers on the staff.²⁸

To save the Lutheran children from a long walk to Sauk Trail and Cicero, a new school was started in 1868.²⁹ Both schools are presently standing today with one in Matteson down 216th Street, and the first built is standing on the corner of Sauk Trail and Cicero. The Zion Evangelical Church was founded in 1878.³⁰ Twenty-two families belonged to its' congregation which met in private homes prior to its erection. The pastor of this church served as the Schoolmaster in 1884, as did all the other pastors until 1933.

In 1928, the first graduating class from Matteson Grade School had their graduating ceremonies in the new school gym. At this time the school building consisted of 4 rooms until the gymnasium was built. Later, the PTA was founded and it began a two-year high school program the same year.

In those days, high school was optional. Yet, in 1942 the program was discontinued. Students that wanted to go to high school went to Bloom or Thornton Township until Rich Township opened its doors in Park Forest in 1953, presently Rich East High School.

It was fortunate for me to attend a bicentennial meeting during my research for this paper. Mrs. Rita Kaonohi, a history teacher at Huth, provided a tape for us to listen to which consisted of the childhood days and memories of three residents of Matteson during the 1900's. Their names are John Ray, and Frenchy Laturno, both born in the 1900's,

and George Templin.³¹ It was interesting to find out that the way these men amused and entertained themselves during their childhood was somewhat identical to my childhood, in the respect of childhood games that were played. Even though memories mentioned in this tape were "a little over my time, it was interesting to find out how one without a T.V. set, radio, magazines and books could do something that was time consuming and fun.

The railroad played an exciting role in the men's childhoods when they were young. The children would line up along side the railroad tracks patiently awaiting for the train to pass by so they could yell the word "chalk" to the man in the caboose.³² Those who snatched the piece of chalk that was thrown from the train had to be the quickest in the group, for in order to get a piece of chalk it was first come first serve basis. This type of amusement was down to my generation because I have done this also.

Set between the viaduct on Front Street was the Old Tower by the I.C. Station. From the Tower, the operators who were working the levers to set the tracks different directions could see the upcoming train arriving into town. Many Matteson families recall what their darling village youngsters did for them. They kept their families supplied with bananas, courtesy of the I.C. Railroads.³³ When the train would stop, the children would jump aboard and help themselves. This is only a sample of the tricks these children would play.

On Halloween each year the lads would knock over cans full of milk that farmers had sitting out along the tracks on a rack. One year they took apart a plow and set it on top of the Old I.C. Tower.

The children in those days were no worse than ours today though. They also tried to find ways of earning money by selling cards, vegetables and extra chores around farms. A wage of 63¢ per day was good money for these ambitious young workers.³⁴

George Templin remembers roller skating down Lincoln Highway,

which used to a boardwalk, just to go to the movies in Chicago Heights. They went fishing, boating, and swimming in the Butterfield Creek area for entertainment. Some of the games they would play were passed down to my generation such as, kick-the-can, street car light, and king of the road. These men mentioned that their roughest game was when they would play kick-the-can down 216th Street on their bicycles, their only transportation in those days.³⁵ Cars were not as easy to come by at this time at this time, yet, Templin remembers you could put a body on Model T with only six bolts.

For the ~~y~~ parents, there was other sources of fun besides dances, ~~wjccj/yere/pcczsprrz/ll/je/d/~~ which were occasionally held. The major attraction was Elliott's Amusement Park, mentioned early in the paper. Besides being an exciting place to go, it attracted thousands of visitors to Matteson. There was even a special train that would transport people from Chicago to Matteson and back again. In 1913, the park was closed, but the gap was filled in part by the opening of a baseball field in the village for its team.³⁶

In the 19th Century, Matteson was lit by oil lamps and on moonlight night these were not lit to save the village funds.³⁷ The village policeman made his rounds by a horse-drawn cart, lighting and cleaning these lamps. By 1880, Matteson's population had nearly 500 people in the village.³⁸

Its businesses included 2 hotels, 2 general stores, a bank, a butcher shop, hardware store, taylor shop, 2 harness shops, a furniture shop, a farm implement shop and 2 saloons.³⁹

The Dettmerings, another German family who have lived in Matteson since the 1800's bought the Farmer's Hotel and operated in the building which now is ~~Dettler~~ Dettmerings Tavern. Campe's Insurance Company on 216th Street is where the first bank stood and Rudolph Adams' barber shop is still in operation. The undertaking establishment used to be across the street from the Neimeyer's coffee shop in Matteson. It was (the undertakin.

business) in the place where Matteson had its library till this year. The wagon and implement shop was built in 1860 by William Hayne, Village President during 1890-1901, next to where Mahler's Garage now stands. ⁴⁰ Mrs. Roberts, a librarian at Rich South, lives in one of ~~the~~ the first farm houses built in Matteson. Considering how old my town, it is surprising that ~~the~~ these many places and a few more are still standing today.

So many events took place in the late 1800's that it is impossible list them all. Much recognition should have been given to the late J. F. D. Elliott for giving Matteson some beauty and amusement in the early days of our village. He bought and planted thousands of pine trees which he brought back from the East and later he dedicated land for the Matteson cemetery.

Two memorable events occurred in the 19th Century. First was the moving of the 180 foot grain elevator which had been operated by the Stege Grain Company. ~~It was built in 1881 and costed some \$4000.00.~~ It was built in 1881 and costed some \$4000.00. Chaff, a by-product of the elevator, fed the many chickens of Matteson. The other memorable events took place on October 7, 1926, when the Illinois Central Railroad was electrified. This happened after the elevation of the tracks which changed the appearance, so that the appearance east of town seemed isolated more or less.

Many important dates should be added such as the erection of the firehouse in the month of November, 1897.⁴² At first the fire department fought the fires with bucket brigades. The bell in the belfry alarmed the town and fire department that there was a fire.

Other important dates are:

1946-Legion Hall was built

1948-New firehouse and new truck were dedicated.

1949-The Matteson Park District was formed.⁴³

The 1950's and 60's were a building craze for a time in Matteson, since the cease of development at the end of the Second World War.

To this day Matteson is considered Suburban Living. Change in the town was helped by automobiles and of course, the railroad, More and more transportation meant one could work in the city, enjoy city wages, and commute to the suburbs.⁴⁴ The acres of lands which were inhabited by Indians at one time, is now a bustling community of nearly 6,000 inhabitants.