



ROYAL OAK Historical Society

FEBRUARY 2025 • ROYALOAKHISTORICALSOCIETY.COM

Royal Oak's Highway in the Sky

By John S. Schultz

WHAT WAS EXPECTED TO BE a beautiful addition in the sky over Royal Oak turned out to be nothing but a pie in the sky.

On Sept. 14, 1929, a grand plan was unveiled by Grand Trunk Railroad to provide a faster commute to the many Royal Oak and other suburban residents who worked in Detroit. The ambitious proposal was to construct a high-speed automobile toll highway, erected on pillars above the Grand Trunk tracks running between Detroit, Royal Oak, and Pontiac.

Following approval by all the cities in its path, the work would start in three months and was expected to be completed in 1931. Revolutionary in scope, it was estimated to bring unprecedented development to the North Woodward Avenue area. The entire project, including electric suburban train service, would cost \$100 million (about \$1.8 billion today).

THE EXTRAORDINARY PLAN was not a new idea. In February 1922, a similar commuter project of erecting an elevated rail system or monorail was proposed between Pontiac and Detroit and would also run through Royal Oak and other suburban cities. The plan was derailed in May of that year because it was thought the elevated monorail would be impractical and too costly. George A. Dondero, mayor at the time, said, "Building this system would not solve the transportation problem. This line begins nowhere and ends nowhere."

A developer's promotional flyer showing the proposed elevated highway, circa 1930.

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PONTIAC-DETROIT RAPID TRANSIT

Served by Rapid Transit—

CUMMINGSTON PARK

"The Community of Beauty and Rare Opportunity."

CUMMINGSTON PARK is a complete townsite possessing within itself all the facilities required for its development. It will have its own business section, its own churches and schools, park and playgrounds. Being a corporate part of the City of Royal Oak, Cummingston Park already has many improvements installed with all city improvements immediately available. Too much significance cannot be placed on the fact that Cummingston Park will have its own regular station stop on the Grand Trunk

Rapid Transit, situated on the property at the Fourteen Mile Road (Clawson Rd.) and Coolidge Highway. This puts the property within a few minutes' travel time from downtown Detroit or the Pontiac industrial section. Coolidge Highway provides a fast broad highway to the Rouge industries and the Elevated Auto Speedway over the Grand Trunk tracks will place the east side industries, downtown Detroit and the Pontiac industries very close to Cummingston Park in auto travel time.

CASPAR J. LINGEMAN
DETROIT

ENTIRE SECOND FLOOR
Cadillac Square Building

CADILLAC SQUARE at Woodward
Randolph 7144

Billy Lee Attempts 100-Hour Endurance Drive in Royal Oak

By Don Callihan

IT WAS OCTOBER OF 1927; Royal Oak was abuzz over the upcoming endurance drive of a plucky, 23-year-old young lady who went by the name of Billy Lee. *The Daily Tribune* and local businesses were responsible for bringing Billy to the area, billing her as the "world's champion girl automobile driver, stunt artist and auto racer." Her last endurance drive was in May in St. Petersburg, Florida, where she set a personal record of 75 straight hours. This time she was planning to drive 100 full hours.



Publicity for the event began on Thursday, Oct. 6, 1927, and continued over the next few days. The *Tribune* reported that milk would be Miss Lee's only source of nourishment; a Chrysler 52 automobile from J.B. Malburg, the Royal Oak Chrysler dealer, would be her vehicle; and the drive would be through Royal Oak and other communities and would conclude at midnight on Saturday at *The Daily Tribune* office on South Washington Avenue to complete the 100 straight hours.

Miss Billy Lee in the Chrysler 52 sedan in which she will attempt to drive 100 hours without stopping. (The Daily Tribune, Oct. 12, 1927)

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"A TANGLED WEB: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN 19TH CENTURY ROYAL OAK" CONTINUES THROUGH MAY ■ SEE PAGE 3

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Hours: Tues., Thurs., Sat., 1–4 p.m.
and by appointment

CURRENT EXHIBITS

January – February 2025

Underground Railroad in
Oakland County Project

January – May 2025

"A Tangled Web: African Americans
in 19th Century Royal Oak"

*All photographs, artifacts, and archival
materials are from the collections of the
Royal Oak Historical Society unless noted.*

President's Message

BY TOM TOGGWEILER

GREETINGS TO THE NEW AND LONGTIME members of our board and dedicated volunteers. We wish a healthy and happy 2025 to all and hope the upcoming year is filled with warm moments with family and friends.

Looking back on 2024, we had many successful events that helped support our mission to preserve the city's rich history and also entertain and educate our members and the public.

One highlight was Santa's annual visit to our museum. We had more than 150 people attend, while Mr. Claus rode in on a Royal Oak fire engine with lights flashing and sirens blaring. All the kids had a chance to visit with Santa.

ANOTHER HIGHLIGHT was our annual dinner in October at the First United Methodist Church as we celebrated our successes of the past year. Officers were installed for 2025 and annual awards were presented to several volunteers. LaKeesha Morrison was presented with the Sophie V. Bowman Award and Don Drife was presented the Joseph S. Morrison Award. These are given to a woman and man who typify the ideals of historic preservation and have contributed significantly to advancing the history of Royal Oak.

The Spirit of Royal Oak Award was given to the Metro Detroit Youth Clubs, also known as the Boys and Girls Club. Club director Brett Tillander accepted the award for this organization, which has had an enormous impact on so many youth over the years in Royal Oak. We are proud of our association with them and will continue to support their mission.

THE THOMAS F. WURDOCK AWARD was given to Bob Muller, a past president of the Historical Society and a longtime dedicated volunteer to our mission. Thanks, Bob, for what you done and for your continuing effort to help us maintain our museum and help in our growth.

I also want to give a special thank you to all our volunteers for a job well done in the past year. Everything we accomplish is due to your hard work and commitment to the museum.

We will be sponsoring a panel discussion at 7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 28 at the Royal Oak Middle School auditorium pertaining to our current exhibit at the museum on the Underground Railroad. (See story on Page 5).

THROUGHOUT THIS YEAR we are also planning a few "Members Only" events at our museum. At the first, scheduled on Sunday, March 2, our curator Johanna Schurrer will give a tour of the museum and explain how our archives and collections are stored and preserved.

*** MEMBERS ONLY EVENT ***

"GET TO KNOW
THE MUSEUM"

WITH CURATOR
JOHANNA SCHURRER

2 P.M. SUNDAY, MARCH 2

MEMBERSHIPS AVAILABLE
AT THE DOOR

I invite everyone to this event and to all our programs and exhibits during the year. I also ask for your support by renewing your membership. Your membership due date is shown on your newsletter mailing label. We also will notify you via email. Your continued support is crucial and so much appreciated for us to continue our mission through exhibits, public events, and our quarterly newsletter.

Please plan a visit to the museum soon with your family and friends. 🌱



Among the awardees at the annual dinner were (left to right) Bob Muller, LaKeesha Morrison, and Don Drife.

Curator's Corner

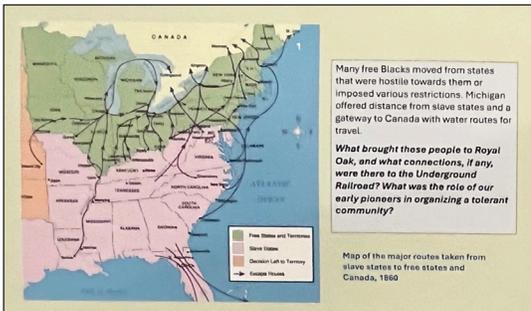
BY JOHANNA SCHURRER

Discover Royal Oak's Underground Railroad History

HAPPY NEW YEAR! This year has started off with a bang. On January 10, Leslie Pielack, local historian and director of The Birmingham Museum, gave a sold-out talk on "The Underground Railroad in Oakland County Public History Project" — a multi-community project to research and document anti-slavery activity in our communities. The traveling exhibit is part of two exhibits on the Underground Railroad that opened at our museum on January 12. Visitors were very impressed with the scope of the new information. The traveling exhibit will be with us only until February 26, so be sure to see it.

The second part of the exhibit is our own "A Tangled Web: African Americans in 19th Century Royal Oak," which will continue through May. One of the most fascinating discoveries to me was the number of African Americans who settled in Royal Oak in the 1840s. New research sheds light on four families in particular — the Dollarsons, Duncans, Casons, and Whites. This was a previously unknown part of our history that we recently uncovered. Some of these families stayed here for quite some time, bought property and raised families, and several were closely connected with Underground Railroad activities in Detroit. This is just the beginning of Royal Oak's history that we've uncovered so far, so come in and read more about it. For a background story on the research for this exhibit by our own Leslie S. Edwards, see Page 5.

WE ARE HOSTING an exciting illustrated panel discussion at 7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 28 in the Royal Oak Middle School auditorium featuring two local historians who have firelessly researched the topic as well as a woman from Canada who is a descendant of those who were involved in the Underground Railroad. This panel will discuss the existence of the Underground Railroad in the metro Detroit area and will take questions from the audience. Please come, share, and learn about an important part of our local history.



Related to the Underground Railroad, Shaelyn Simms, a student at Royal Oak High School, has created an illustrated graphic novel about the Hamer family and their journey to Royal Oak via the Underground Railroad. This is her project for the Girl Scout Gold Award, the highest and most prestigious award in Girl Scouting. She hopes to get this printed in the near future.

Later this year, we will present an exhibit which will focus on the many resources in our library and archives for people

to research the history of their house. This includes plat maps, subdivision plats and association records, permits for construction or renovation projects, city directories, and even some deeds and abstract titles.

WE HAVE ALSO been working with the teachers from Royal Oak elementary schools on coordinating with them on curriculum and school visits to the museum. We hosted 16 teachers in December, split into two groups, to learn about the museum, library, and archives. I also met with the Royal Oak Library's new outreach/programs librarian. She toured the museum, and we discussed ways we might collaborate in the future.

Our volunteers are continuously updating our museum display cases, and the museum is acquiring new exhibit panels which allow us to accommodate more space for our popular Speaker Series. [See box.] We are also organizing the archival and library collections for people to come in and do research. You are welcome to come in to do research during the museum's open hours when we have volunteer researchers to help you. We're also in the process of putting a form on the website for you to fill out for research assistance.



Underground Railroad Panel Discussion
7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 28
Royal Oak Middle School Auditorium
\$15 per person, tickets at royaloakhistoricalsociety.com

SPEAKER SERIES DATES

For details and to purchase tickets go to: royaloakhistoricalsociety.com

7 p.m. at museum • \$15 per person • Space limited to 50

Friday, Feb. 14 — The Battle of the Bulge: The German Gamble in the Ardennes, with Steve Mrozek

Friday, March 14 — Hall of Fame DNA: The Legacy of Baseball Legend Norman "Turkey" Stearnes, with Vanessa Rose

Friday, April 11 — The WPA Murals of Royal Oak, with Deb Anderson and Gary Briggs

Thanks to all my volunteers for helping to improve our museum and archives, your visits to the museum, and expanding our understanding of the history of Royal Oak.

Nevertheless, the new elevated speedway plan in 1929 was considered a better idea. The planned roadway, which was to be 40 feet wide and would accommodate four lanes of traffic, making it possible to drive from Detroit to Royal Oak in about 20 minutes. Electric trains on the commuter service would take about 25 to 30 minutes to make the run. Officials of Grand Trunk Western Lines had approved the program and were excited about the endeavor.

THE SPEEDWAY WOULD BE accessible by ramps from all important points between Detroit and Pontiac. When finished, not only would there be rapid transit between Detroit and Pontiac and intermediate points, but all passenger traffic below would be handled between Detroit and Pontiac by electric locomotives.

"The proposed motor speedway, for the use of which a charge will be made, will be constructed on the columns carrying the overhead wires of the electrified system," explained C.G. Bowker, general manager of the railroad in an article in *The Daily Tribune*. "The roadway will provide for four streams of traffic, the inner lane in each direction being for high speed while slower moving vehicles will have their lane on the outer side."

JOSEPH A. BOWER — a financier from Detroit who was working in New York and who was responsible for helping raise funds to build the Ambassador Bridge — was behind the plan to construct the speedway and said he saw many advantages to the citizens of Royal Oak and other commuters.

"This is the first electrification in the Detroit district by a railroad which will give all the advantages of an improved and quieter service," Bower stated. "The elimination of the smoke and dirt nuisance will follow electrification, and it will be possible for the railroad with the new facilities to serve the industries along its line to better advantage.

"The motor speedway, being available for the enormous north and south traffic, will relieve the city streets to a great extent," Bower said. "It may remove the necessity for street widenings, since motorists will be able to come through the city uninterrupted and will be able to leave it at points such as Grand Boulevard, Gratiot and Jefferson where public garages are to be built. The speedway will be built in sections, the first three probably from Jefferson Avenue to Royal Oak."

The expenditure of \$100 million included the trains, tracks, and electrical equipment, arranged through Detroit Edison, and the speedway, terminals in Detroit and Pontiac and stations along the line. "The first unit will extend from Detroit to Royal Oak, it is planned, and the tracks and speedway will be placed simultaneously," Bower said.

ON SEPT. 26, 1929, officials of southern Oakland County municipalities attended a hearing in the Detroit city council chambers on the proposed ordinance permitting the Grand Trunk railway to construct the elevated automobile toll highway over its tracks.

After extensive debate, the Detroit council delayed action on passage of the ordinance. Detroit Mayor John C. Lodge insisted that D.S.R. buses be permitted to operate over the



The Detroit News archive

The man behind the elevated speedway plan, Ambassador Bridge developer Joseph Bower (center, kneeling), is shown at ceremonies on May 7, 1927, with banker Joseph Austin's 16-year-old daughter Helen driving in the first spike of an approach ramp for the bridge. The bridge — the first privately funded international bridge in North America and the world's longest suspension bridge at the time — opened just over two years later on Nov. 11, 1929.

new highway at a small charge, or free, before he would favor granting the railway permission to cross Detroit city streets with the elevated structure. The buses would operate only to the city limits. Unfortunately, the delay on approving the proposal also delayed its chance to be put on the upcoming November 5 ballot.

In Royal Oak, Mayor Harold E. Storz said he anticipated little difficulty for the speedway to be built through Royal Oak, although the city commission would do everything to guard the rights of the city and the public. Storz said that by watching the Detroit case would bring out all the problems that may be involved for Royal Oak officials.

PROMOTERS OF THE PROJECT had hoped for smoother approval from the various city leaders, believing the right-of-way from the already established railroad track entitlements would pave the way for cities along with the highway — and they believed most people would want the revolutionary development. However, 1930 marked more debate by several cities to ensure minimal impact on their communities.

It wasn't until the November 1930 elections that Detroit residents overwhelmingly approved the plan for the elevated highway with a two-thirds vote. Joseph Bower, promoter and financier of the highway, announced at that time that the work on the project would be started in the winter. He still, however, needed favorable action from the city of Hamtramck and in all Oakland County communities between Detroit and Pontiac.

Bower was prepared for the battle. He had a record of snatching success from the jaws of defeat. Bower was noted in an article on the Historic Detroit website as the driving

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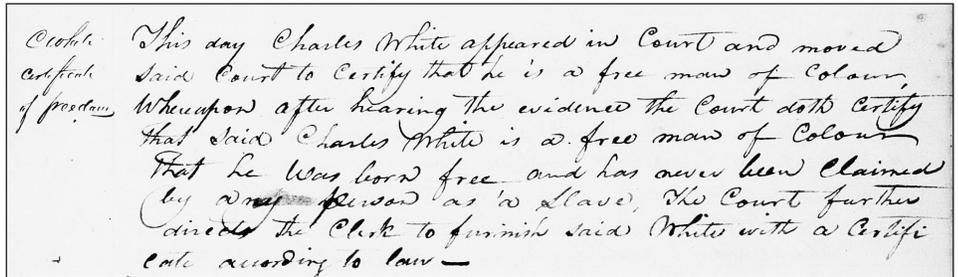
Royal Oak's Connections to the Underground Railroad

By Leslie S. Edwards

IT IS EXCITING TO SEE the interest in our current exhibits, "The Underground Railroad in Oakland County Public History Project" and "A Tangled Web: African Americans in 19th Century Royal Oak." "A Tangled Web" came about when I expressed an interest in being part of the research team for the Oakland County project about a year ago. At that time, I was asked to research Joseph White, a Black man whose name first appeared in Royal Oak on the 1850 census with his wife Betsey and their son Alvin. We had no idea who Joseph White was or why he had settled in Royal Oak. His story is now presented in the "A Tangled Web" exhibit.

Research does not happen in a vacuum — previously, scholars, historians, and researchers had to either travel to libraries, archives, and government repositories in person, or correspond with them via snail mail. Today, more and more repositories are digitizing materials, and platforms like Ancestry and Family Search can provide much-needed clues. Since we did not have any resources in the Royal Oak Historical Society's library or archives pertaining to Joseph White, I began my research using these platforms. As luck would have it, I connected with a DNA genealogist from Tennessee whose best friend is a descendant of Joseph White. Together we were able to fill in missing blanks, share information, and verify our suppositions using DNA relationships. One of the key pieces of evidence was matching DNA to Joseph's father, Charles White. This led to corroborating documentation to help tell Joseph's origin story.

JOSEPH WHITE WAS BORN a free Black man in Pike County, Kentucky, in 1826. While we have not yet confirmed who his mother was, we know that Joseph's father, Charles, was also born free. Imagine my excitement when I located a court recording of the Whites' "Certificate of Freedom."



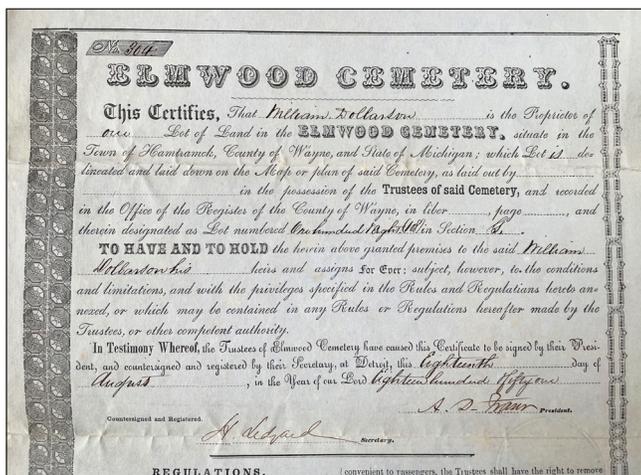
Joseph White's "Certificate of Freedom" issued in December 1838, Pike County, Kentucky.

We don't know exactly when Joseph left Kentucky and came to Michigan, probably traveling via the Underground Railroad network, but he landed in Oakland County where he married Elizabeth "Betsey" Coleman in 1848. The 1850 census for Royal Oak suggests that the Whites were living on Orson Starr's property where Joseph worked as a laborer, likely for the Starr's. Just a few years later, Joseph, who had saved \$500, purchased 68 acres on the south side of what is now 11 Mile Road near Campbell. He became a successful farmer and a shrewd businessman before enlisting in the 102nd U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War.

The Whites had three sons — Alvin, Lewis, and John Wesley. After the war, Joseph and Elizabeth split up and Elizabeth married John Harris, one of the sons of Jane and Hamlet Harris. Joseph and two of his sons moved west while Alvin stayed in the area until his death in 1911. You can learn the rest of the Whites' story by visiting the exhibit, at the museum through May.

IN MOST CASES, we do not have photographs of the African Americans who came to Royal Oak in the mid-1840s. We do know now that there were four "groups" of Black people who settled here before the Civil War — free Blacks like Joseph White; those who were enslaved but emancipated by their enslaver; those who were born free to formerly enslaved parents; and self-emancipated freedom seekers who escaped and made their way to Royal Oak.

In addition to the Whites, "A Tangled Web" tells the stories of William Dollarson and the Daniel Cason and Alexander Duncan families. They settled in Royal Oak in 1847, 1848, and 1849, respectively — more than 10 years before the well-known Hamers settled here. What brought these individuals to Royal Oak — why did they choose to settle here and not in another township or in Detroit or even Canada? While these questions may never be answered, I have been able to uncover parts of their stories to help us understand more about the connections between Royal Oak and the Underground Railroad movement. Using census records to help determine places of birth, I was then able to locate information in historical newspapers, county records, online databases, and land and probate records to piece together these families. I contacted court clerks, historical societies, archivists, and librarians, and most were more than willing to assist with procuring copies of records to help document our early residents.



Elmwood Cemetery deed for one lot purchased by William Dollarson on Aug. 18, 1851.

A VERY LONG ACCOUNT, published on Nov. 28, 1883, in *The Evening News* (now *The Detroit News*), told the story of William Dollarson, who was formerly enslaved, sold several times, and who escaped from his enslaver. He then went to New York where he met and married Maria Fletcher. They ultimately made their way to Detroit where Dollarson worked as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Once there, he purchased a parcel of land in Royal Oak with the intention of encouraging other freedom seekers to do the same. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that Dollarson assisted the Casons, Duncans, Whites, and others in relocating to Royal Oak.

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From Our Collections

Hedge's Wigwam Memories

The letter below was written by Connie Redman, niece of Roy Hedge, owner of Hedge's Wigwam, a Native American-themed restaurant on Woodward Avenue in Pleasant Ridge on the border of Royal Oak. The eatery, with its unique cafeteria-style buffet, was popular in the area from 1927 to 1967, when it closed. The exterior of the building featured a giant concrete teepee over the front door, along with several concrete Native American statues. One of those 1,800-pound statues now stands outside the front door of the historical museum.

The letter includes Connie's memories of going to the restaurant with her uncle and aunt — the Hedges, and of Vernon Butler, who took over ownership of the landmark restaurant after Roy Hedge died. It is not known to whom Connie was writing the letter.

— Leslie S. Edwards

I'm not sure, but Vernon Butler started working for Hedge's as a very young man because he dropped out of U of M to work there — probably 1926-27 since he was born in 1906. He was the manager until Roy Hedge died in 1955, when he inherited Hedge's. Mr. Hedge must have been a good owner as Mr. & Mrs. Butler enjoyed a good life. They spent their later years living between Birmingham and Venice, Florida. Vernon passed away in 1993 & his wife, Ida, in 2007.

I loved it when [my uncle and aunt] took me there because I got to feed the goldfish in the indoor pond. I also got to get a treat — always maple sugar candy that was in some shape ... animal, maple leaf or doll, etc.

I also got someone fired. I told my uncle I saw a waitress flip a salt shaker. He went right over and fired her. He always wanted the restaurant to be very professional. To this day that bothers me because as a 10-year-old I hope I saw it right!



Ida and Vernon Butler



The gift shop at Hedge's Wigwam.

More About the Rhubarb King

The article about Ellis Berry, Royal Oak's rhubarb king in the late 1920s, in our July 2024 issue brought back memories for lifelong Royal Oak resident Virginia Merritt. Virginia's mother, Blossom, and Ellis' wife, Helen, played bridge together for many years, and Virginia and the Berrys' son, Bob, were in the same high school class.



One day in the 1940s, Ellis, an agent for the railroad in Royal Oak, was faced with the dilemma of a large unclaimed order of nursery plants. He knew that the Merritts were moving to a new home and thought they might be able to use the plants. Harry Merritt immediately accepted the offer and soon an

assortment of honeysuckle bushes, apple and peach trees, privet hedges, and rose bushes was transported to the Merritt property and planted. Virginia remembers that her father was not much for gardening, but the plants were placed "anywhere and everywhere" around the house and grew successfully.

Do you have a memory of growing up in Royal Oak? Share with us at editor@royaloakhistoricalociety.org. We'd love to hear from you.

Welcome to new members of the Royal Oak Historical Society. To join, see Page 12.

Julia Elliot
Theodore Godley
Helen Jositas
Karen Kline
Barbara Nielsen

Jennifer Van Every
Denise Vultee
Ann Williams and
Frank Edwards
Kathleen Williams

Welcome!

Thank you to the following recent donors.

Colleen Christopher
Judy and John Davids
John Forester
Helen Jositas
Ellen Kehoe

Carson McEachern
Jacqueline Patt
John Springer
Patt Trama

Thank You!

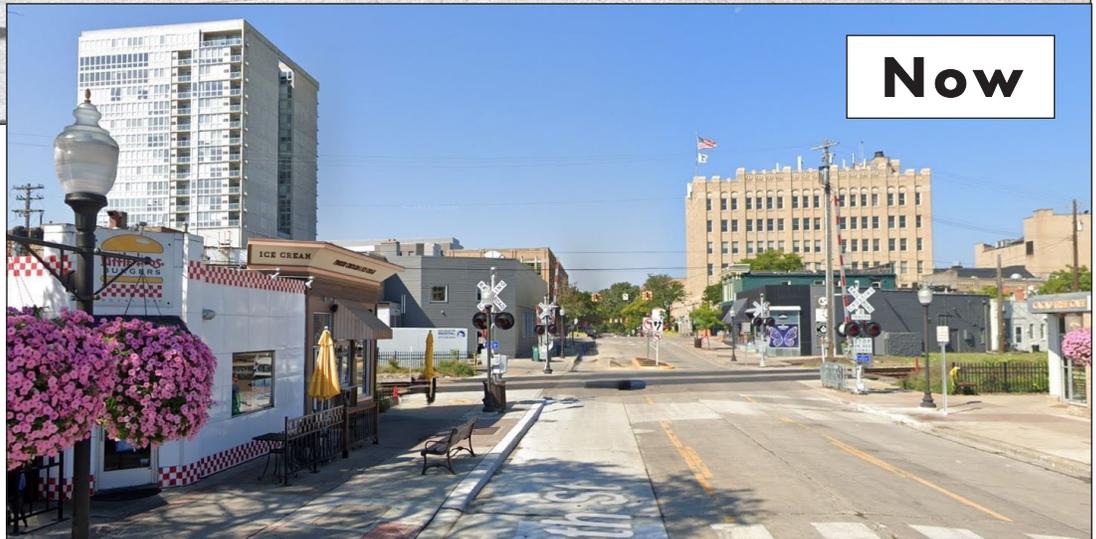
Royal Oak Then & Now

BY JOHN MAURICE

Then: late 1950s



Now



FOURTH STREET IS one of the main thoroughfares of our downtown area. The **Then** shot from the late 1950s shows a view looking west along Fourth Street at Center Street with the Washington Square Building in the background. Built in 1927, it was the tallest building in Royal Oak for many years. Just a year later came the Royal Oak Theater, which still had its original marquee in this photo, although we can't quite make out what movie is playing.

The building sitting nearest to the viewer in the **Then** photo was Enner's Grill or Enner's Sandwich Shop at this time. This location at 201 West Fourth has been a staple for Royal Oak diners since it was built in 1939. Through the years it has gone through a number of owner and name changes, but other than the name, the building itself hasn't changed much in its more than 85 years. It started out as B&P

Restaurant in the 1940s, was Enner's in the '50s, and more recently Gonto's Coney Island in the 1970s and Corner Coney in the 1980s. Today it exists as Little Brothers Burgers, which features a large menu for its 344-square-foot size.

Fourth Street appears to be bustling with activity at the time the **Then** photo was taken. With plenty of department stores, specialty shops, and walkable streets, Royal Oak has been a destination for shoppers since the post-war years. 🍷

Now photo courtesy of Google Maps

Billy Lee • Continued from Page 1

Just before 8 p.m. on October 11, in front of the Baldwin Theatre, Billy Lee, dressed in white, climbed into the driver's seat of the 1927 Chrysler 52 sedan. Royal Oak police chief Lloyd R. McClintock handcuffed her left hand to the steering wheel [a standard practice in endurance driving]. Billy started the car, depressed the clutch, and put the vehicle in first gear. As the clock struck the hour, she pressed the gas pedal, let out the clutch, and wheeled onto Washington Avenue. Her drive had begun.

FOR THE FIRST FOUR HOURS, she drove through Royal Oak. At midnight, she passed the Royal Oak police station and an hour later through Highland Park. Then, it was up and down Woodward Avenue three times between Royal Oak and Pontiac. After one of those trips, Billy drove to the Royal Oil Company at Main and Sixth streets, where an attendant jumped on the running board of the car with a can of gasoline and began pouring it into the auto's tank while Billy circled the block. The process was repeated until the tank was full.

The beginning of her drive was grueling as Billy navigated in the darkness and heavy rain. Her car had windshield wipers that worked on engine vacuum. However, the vacuum dropped when the engine accelerated, causing the wipers to slow down and sometimes stop completely. Thus, it was a welcome sight when dawn broke and the rain subsided.

Another welcome sight was Gabel's Creamery truck, which met Billy at 8:30 in the morning at Winter's Drug Store. She was passed a quart of Gabel's certified milk, her first of three for the day. The handcuff on her left hand made it difficult for her to drive and drink from the bottle, so small amounts were passed to her in a cup as she drove back and forth in front of the store.



Pinterest

Advertisement for Chrysler 52 models.

three delivery trucks from Gabel's Creamery; and an oil truck from Royal Oil Company. Cheers were deafening as Billy approached the finish line at *The Daily Tribune* office.

JUST AFTER 8 P.M. the Chrysler came to a stop. Billy could hardly stand to get out of the car. Her manager, William Burton, had the ambulance from J.H. Spiller Funeral Home drive her to the bedroom set up in the car dealership's window where she would sleep. She dropped off immediately, waking two hours later to eat her first real food provided by the City Cafe. She then slept two more hours before being awakened to go home. It was estimated that more than 10,000 spectators filed by to watch her sleep.

Billy slept at home until 5 p.m. on Sunday, through two planned appearances at the Baldwin Theatre. She did get to the 10 p.m. show, told of her experience, and answered questions. Thus ended one of Royal Oak's largest and most popular events.

Learning that an endurance driver cannot leave the car for the duration of the race, the first question that pops into most people's minds is, "How do they go to the bathroom?" This question is never answered, and we can only speculate. Billy went on a liquid diet during her pre-drive training and stuck to liquids during the drive.

IF NOT FOR AN automobile accident in Detroit on Oct. 27, 1927, 10 days after her record-breaking drive, we would not know Billy Lee's identity. *The Detroit News* reported the accident and identified Billy as Lucille Rust of Highland Park. She was born in Denver, Colorado, in June 1904. It appears her first endurance drive was in St. Petersburg, Florida, and that her only other drive was in Ann Arbor in 1928. Records are sparse, and she may have done others or even driven under another pseudonym.

In 1929, Lucille married Arthur Sullivan, a toolmaker for Ex-Cell-O Aircraft & Tool Corp. in Detroit. A few years later, Arthur suffered a head injury in a robbery that left him an invalid for the rest of his life. Lucille became his caregiver, and the couple eventually moved to Florida. Arthur passed away in 1943. Caring for Arthur motivated Lucille to become a nurse, and her daughter and granddaughter followed in her footsteps. Lucille passed away in 1969 at age 66; three grandchildren survived. One granddaughter remembered her grandmother as "strong-willed and a tough cookie." And yes, she was plucky. 🍪



Courtesy of Sandra Park-O'Hara

Miss Billy Lee

THE SECOND DAY of the drive was the same as the first, with Billy driving past sponsors' locations, receiving milk three times, and getting gasoline on the fly. By 3 p.m. on day three, the effects of driving were beginning to show. She was experiencing cold symptoms, and a nurse got in the car to confirm that Billy could go on.

Also on day three, *The Daily Tribune* requested a change. Miss Lee originally was to complete her drive at midnight the next day. However, so more of her fans could see her finish, the *Tribune* asked to move the ending back to 8 p.m., thus shortening her drive to 96 hours. Billy, not wanting to disappoint her fans, reluctantly agreed.

When 8:30 a.m. came, Billy had her morning milk, which gave her a slight energy boost, and she pressed on. Onlookers and the curious flocked to downtown Royal Oak. As 8 p.m. approached, the crowd became the largest ever assembled there.

Billy guided her car behind police chief McClintock, who drove with sirens wailing and lights flashing; three gleaming Chryslers from J.B. Malburg's dealership;



Courtesy of Sandra Park-O'Hara

Lucille Rust — Billy Lee's real name — in a race car.

Highway in the Sky • Continued from Page 4

force to build the Ambassador Bridge. The Ambassador Bridge website described Bower's success as not that of a banker, but of a businessman who understood finance. His reputation for converting soured loans into solid accounts bordered on the legendary. Henry Ford turned to him during the Ford Motor Co.'s fiscal crisis of 1921.

Still, the approval process for the elevated highway dragged on throughout early 1931, but by early March, the leaders of some of the cities had approved the ordinance. Then in mid-March, the ambitious plan hit another snag when Ferndale tabled the proposal. In April, Hamtramck blocked construction of the elevated highway in its city-wide referendum.

THE VOTE WAS DIFFERENT in Royal Oak. On April 20, 1931, the Royal Oak city commission approved the zoning ordinance by a 4 to 3 vote after a controversy which raged since the first public hearing six months earlier. The final vote, taken after four hours of contentious debate, was accomplished only after the mayor and two commissioners favoring the act swallowed a "bitter pill" to ensure the act's passage.

Commissioner Arthur L. Lawson said he would only vote for the passage if his amendment to the ordinance would allow about 13 acres of property on Webster Road owned by W.D. Curtis to be zoned as industrial property instead of residential was approved. Finally, after a lengthy discussion of the proper setback around the Curtis property, only a small portion was approved — which made it practically unsuitable for industry — the motion passed and led to the approval of the ordinance.

Just three weeks later, in mid-May, Grand Trunk made a stunning announcement that the railway would begin its first-ever rapid transit commuter service operating between Detroit and Pontiac in the next few months. C.G. Bowker, general manager of the lines, said, "For Royal Oak this means an advantage so great, that it will be difficult to estimate its value. It will bring all of greater Royal Oak territory closer to Detroit and it is expected to result in a greater influx of new population in the next few years."

ON AUG. 1, 1931, the rapid transit commuter service began offering six daily trains between the two cities, making the trip in 45 minutes. Large celebrations took place in cities along the route, with one event attended by Michigan Gov. Wilbur M. Brucker, former Gov. Alex J. Groesbeck, and railroad general manager Bowker. The train stopped at the Royal Oak station on Fourth Street, where Rev. Charles E. Coughlin of the Shine of the Little Flower made a welcoming address.

Thus, with the advent of rapid trains as a more efficient and less-costly way to address the commuter problem — and the impact of the Great Depression, the elevated speedway project never got off the ground. 🍂



The first commuter train leaves the Northwood station on Aug. 1, 1931.

Royal Oak's Underground Railroad Connections • Continued from Page 5

Alexander Duncan III was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, to formerly enslaved parents who were emancipated by their enslavers. This area of Virginia has a complicated history with slavery, and the Duncans' story is no exception. Alexander and his wife, children, and parents also came to Detroit, likely as part of a pilgrimage of free Blacks led by William DeBaptiste and Maria Louise More in 1846. The Duncans lived in both Detroit and Royal Oak for nearly 15 years, which suggests that they, too, were Black abolitionists shepherding people to our community.

DANIEL CASON WAS also born in Virginia, possibly in Princess Anne County. His story is quite different. As a young child, his enslaver, John Cason, moved to East Feliciana, Louisiana, where he had a plantation and several enslaved individuals. Daniel likely worked in the cotton fields. When Daniel was about 18 years old, John Cason moved to Yazoo County, Mississippi, where he acquired a 700-acre plantation. In his will, dated 1836, he emancipated Daniel, his wife, and their children. Though there is a 10-year gap in Daniel's story (1837-1847), he bought land in Royal Oak in 1848 and remained here until his death 40 years later. His son, Calvin, lived in Royal Oak for nearly 60 years. The Casons are buried in Royal Oak Cemetery in unmarked graves.



Duncan family grave in Elmwood Cemetery.

Find Old Deeds of Freedom.

Pontiac, March 15.—The probating of the estate of Calvin Cason, a colored man of Royal Oak, brings to light some old deeds in which their maker freed his slaves, Daniel and Betsey, for long and faithful service. The will was made by John Cason in Yazoo, Miss., in 1836. After becoming a free man Daniel came to Michigan. It is his son's estate now admitted to probate.

Grand Rapids Press report of probate in March 1906 for Calvin Cason, son of Daniel Cason.

THERE IS MUCH MORE to discover about each of these families, such as researching the women and their potential roles in the Underground Railroad. In addition, there are several other Black families who settled here — some longer than others — as well as children who seem to have taken shelter with various families for a number of years. For many of these individuals, we have only nominal information. Royal Oak was also home to several abolitionists, and their stories have yet to be fleshed out. However, the research I have done to date makes it clear that Royal Oak was an important part of an organized Underground Railroad network from the mid-1840s until after the Civil War. Our community's story is much more complex than we ever imagined and connects to the larger history of Underground Railroad activities in southeastern Michigan. 🍂

Looking Back

COLLECTED AND EDITED BY JOHN S. SCHULTZ FROM THE PAGES OF THE DAILY TRIBUNE

What was happening in Royal Oak...

50 years ago — 1975

A FLYING INSTRUCTOR and his student escaped injury when their Piper Cub crash landed on a vacant field in Troy at 5:39 p.m. Thursday (Jan. 2). The instructor, James E. Cerillig, age 23, 3608 Benjamin, told Patrolman Dennis Barley, Troy, that the engine stalled shortly after takeoff from Grand Prix Airport, Fifteen Mile (Maple), west of Crooks. Cerillig said the student pilot, Michael C. Maryonivich, age 31, of Birmingham, had reached an altitude of 150 feet when the engine stopped. Cerillig said he took over control of the plane, was unable to start the motor, but managed to land in a field east of 2821 Industrial Row. Barley said the Piper Cub came to a stop on its nose and sustained minor damage.

ROYAL OAK TEACHERS JOINED with city and fire unions in a massive campaign to approve a tax hike on March 11 ballot. Patrolman Donald E. Novak, president of the Royal Oak Police Officers Association, said in return for teachers' support, city unions have agreed to back a school renewal tax question expected to go to voters this spring. Walter J. Rogowski, executive director of the Royal Oak Education Association, said the coalition is not seen as a permanent arrangement, but as an effort to work together on the current problems facing both schools and city government.

60 years ago — 1965

LIKE PROUD PARENTS, CITY FATHERS and police officials will dedicate Royal Oak's new three-story, glass and stone police building Sunday (Jan. 5) — the first facility designed and built especially for police work in the city's history. City officials, dignitaries and the public from throughout South Oakland have been invited to the 2-5 p.m. ceremonies.

Police Chief Herman Potts stressed that everyone is invited. "We couldn't mail invitations to everybody. But each and every member of our department takes great pride and welcomes the opportunity to show you what we believe to be one of the finest police facilities in the country," he said. Policemen will be on duty in all departments to demonstrate their operation and answer questions. Refreshments will be provided in the basement pistol range.

ACCORDING TO DR. REUBEN MEYER, professor of pediatrics at Wayne State University, "all babies should be vaccinated for measles at nine months of age or as soon thereafter as is possible." Measles vaccine generally has been available for at least two years, and few children have been vaccinated. Because epidemics come in two-year cycles, Detroit can expect a peak year in 1965. Two years ago, there were 48,752 cases reported. Last year, 27 deaths were reported in Michigan. "There is no reason for children to suffer or die when this vaccine is at our disposal," Meyer said.

70 years ago — 1955

RESIDENTS OF THE EAST SIDE of Royal Oak Township voted to become the City of Madison Heights Monday and elected nine commissioners to draft a charter for the new city. Home-rule status was approved by 1,734 residents while 1,362 were opposed. The decision to become a city leaves only the West Eight Mile all-Negro section and 120 acres at Greenfield and 10 Mile as the remaining unincorporated areas of the township. The new city, area wise, will be the second largest in South Oakland at an area of 7 1/2 square miles. Only Royal Oak, with 12 square miles, is larger. The new city population is estimated at 15,000, fifth largest in South Oakland County. The 120-acre Greenfield section, surrounded by Southfield Township, has 35 residents. These areas are all that remain of Royal Oak Township which once included all cities in South Oakland.

WILLIAM SPRAGUR, HIS WIFE and seven children probably will sleep in the family car tonight. Their family furniture and possessions are on the street, evicted in a land contract foreclosure on their home at 1504 Hoffman in Royal Oak. Spragur, a self-employed contractor, contends he tried to pay up his back payments during the redemption period, but the facts are disputed. Eviction will not free him of a \$3,000 note to pay for a new garage and an addition to the home. "I don't know what

50 Years Ago — January 3, 1975



THE JUBILEE IS OVER — Officers of Royal Oak Golden Jubilee, Inc., the planning committee for the 50th anniversary celebration in 1971, presented a display case and all the committee's papers and documents to the City of Royal Oak. John G. Wilson (left), president of the committee, attached a dedication plaque to the case in the library while Mrs. Virginia Savery, library director, and other committee officers Donald E. Gee, Janet L. Gee and Harry Merigian watched. (Tribune photo)

I'm going to do," he said. "One of my daughters is recovering from polio, another is sick, I owe all that money, and I haven't a home."

80 years ago — 1945

SNOW SHOVELING WILL CONTINUE to be Southern Oakland County's main sport as citizens entered their 26th day of drifting snow, icy pavements and below freezing weather. Temperatures in this area will descend to near-zero tonight (Jan. 4), with outstate temperatures recorded today at 17 above zero. Municipal officials ask that citizens continue to clear snow from sidewalks at residences or business establishments, as light covering of snow hiding slippery walks makes travel for pedestrians particularly hazardous.

90 years ago — 1935

A FREE COURSE IN AERONAUTICS will be taught under the Royal Oak Federal Emergency Relief Administration education program. The instructor is a licensed commercial pilot. Registration and the first class will be at the high school. The class will include: Nomenclature of airships, operations of controls, theory of flight, instruments, engines, air commerce regulations and air traffic rules.

MICHIGAN WORKERS with an average annual wage of \$1,555 are the highest paid in the United States, a survey shows. The average wage per worker in the country as a whole is \$1,300. In the Great Lakes states average annual wages are: Michigan, \$1,555; Illinois, \$1,465; Ohio, \$1,445; Indiana, \$1,335; and Wisconsin, \$1,305.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS for equipping the Royal Oak police department with automobiles and machine guns to enable officers to cope with bandits "who are well armed and travel in fast cars" were adopted by the city commission.

100 years ago — 1925

FARES OF BOTH THE STAR MOTOR COACH line and the DUR were increased to two cents a mile in accordance with the new rate schedule for the bus line which has just been approved by the Michigan Public Utilities Commission.

Royal Oak and Clawson will feel the change considerably, although Royal Oak will suffer less than any others because of its lesser distance from the Ford plant in Highland Park, the point from which the mileage is computed. The new DUR fares are: From Ford plant to Eight Mile, 6 cents; Nine Mile, 8 cents; Poplar Park, 10 cents, Royal Oak station, 12 cents.

THE CONTRACTS HAVE BEEN SIGNED and ground will be broken this week (Jan. 15) for the new sales and service station to be built by the REO Michigan Sales, Inc. at Woodward and Ten-Mile. The REO people demonstrate their faith in the future of Royal Oak by establishing here a direct factory branch in what is the smallest city in the United States to have such an institution. There will also be a gas station in connection and a complete service will be maintained by expert REO mechanics. The station will be under the management of Jack Lynch, who is well and favorably known in Royal Oak. *[Editor's note: The REO Motor Sales Car Company was based in Lansing and produced automobiles and trucks from 1905 to 1975.]*

105 years ago — 1920

THE TRANSFORMATION OF WOODWARD AVENUE into a paved highway 100 feet wide between Detroit and Pontiac, appears to have been put over until 1921. However, it will be widened from the Six-Mile to the Eight Mile Road, in the immediate future.

ALBERT D. KIDDER, of the Erb-Kidder Lumber Company, was elected president of the Royal Oak Savings Bank at its annual meeting Tuesday afternoon (Jan. 16). Mr. Kidder succeeds M.L. Brabb who declined to act as president although he retains his place on the board of directors. John M. Beddew was chosen vice president, taking the place of Jacob Erb who still remains on the board of directors. The board of directors was increased to nine members, Jacob J. Levy being elected as the new member.

90 Years Ago — January 1935

Pin [ball] games, baffle boards and other gaming devices in Royal Oak stores must be disposed of within two weeks or they will be confiscated, the city commission decreed at the weekly meeting last night.

The ultimatum, to be carried out through the police department, gives owners of the establishments until Jan. 21 to dispose of the devices to protect their investment. After that date, the devices will be seized and destroyed.

The action is construed as supporting the police in confiscating four pin games at the confectionary store of Peter Jennings, 615 North Washington Ave., near Royal Oak High School.

Jennings, who admitted premiums were given for certain combinations, appeared before the commission and requested that two of the machines which he bought for \$23 be returned to him. His request was granted when he promised to turn them back to the manufacturer and not to use similar machines in the future. City Manager Edward M. Shafter said the machines were

seized after numerous complaints were received by parents that school children had spent their lunch money playing the devices. He said it was the regular practice of police to confiscate any of the machines when evidence was secured proving them to gambling devices.

Commissioner Fletcher L. Renton objected to the action of police in centering their seizure in Jennings' place and said if his machines were confiscated, all others in the city should be seized. "I approve of the action of our police, in seizing these machines, especially from places near our schools," Commissioner Evert M. Bangham declared. "In my opinion they should be picked up on any pretext."

"If that's gambling, how about our bridge parties and keno games?" Renton asked. "There's a vast difference between adults playing bridge and keno, and school children using their luncheon money to play baffle board," Bangham replied.

JAN. 8, 1935





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