



ROYAL OAK

# Historical Society

FEBRUARY 2020 • ROYALOAKHISTORICALSOCIETY.COM

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*Photograph courtesy of Royal Oak Historical Society Museum  
The Village of Royal Oak's float in the Oakland County 100th anniversary parade, 1920.*

## Celebrating the Birth and Growth of Royal Oak, the Region

*By Bob Muller, ROHS President*

Over the next several years, many important anniversaries will occur to celebrate the origins and development of the region. This year marks the 200th birthday of the 1820 founding of Oakland County and of the city of Pontiac being named the county seat. Oakland County is a square made up of 25 townships, five on each side. Townships are made up of 336 one-mile-square sections, six on each side. Holly Township is in the northwest corner, containing the Village of Holly, and Royal Oak Township is in the southeast corner containing the City of Royal Oak.

Also in 1820 was when settlers purchased the first piece of land in Royal Oak Township, although no one initially settled on it. In the next five years, 22 pieces of land were purchased, and settlers began to arrive. The development of Royal Oak Township had begun. It's hard to believe that just 200 years ago, this was untouched wilderness with only a few Indian trails crossing the land. Wolves and bears were still common.

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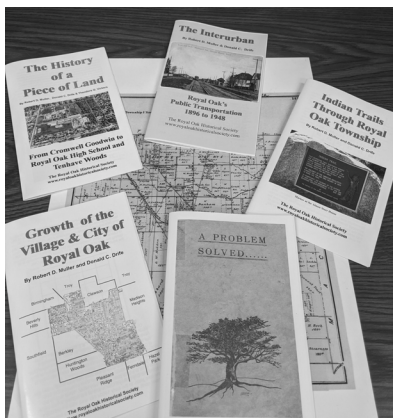
## Growth of Royal Oak *Continued from page 1*

On June 21, 2021, we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of Royal Oak becoming a city. November 8, 1921, was the date that Royal Oak citizens voted to adopt a charter providing for a commission form of government. George A. Dondero was elected the first mayor. Also in 1921, Clawson and Pleasant Ridge became villages, followed by Berkley in 1923.

In that first 100 years — from 1820 to 1920, the wilderness was transformed into farms surrounding what became downtown Royal Oak as its commercial center. Over the second 100 years, the farms disappeared, thousands of houses were built for the workers of the growing auto industry, and Royal Oak's land area expanded exponentially. Today, 11 communities touch the borders of our city.



Photograph courtesy of Royal Oak Historical Society Museum  
Center Street in Royal Oak, circa 1920.



Many remembrances were written by people born in the 1800s, telling of those first 100 years. Those of us born in the second 100 years need to write our remembrances for those who will be looking back 100 years from now. History is lost if no one writes it down. I just read that Main Street was a sand road shaded by spreading oaks from Catalpa to Third Street; this was about 1910. Do any of you remember that?

Think about what you remember. It may not seem important, but those in the future will be thankful for it. I remember walking from my home to Gardenia and Campbell roads to catch snakes, frogs, and crawfish. In the 1950s, around Halloween, my parents would drive out Stephenson Highway north of 12 Mile Road to buy pumpkins from farmers. Royal Oak was the northern edge of the suburbs, and there were still wild places and farms only a few miles from downtown. Think about when you were a kid, write it down, and bring it to the Historical Museum. We will maintain these remembrances for the future.

For more history on the growth of the region, as well as other historical information on the area, there are several booklets available online ([royaloakhistoricalsociety.com](http://royaloakhistoricalsociety.com)) or in the Museum gift shop.

### “Royal Oak... The Early Years” – now through July



A new exhibit opened this month at the Royal Oak Historical Society Museum. “Royal Oak... The Early Years” presents a look at the city's earliest pioneer families, businesses, and schools. Learn which long-time business got its start in floor refinishing, what family provided seeds to the D.M. Ferry Seed Co., and who owned the pretty china shown here.



See our “school marm” pointing the way to the history of local schools — maybe even your childhood school. The “Royal Oak... The Early Years” exhibit will run through the end of July.



# Homes & Buildings in Royal Oak

Edited by John S. Schultz

In each issue, this feature focuses on historic homes and buildings in our city. The selections come from the book, "Royal Oak Images, Yesterday's Charm Today's Treasures," published by the Roundtable of Royal Oak Historical Organizations, a standing committee of the Royal Oak Historical Commission of the City of Royal Oak. The book was published in 2006, and a second edition is in the works.

We encourage other Royal Oak residents to share the history of their home for possible publication. For more information, contact John S. Schultz at [jsschultz11@gmail.com](mailto:jsschultz11@gmail.com).

## Borglum House

319 Crane Avenue

*California Craftsman Bungalow Built in 1907*

The house at 319 Crane Avenue is a typical California Craftsman bungalow, a style of architecture popular from 1900 to 1930. Royal Oak city records indicate this house was built in 1907.

In its day, the term "California bungalow" characterized a one or one-and-a-half story dwelling and an Arts and Crafts architectural style that merged elements from Japanese buildings and Swiss chalets. Central to the bungalow-style philosophy was the idea that simplicity and artistry could harmonize in an affordable house. Prices for most of these homes at the time typically ranged from \$900 to \$3500.

The house at 319 Crane exhibits many of the traditional features found in a Craftsman bungalow: wide overhanging eaves, cedar-shake siding that was originally stained dark brown (due to a bungalow philosophy to merge the home's exterior look with nature), a large covered wraparound front porch, original oak front door with beveled glass panes opening directly into the living room, plaster ceilings crossed geometrically with deep stained oak box beams, a brick fireplace surrounded by built-in bookshelves and flanked by leaded glass casement windows, and deep stained oak trim in both the living and dining rooms.

The owner of the house in the 1930s-40s according to city records was Walter Smith. It is unknown if he was the original owner from 1907.

George Borglum owned the house in the 1950s and 60s and sold it in 1976. He was a professor of French at Wayne State University and the nephew of Gutzon Borglum, the famous sculptor who was responsible for the carvings at Mount Rushmore.

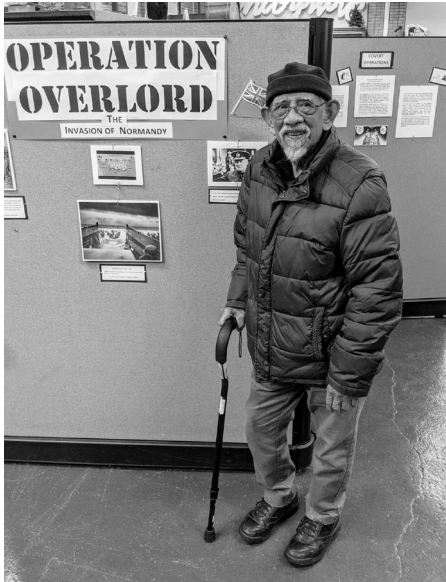
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## Curator's Corner

by Muriel Versagi

Wonderful things happen at the Museum! One example was at the opening of our "Remembrance of D-Day, the Normandy Invasion" exhibit on November 10, 2019, when we were honored with the presence of Clifford Alvira, 94, born and raised in Royal Oak. Alvira was in the Navy as



Museum photograph  
 Clifford Alvira

part of the invasion of Normandy, serving on one of the landing craft that brought the Jeeps, trucks, and other war equipment needed on the beach.

Cliff spent the entire afternoon with us, leaning on the gift shop counter at the front of the Museum. Every one of our visitors talked with

him—a member of the Greatest

Generation in the flesh. His picture as well as a photo of him on the landing craft along with his story were on display in the exhibit.

We have met the most incredible people in the last 10 years from all walks of life, with so many of what I call "mini reunions"; that is, two or three people will be visiting, they look at each other and say, "Don't I know you? Did you go to...?" and they will name a school. For the next hour or so, they spend time in the Museum library looking through yearbooks and having a wonderful time strolling down memory lane.

About five years ago, Royal Oak Middle School history teacher Sarah Bockhausen discovered the History Detectives video of our Abraham Lincoln signature. She decided to use it in her classes about the Civil War and Lincoln. She called and asked if I would be willing to come to the school and talk about the signature, George Dondero, and our Lincoln collection. Would I? Of course! What fun!

Then three years ago, Sarah said, "I'd like to start a History Club at school and meet at the Museum." We were on board! The club meets once a month, mostly at the Museum, but we have gone on field trips... the Orson Starr House, the Royal Oak Cemetery, and paranormal tours at the Museum and the Starr House. An Abraham Lincoln impersonator enlightened the students last June. Recently retired Royal Oak Director of Public Service and Recreation Greg Rassel and his crew provided picnic tables so we could meet outside in the yard of the Museum. A total success!

Our local Daughters of the American Revolution Ezra Parker Chapter recently presented its "Outstanding Teacher of American History" award to Sarah. We were honored to write a letter in her support. Sarah is one of the amazing people who come into the Museum and stay involved. Often people will visit an exhibit, fall in love with the building, and ask, "Do you need volunteers?" Sometimes we can fit their work schedule, sometimes not; sometimes they are retired and flexible.

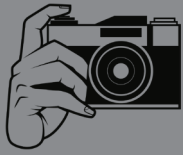
As many of you know, I often say, "Every day at the Museum is Christmas because someone brings in a wonderful piece of history or a new volunteer pops up."

**Donations to the Royal Oak Historical Society  
 are gratefully accepted**

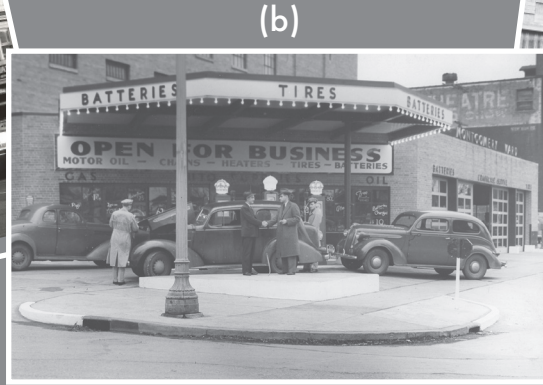
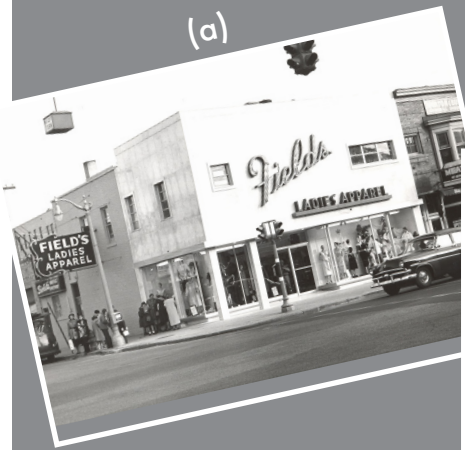
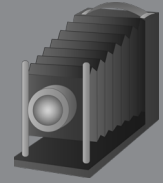
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*Donations are tax-deductible. Thank you in advance.*



We call this issue's Photo Game "What is Here Now?"  
 Featured are photos of former Royal Oak businesses.  
 Do you know which establishments occupy these sites today?  
 See answers below.



Photographs courtesy of Royal Oak Historical Society Museum

## Borglum House *Continued from page 3*

While George Borglum owned the house, the front and back landscaping plan was quite extensive and was said to have been designed by a Detroit Zoo groundskeeper. Mr. Borglum kept detailed records of the number of types of plantings and shrubs and trees throughout the property. One interesting fact about the house was a visit by author Theodor Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss.

The house was purchased in 1976 by the Lodge family. Patricia Lodge and her husband and four children lived in the house until she sold it in 2003 to Mary Margaret (Marge) Goodrich. Marge says she learned from Andrew Mutch, a local expert on Sears Kit Homes, that the Crane house appeared to be one of more than 70,000 such homes sold primarily through mail order from the company's celebrated catalogues from about 1907 to 1940. The kit houses included most of the materials needed to build the house and were shipped by railcar and once delivered were often built by the homeowner, relatives, and/or neighbors. Marge says the model name for the Crane home design was "The Corona." She sold the home in 2017 to Pamela Murray.



Here's a later photo of the Bistro 82 corner that really gives it away! (Museum photo)

- (c) Hocking-Gillies Shoe Store — Mesa Tacos and Tequila
- (b) Montgomery Ward Auto Center — Bistro 82
- (a) Field's Ladies Apparel — Atomic Coffee

PHOTO GAME ANSWERS:

# Royal Oak Then & Now

by John Maurice, ROHS Facebook Editor

At the east entrance to the Northwood subdivision, where Northwood Boulevard meets Crooks Road, there is a stone marker that often goes unnoticed, even by people who walk or drive by it every day. The marker was put in place in 1927, and the inscription on the plaque reads:

ON THIS SITE STOOD  
 THE OLD HOMESTEAD  
 OF DR. FIRMAN W.  
 CLAWSON THE ORIGINAL  
 OWNER & SUBDIVIDER OF  
 NORTHWOOD  
 "THE HOMESITE BEAUTIFUL"  
 PLANNED & PLANTED  
 A.D. 1900

Dr. Firman William Clawson was a dentist who came to Michigan in 1877 from Philadelphia. He taught in the Department of Dental Surgery at the Detroit College of Medicine until 1906. The Clawson family bought a large farm, including a house and huge barn, in 1898. The property extended from Crooks Road to Woodward Avenue. Both structures burned down in 1917, but no one was injured.

Even before the fire, Clawson had begun subdividing part of his land, calling it the Northwood subdivision. The area was bounded by Oakwood Boulevard (12 Mile Road), Woodward Avenue, Webster Road, and Evergreen Drive.

The land where the farmhouse and barn stood was donated to the First Congregational Church, which stands on the site at Northwood and Crooks. Land to the west of the church was donated to the city, on which was built the firehouse that now houses our Museum.



"Then" photo courtesy of the Royal Oak Historical Society Museum.  
 "Now" photos of the Northwood-Crooks intersection by John Maurice.

F.W. Clawson died May 30, 1923. His only son, H. Lloyd Clawson, served as mayor of Royal Oak and was instrumental in the development of the Northwood area of the city up to and during the Great Depression.

# Looking Back... Royal Oak in February

Collected by John S. Schultz from the pages of *The Daily Tribune*

## 60 years ago — 1960

The worst ice storm of the winter clutched Southern Michigan isolating at least 32 cities, closing schools and cutting off electric power.

Freezing rain turned telephone and electric lines into long, weird icicles. Hundreds of lines snapped under the weight. Poles and trees fell in a shower of ice. A seven-year-old Grosse Pointe boy was killed when a snow-laden garage door crushed him.

## 70 years ago — 1950

Royal Oak will permit builder Bert L. Smokler to erect 200 homes on Alexander and Amelia avenues, east of Rochester Road, and to install water mains to serve them. But the city wants it to be clearly understood that the homes cannot be occupied until Royal Oak provides water. That may be a few months after the homes are completed.

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**Phone rates tick up:** South Oakland residential telephone rates will be increased 10 cents a month under a new rate schedule filed by Michigan Bell with the Michigan Public Service Commission. Business rates will also go up substantially in Royal Oak and lesser amounts in Troy, Birmingham, Southfield and the Mayfair exchanges. Two-party measure service will be \$3.10 in Royal Oak.

\*\*\*

**Parking fines:** Seven hundred notices from unpaid parking meter violations have been mailed by the Royal Oak police. The violators are warned that failure to appear may mean revocation of their driver's license. In addition, the violations bureau has obtained 55 warrants for moving violations. A five-day notice to appear is being sent before arrests are made.

## 75 years ago — 1945

The Memorial Park committee announces that plans for memorializing Royal Oak's World War II Gold Star servicemen include a significant use of the historic young oaks now being tended at the Detroit Zoological park.

### 1960: Building Undergoes Renovations

One of Washington Avenue's oldest landmarks has undergone a facelift. The rejuvenation process of the former Tom Alger building (now Pronto!) at 611 South Washington has been accomplished gradually under the modernization program started by the present owner, Arthur L. Snow.

Snow, a real estate broker, acquired the building in 1946 from Martin Alger, who inherited it from his father, Tom Alger, an early photographer who built it in 1913.



Before



After

is the "bubble" that hung over the sidewalk for many years. Even Frank Morelli's shoe shop, which occupied a front store for so long, it too becoming a landmark, has moved around the corner to larger quarters in the same building. Smooth marcotta has replaced the weather beaten wood and limestone brick that once housed a small grocery, and the entire façade now presents the "contemporary" look.

"Modernization is a 'must' for business blocks in an up-to-date business section," Snow said.

Photographs courtesy of *The Daily Tribune*

Gone are the spreading branches of a shade tree that stood in front. Gone

## 80 years ago — 1940

Royal Oak City Manager Edward M. Shafter will confer with FHA officials in Detroit for approval of city-owned property on Coolidge highway and on Edgar Avenue for FHA insured loans in the \$2,500 home building class.

## 90 years ago — 1930

The Federal Post Office building for which petitions are being circulated by a committee of United Service clubs of Royal Oak, will be financed by appropriation authorized by Congress for 1930, Lee Campbell, chairman of the committee said.

## 100 years ago — 1920

Erection of a new church building at North Main and University is planned by the Royal Oak First Baptist church. A campaign to obtain \$50,000 for the first unit of the new structure will be launched next week.



THE ROYAL OAK HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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