Oakland County *at* 200

AFTER TWO CENTURIES, A DOMINANT PLAYER ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

By **Patrick Dunn**

When Oakland County was founded 200 years ago, its merits were severely underappreciated.

Carol Bacak-Egbo, a historian for Oakland County Parks, says surveyors' first assessments of the land that would become the county were "not very positive."

"It was looked upon as being very swampy," she says.

That changed significantly in 1818, when a group of 15 investors purchased land to build what would become the city of Pontiac. Michigan Territorial Gov. Lewis Cass founded Oakland County the following year, and Pontiac grew quickly into what Birmingham Museum Director Leslie Pielack describes as "an agricultural, commercial hub." Wool, lumber, potatoes and apples were all major exports for the county.

The county's development revolved around Saginaw Trail, a Native American footpath that was later developed and renamed Woodward Avenue (or, north of Pontiac, Dixie Highway).

"If you think of Birmingham, Pontiac, Waterford, they're all right along that road," Bacak-Egbo says.

The county's industrial focus shifted significantly in the late 19th century, when Pontiac became what Bacak-Egbo calls "the leading carriage maker in the Midwest." Carriage factories swiftly pivoted to begin producing automobiles in the early 1900s, and many smaller manufacturers were eventually acquired by a new company called General Motors.

While the auto industry became a dominant force locally, tourism was also big throughout the early and mid-20th century, with wealthy Detroiters flocking to the county's resorts and amusement parks. As the century went on, Pielack says, Oakland County became a desirable place to live for those seeking a "very beautiful, hilly, lake-strewn" environment with proximity to Detroit.

Today, natural beauty abounds, the auto industry has grown to include next-generation mobility, and hospitals and educational institutions are thriving. It all fosters a diverse framework on which to build the county's next two centuries.

"Our global connections are really growing," Bacak-Egbo says. "People are coming here to study or do research from all over the planet."



Oakland County pioneers gathered for a picnic in 1874.

Photo: Courtesy of Oakland County Pioneer and Historical Society

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