HISTORY OF PARCHMENT

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In this day of planned economies one seldom realizes that some communities have planned backgrounds too. This paper came about largely because of an interest in the community of Parchment and its surrounding area. Never could Frank Lloyd Wright or Norman Bel Geddes, modern planners, have influenced an area more completely than did the Jacob Kindleberger family dominate the scenes of early Parchment. All this in a day noted for its laissez faire attitude on city development.

In the first part of this paper I hope to create the color of the area along the bank of the Kalamazoo River directly north of the old village of Kalamazoo. One notes the similarities in the background to all settlements nearby. Finally I shall bring in the history of Parchment both as a village and finally as a city.

As in Richland, Schoolcraft, Kalamazoo, and other nearby communities, original settlers to the area were predominately from the East, Vermont, New York, and Pennsylvania. Those who came by land routes early learned to avoid the "Black Swamp". The Erie Canal was the popular water route and later settlers used both rail and stagecoach.

One must remember that the beginnings here coincide with the canal rage of that day. The Erie was still the wonder of the day and it isn't difficult to believe that every settler secretly hoped for a second Erie on his own doorstep. Thus the natives looked on the Kalamazoo River as a future canal zone between east and west Michigan.

The early individual development seems to center around the Watsons, the Russells, the Travises, and the Schaus. From the Watson family I got

much of the color of the locality preceding the Civil War[1]. The elder Watson's were agreed that farming held little promise of development because the land was too hilly and stony. These hardy folks recognized at once the signs of the New England farm.

Speculators had already begun operations here by 1834. Land titles had changed hands freely, but nature still left wild turkeys, ducks, deer and fish. The turkeys came in flocks in woods near present Mossell Avenue, and bears were plentiful.

The family relates an interesting vocation practiced in these early days. Carrier Pigeons were very plentiful when Grandfather Watson was a boy, and he tells how he and his father would catch pigeons to sell at eating places in Kalamazoo. The sport and vocation called for the use of live pigeons as decoys. One way of catching was to blind the bird by having his eyes sewed shut with thread and then to attach a string on his foot to control his flight. When they saw a flock of pigeons coming they would throw this blinded pigeon up and after he would flutter to the ground, the flock would be attracted and the men would have a net to catch the rest as they flew down. Another way of catching was to tie one bird by his legs to a stool, then by a sort of teeter-totter arrangement the pigeon sprang in the air and would flutter to the ground and attract the flock. The men alwyas saved about a half dozen live decoys for the next "catch" and the victims were sold to the townsmen.

The village of Kalamazoo not only supplied food and a market but also provided entertainment. The Watsons told how they would go to town to the saloon and one of their favorite sports was to get two Indians who were fleet

[1] Interview with Robert Watson

of foot and bet on which could run the fastest.

The predominate activity, though not outstandingly successful, was of course farming. According to the Watson's the practice was to file a one or two hundred dollar mortgage in the spring to buy seed and pay off in the fall when crops came in. It was never a prosperous farming area. The crops grown were corn, wheat, and oats. Live stock raising was essential.

The wooded areas were cleared with oxen, the latter wearing heavy, iron shoes. Several years ago a pair of these double shoes were found on what is today the McLarty property.

The Civil War took very little toll of the community because the area had a population of only seven small, farm families. The development at this time is almost synonymous with the story of the Russell family who today live on a small farm on North Riverview Drive. The farm is known today for the excellence of the turkeys it produces on the nearby fields.

The Russells, one of the oldest families nort of present Parchment, came to the area in 1857[1]. The original landholder took up 197 acres on the very day James Buchanan was inaugurated. The father of the family of seven children came over from Erie, Pennsylvania. They were descendants of another generation of Rutland County, Vermonters. He came via the outskirts of the Black Swamp and up through the southern tier of counties by oxen team. The wife and two daughters came two weeks later by rail to Sturgis and then stage coach to Kalamazoo.

When the Russells came they entered the valley north of the present city by way of a narrow road or trail which today runs parallel to Riverview Drive

[1] Interview with Derby Russell

but lies to the east atop the Catholic cemetery ridge. The whole valley was heavily wooded and the river was clear and full of fish. Wild turkeys and bear were still around and farming of a sort was the predominate activity.

The Russell's were originally hotel operators and new at the game of farming. The elderly aunt, now 93, recalls how the brother-in-law, Hiram, would load the boys on a wagon and travel up to Grand Rapids for lime. This was purchased from plaster mills and brought back to the farm and then during planting season the boys' job was to deposit a portion of the lime in each corn hill. This was thought to be a necessity. Along with corn hogs and cattle were plentiful.

The Russell farm became quite a center of activity in the years to come. Roderick, the eldest son, enlisted in the Civil War and rose from private to captain in a cavalry outfit. He later traveled in South America selling for a farm implement concern which eventually sold out to International Harvester.

In the post Civil War days the farm was the demonstration center for an exhibit of the first side reaper in the area. During slack winter months they operated a boarding farm for the city folks' horses. Here rested the blooded horses of Senator Burrows, the J. J. Knights' and Mr. Stockbridge.

In the period before the Kindleberger's came, the present city site was occupied by the farm homes of the Huntley's, the Schaus and the Murreys. The present city fire chief resides in the farm home of the Murreys. This was purchased by the Kindlebergers when number one mill was constructed and the home was kept intact.

It was quite an event when the sugar beet factory came to this locality. More will be said about it subsequently but the Russells' recollections are of especial interest at this point. The factory was built where number one mill is today. The scale house, now the site of a new grocery story, was erected to weigh in the beets. The beets were then placed in troughs and conveyed in running water to the mill proper.

The whole project seemed doomed from the start due to the expense factor even though in its heyday could boast labor imported straight from Russia. Mr. Derby Russell relates the story of how large, blonde and impressive these folks seemed as they came in from Kalamazoo. He also tells of how the farmers used the beet silage for their livestock and on one occasion he and a hired man went to get their wagon loaded with the mash. The line was long and during the waiting the small boy became cold. His delemma was neatly solved when the mash was dumped around him and he proceeded home with nothing but his head protruding from a mass of beet sugar pulp.

This then, was the typical story of what was going on before Jacob Kindleberger and his family moved to take up residence in the Zimmerman home, near Parchment, which incidentally was the old sugar beet scale house made over and enlarged to accommodate the Kindleberger in-laws when they came to the community.

Mr. Jacob Kindleberger comes into the picture in the fall of 1909. He was then a resident of West Carrollton, Ohio where he was a salesman in the Friend Paper Company. At that time he received a letter from Harry Zimmerman, husband of his sister Rose, who had come to Kalamazoo to work in the paper mills there. Mr. Zimmerman was quite enthusiastic about the opportunity for another paper mill in Kalamazoo, especially a converting mill for the manufacture of parchment, and Mr. Kindleberger came up to look the situation over.[1].

When he came there were only the three farm houses we have mentioned, the Murrey, Huntley and Schau farms. On the Murrey farm was the sugar beet factory, which came about 1904[2]. The laborers for the mill came from the Barry County beet fields as well as from Russia and lived much as migratory workers

[1] Parchment News, Jan. 2, 1947.
[2] Interview with the Schau Family.

do today, in crude tents.

This factory was well equipped and complete in every detail but as we have mentioned was not successful. The farmers in this locality could not produce enough beets, and it proved too costly to bring them in from the outlying districts. After the business failed the buildings were torn down, and the bricks salvaged and shipped to a new location in Wisconsin, along with the machinery. The warehouse, wells, cement foundations and basements were all that remained and these were later to be the basis of the industry around which Kindleberger was to build.

Coming with Jacob Kindleberger were Earl Boldman, Hank Butler, George Martin and Charles Conrad. The original company had 10,000 square feet of floor space and was capitalized at $50,000[1].

The new mill was to be located in open country on the remnants of this old beet factory. Only a dirt road, shoetop deep with mud in spring and autumn, dusty in summer, snow bound in winter, connected the mill with Kalamazoo.

Construction began late in November, 1909. Twenty-five people formed the labor force. Some of these men and their wives moved out to Parchment and lived in tents. In the winter plenty of house blankets and straw kept them warm. A lone bicycle was used for messages and errands. Much of the time the road to the city was almost impassable with mud. Many pairs of rubbers are in Riverview road buried in the gumbo mud of the rainy season. These conditions lasted for over three years.

Other townspeople commuted to the mill by way of the C. K. & S. tracks and later a Mr. Brockie brought some of the help from town in a gravel truck. Sometimes residents of Parchment would chip in and go into town on the hack,

[1] Parchment News, January 2, 1947.

that had brought out a passenger to Parchment[1]. The local residents walked the C. K. & S. railroad tracks too, as it was the closest route to town or Burdick Street.

Only one girl worked at the mill for some time. When snow storms were too bad she would come over to Mrs. J. Kindleberger's for dry stockings, as snow would often be hip deep.

Occasionally Mr. Kindleberger would bring salesmen home for meals. This was oftentimes most inconvenient and embarrassing as groceries were a problem. The MacQueen grocery store of Kalamazoo would send out a man to take orders in the morning and sometimes they would get their groceries that afternoon and maybe it would be the next day[2].

However the eagerness to get started on making parchment paper was matched only by the lack of capital and the genius for making mistakes in construction:

"It began to snow the day before Thanksgiving. We didn't see the ground until nearly the first of April. That made construction unusually difficult. We felt the Pilgrim Father's had nothing on us in their first winter", Mr. Kindleberger relates[3].

Nails were bought five pounds at a time. They could not pay for a keg. Men furnished their own tools, if they had any. Much time was lost by various men waiting until the others got through with the hammer or monkey wrench.

The planners were handed many lemons in the things which were purchased, everything from a horse that looked like a thoroughbred the day she was bought,

[1] Interview with Mrs. Joe Kindleberger

[2] Interview with Mrs. J. K. Kindleberger

[3] Philosopher, November, 1932

and like a bag of bones the next morning, to a paper trimmer that wouldn't cut within a quarter of an inch of accuracy, and was down for repairs two or three hours daily. But work kept on.

Gradually as the mill enlarged they found they were able to advance enough money to build a few houses. The first houses to be built were located directly across the road from the Schau house[1]. There were six, four of which were called "Alladin houses", probably the first pre-fabricated of this area. These proved to be poorly constructed and had to be torn down. Later, eight more were built, all across the road from the Schau home. This was in 1915 and it was then that Mr. David Schau had the northern part of his farm platted and a street made which still goes by its original name of Oak Grove Avenue. This was the first street in what was later to become the city of Parchment. The remainder of the farm was sold to the mill in 1923 and was to become the site of the Community House. Part of the present business section is located on that portion which is along the main street known then as River Road and now Riverview Drive. The farm house and a large lot surrounding it were retained by Mr. Schau[2].

Soon feeling a need for a little organized activity and social life, they decided upon starting a Sunday School. Seven of the residents got together and paid a "downtown minister", as he was called, to come to Parchment for an hour on Sunday afternoon. This was the real start of the community activities. These meetings were held in one of the larger farm homes, the Brockies'[3].

In the winter months, when the condition of the roads made it impossible

[1] Philosopher, November, 1932.

[2] Interview with Mrs. David Schau.

[3] Kalamazoo Gazette, Jan. 24, 1937.

for a minister to come to Parchment, rather than give up the meeting, a few of the members would get together and plan a musical program, a play, or oftentimes a community sing. An old hand pump organ provided the music. The people were so pleased with these programs arranged by the members of their own group that the movement grew.

With the growth of the employment brought about by the growth of the mill the population increased. The farm house soon proved too small for these weekly gatherings. Above one of the mill buildings was a good sized room used as a lunch room by the employees. It was not long before the women of the community had the room redecorated and had convinced the men of the need for a raised platform to be used as a stage. Weeks were spent in rehearsal of a children's play to be given on Children's Day as the grand opening of the new Welfare Hall, as this addition was called. Everyone lent their hand in helping to bring about the success of the event. Whole evenings were spent together, the women making costumes, the men discussing the possibility of a new addition to the rapidly growing industry.

One has only to listen in on the conversation of two or three old residents of the new modern Parchment to realize the wonderful spirit of friendship and loyalty that was felt and expressed in the activities in the Welfare Hall.

After Welfare Hall was completed the next building project was a small one room school, located one and one half miles north of the community center, outside the present city limits, was outgrown very shortly and after a second addition it was abandoned. The new school, a four room structure, was located inside present Parchment and grew by successive stages to a sixteen room building. In the fall of this year the city opened a separate junior high structure of twelve rooms. Total enrollment has risen from an original 25 to the present 525.

At the time the school was built the company built several more houses. These houses were large and spacious. They were not, as so many industrially built houses are, a repetition of one another. Each one was entirely different from the other. They were built with the comfort of the residents in mind. A few individuals began building homes of their own. It was soon possible for all the workers in the mill to also be residents of the community.

The Welfare Hall which had a few years before seemed large and roomy now became over-crowded. There was not enough space for the whole village at the Sunday School meetings and the entertainments. Mr. Kindleberger realized the need for a new hall. Looking backward over the rapid development of the population and looking forward to the probable future development, he called a meeting of the adults of the community.

It was with unanimous consent that the Schau farm was bought and the ground broken for the new Community House. It was modern in every way. This was later to serve as a church, recreation and governmental center. Today it is the hub around which community life centers.

During all this time there were still no roads by which one could easily get into Kalamazoo. It was not long however, before the mill provided a truck to take the women into Kalamazoo to do their shopping. It was an ordinary mill truck with a bench on either side. It usually made a trip to town twice a day. It was quite an event. Everyone would stand in front of the new Community House and wait for the truck to come from the mill. It was generally loaded down with baby buggies and shopping baskets. A time would be set for returning and the truck would pick them up and bring them back home[1]. In very wet or snowy weather the truck often had difficulty making the trip.

[1] Kalamazoo Gazette, January 24, 1937.

Of the farm which was bought for the building of the Community House, much of the land was unused so the idea was conceived that the mill would allow anyone who wanted to, to use the land for growing things, with the condition that it should be well kept and not allowed to become an untidy spot. Almost every family selected a plot of this ground and set out vegetables and fruit. It was the pride and joy of everyone to see if his garden plot could not produce a little larger tomato or firmer head of lettuce than anyone else.

At the end of the canning season a magnificent bazaar was held in the auditorium of the Community House and in the parlors. All the canned things were on display. Prizes were offered for the best pies and cakes. Patchwork quilts were raffled off, aprons, pan holders, dresses and sweaters were sold. Candy booths, the fish pond and grab bag were sources of joy for the children.

As population continued to grow, Mr. Kindleberger decided that it would be a wise plan to map out a model village and have it follow the plan decided upon. This was done and the result has been the development of a model village, as it stands today.

Here I would like to digress long enough to drive home the impression of single minded paternalism which Mr. Kindleberger exhibited toward the life of the village as well as the mill. He had a faculty of seeing homes completed, beautifully landscaped and filled with happy people, where others saw only rocks and gravel pits and sand. Practically every building put up in Parchment, at least until 1935, whether it was a private home, public or business building, had his personal encouragement in its start and frequent inspection during its progress. He had no hesitancy in telling a property owner that he ought to paint his house or mow his lawn or plant a tree[1].

[1] Parchment News, January 2, 1947.

Kindleberger Park is a permanent memorial to his love of beauty and his passion to share good things with other people. In 1932, Mr. and Mrs. Kindle- deeded the area to the village of Parchment for the purpose of a park and no expense was spared in its development.

He continued such unusual interest until his death and though such activity doubtless brought criticism, labeled dictator tactics, it also created a city which today is proud of the results. No better can I suggest his influence than to quote from the local newspaper, a mill organ, titled the Parchment News. It concerns his return from a trip abroad taken in 1936.

"Mr. Kindleberger is on the boat and will be back in Parchment in about ten days. Just before he left us in March, he dictated the following message.

'I shall not be around when spring officially opens. It will soon be clean-up time when the front and back lawns will be put in order for the good old summer time. I hope the tradition will be carried out as usual and that Parchment may continue to be the cleanest and most beautiful little village in Michigan. Each owner and each renter should do his bit in brightening up the corner where he is. I hope that someone will start a clean-up and beautification campaign and keep it going throughout the summer'.

This week a "Clean-up-Day" was held and company trucks picked up a good deal of rubbish. Considerable improvement has been made but there are still many spots in the village that still won't stand too close inspection.

We all know that the attractiveness of Parchment as a community can be directly attributed to the leadership and stimulation of Mr. Kindleberger. We have only ten days to make the village the way he would like to have it. A little paint here and there, a little raking and spading will make a world of difference. That probably would be as fine a welcome home as he would ask for[1].

[1] Kalamazoo Gazette, November 9, 1938.

It is interesting finally to follow the progress of this community as it becomes first a village, then a city. It was in 1930 that a petition was signed by one-hundred and seventy four qualified voters, those who lived within the area, to be made into a village. This was sent to the governor of the state. The news item from which this information was taken states that the area had a total population of five-hundren and eleven persons and consisted of approximately three-hundred and seventy acres in Glendale, Schau's, and Parch-Glen subdivisions[1]. The petitioners were to ask that the board of supervisors submit the request to the voters at the next general election. Six months later the charter was completed and signed by the charter commission and sent to Governor Green. The provisions of the charter were as follows: "It is to be known as the charter of the Village of Parchment and provides for a commission of five men, each elected for a two year period; the commissioner receiving the most votes would be the president. The commissioners must have been a resident of Parchment at least a year. No commissioner can be interested financially in any village contracts. Provision is made for removal from offfice for cause. The regular state election laws will govern all the nominations and elections"[2].

One month later after the governor had approved the charter, it was put before the voters of the community to be voted upon. There were also six names from which they were to elect the five officials of the village. One week after the election when the charter was adopted and the officials elected, the community held a gathering at the Community House and it was a gala occasion. The officials were sworn into office and each made a speech. At this time an editorial appeared in the local paper which points out the important step this community had made. I shall quote directly from the editorial[3]: "Kalamazoo

[1] Kalamazoo Gazette, November 9, 1938.

[2] From Original Village Charter.

[3] Kalamazoo Gazette Editorial, August 30, 1930.

joins with other communities of Southwestern Michigan in congratulating Parchment on its assumption of village status. The change took place formally Monday night when the five men of the new village community were sworn into office with appropriate ceremonies at the Parchment Community House. Henceforth Parchment is something more than a thriving residential and industrial colony of approximately seven-hundred inhabitants; it is a full-fledged village with its limits clearly defined and its own machinery of government duly provided for".

In connection with the forming of the village it is of interest to note that the people outside the mill took a very active part in the formation. Upon examining the newspaper clippings, I noticed that three of the nominees were connected with the mill, and three were not connected with it.[1]

Eight years later in 1938, the village became a city. At this same time there was a building boom in the village for there were twenty houses erected in the latter part of 1938. It was the most extensive housing project in Kalamazoo county for a decade. The project was sponsered by the mill in conjunction with the Federal Housing Administration.

In order for the village of Parchment to become a city, the population had to number at least seven-hundred and fifty. Since the population in 1938 was seven-hundred and seventy the village commission was presented with a petition requesting the community to take steps to make the village a fifth class city under the home rule act. Once again the newspaper tells the story better than I can[2]. "Today, Parchment is no longer a village but a city neighbor to Kalamazoo. The proposal to change the classification from village to a fifth class city was given an overwhelming approval in Tuesday's election. The final vote was two-hundred and thirty in favor of the reclassification to an opposition of only thirteen."

[1] Kalamazoo Gazette, August 30, 1930.

[2] Kalamazoo Gazette, November 9, 1938

Nine men were elected to draw up the city charter. The five village officers were delegated to carry on the affairs of the community until the charter was drawn up. The new charter provided for a city commission type of government.

Today, Parchment's commission government composed of five members controls the affairs of a city with a 1940 census numbering 934 people. It works with an executive group of five appointive officers and has a municipal court which meets every two weeks and is presided over by a justice-of-the-peace. The city is in an unusual position in that it canrely on the mill for both water and fire protection, saving the city the cost of the large initial outlay such service would demand.

Much has been said, thought and printed about this small city. It has always had a reputation of being a model city. It could hardly have been less than that considering the dynamic influence of J. K. Kindleberger. It would seem fair to say that Parchment certainly has been unusually dependent on her largest industry, the Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment Company.

It is only been three years since the founder of both mill and city has been gone. Parchment today is having growing pains as are all American communities and perhaps hers are different only because the city may have to eventually adjust to its problems with less and less mill help as the company becomes more and more just a valuable tax asset.

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