

HISTORY OF TOWN & COUNTRY HOMES ASSOCIATION



1844 TO 1920

The Indian Treaty of April 11, 1844 ceded 1,600,000 acres to the Shawnee Tribe. This tract was roughly bounded on the east by 28 miles of the Kansas-Missouri state line, running south from the confluence of the two rivers; then westward 120 miles; then north toward the Kansas River; and generally east to the point of beginning. Most of the Shawnee Tribe had congregated here by 1830, principally in what is now Wyandotte County, south of the river.

Ten years later, the Treaty of 1854 ceded the entire tract back to the United States Government, and retroceded 200,000 acres to the Shawnees. By 1867, some Shawnees had received patents for their property and were selling it for about \$450 an acre. A few years before this however, we have our first records of precise land ownership of the Town and Country area. On February 12, 1863, an unlucky Shawnee Indian lost part of his hunting grounds to John Dyche when President Lincoln gave it to Mr. Dyche in recognition of his military service. Two years later, after Dyche didn't pay his property taxes, the land changed hands again, for \$500.00, this time to an unknown owner.

A familiar name has come down from this period. The prominent Chief Blackhoof, whose "X" appears on many old deeds, was married to a fine, educated Ohio lady named Na-Nag-si. Her name, smoothed by many years of use, lives on as "Lenexa".

About this time, drovers on their way to the cattle markets on the Missouri river cut off from the

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Santa Fe Trail, a few miles to the north, to a watering stop near the present corner of 85th and Roe. There were shallow springs here. As late as the 1950's, 28 cistern-type wells were counted in the area. The Shawnee settlements were supported by streams and ponds, an abundance of game and a deep, silt-loam topsoil that would grow almost everything but papayas, pineapples and palm trees.

1920 to 1954

The land was shuffled through several ownerships until the early 20th Century. Albert Schoenberg and Arthur Guettel bought it in the 1920's. They operated a stable and polo field a couple of furlongs north of the old watering stop. Several years later, R. L. Nafziger bought 40 acres. He organized the Mission Valley Hunt club and built a stable and barn. The barn survives as part of the structure of the present Mission Road Antique Mall near Corinth Square. Stone gateways, which are still standing in Franklin Park, were the entrance to "Somerset Place", the Nafziger farm. Foxhounds were housed in kennels on the farm property.

Five-acre estates were planned for the Hunt Club grounds. A new polo field, unique for its clay tile drainage system, was built at about 87th and Roe, the present location of Franklin Park. A grandstand was erected. Small lakes were dug and lined with copper screen to prevent damage by muskrats. The effort was for naught; as the lakes filled with silt.

The Great Depression arrived and in 1936, Byron Spencer obtained the 40 acres in a foreclosure sale. The Hunt Clubhouse became The Teahouse by the Side of the Road. Mr. Spencer increased his holdings to 104 acres and turned the Teahouse into the Spencer home.

Another short canter north of 83rd street, Herbert Woolf built stables and a racetrack. He owned Lawrin, winner of the 1938 Kentucky Derby, Eddie Arcaro cup. Lawrin and his sire, Insko, are buried on the low hill west of the Johnson County Public Library. A headstone marks the location.

Early in 1941, J. C. Nichols bought 80 acres at 69th and Mission. He had built 95 homes by the end of that year. At the conclusion of World War II, construction of the Prairie Village shopping Center was begun. An additional 160 acres (the old Porter Farm) was added to Nichol's holdings. In 1951, Prairie Village became a third-Class city, with 79th Street as its southern boundary.

1954 saw significant change. The Woolf farm was sold to the Nichols Company for an addition to Corinth Hills and a shopping center. Mr. Spencer sold 100 acres, retaining his home on the remaining four, to Mr. Carson Cowherd, a man with a vision of a quality, estate-type small town.

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Mr. Cowherd was in his seventies and he had an eye for a good thing. That good thing was to become Town and Country Estates.

1954 to present

In 1954, land values were finally returning to their pre-Depression levels. Mission Township was growing in the shape of an “L” from 71st Street and State Line south toward 95th Street and west to Nall. The enclosed area was ripe for development.

The early plan for five-acre estates was trimmed to the final conception of single acre lots which could effectively serve as sites for gracious homes. Houses were to be well set back from the winding, gently sloped streets. Circular drives would lead to garage entrances at the side or rear of each borne. Creek crossings on Delmar and Fontana were to remain fords to suggest rural atmosphere and to discourage fast traffic. The County Commissioners of the time were doubtful about the planned curves on Roe. Good taste and sense prevailed, however, and the path of Roe now winds gracefully much of the way from 75th to 103rd Street, encouraging the use of Mission Road or Nall for at least some of the through traffic. Roe was widened by about four feet in 1987. Unfortunately, the speed and flow of traffic has increased some since then.

The impression of swinging estate gates and a wall enclosure was to be given by the design of the entrances, with electric lights for safety and recognition. They were one of the first such entrances in Greater Kansas City.

The horse heads of the original design were small, cast in bronze and on short pedestals. That design matured into the large Prussian chessman style we now know. Fiberglass was used for ease of casting and repair. An Indian lady, whose name has been lost, was commissioned to do the original sculpture in clay. She was associated with the Kansas City Art Institute and had previously done the mule for the battleship, “Missouri”.

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Headshakers of the day considered 83th and Roe, with its tar-and-gravel road surfaces and neighboring cornfields, too far from the downtown for professional people. Rumor has it that the suggestion was made that a second sculpture, of the south end of the horse, be used at the south ends of the streets. Fortunately, this suggestion received small support. Mr. Cowherd stuck to his belief that commerce and the professions would follow population. This indeed has been the case, as many of the newer residents have “moved back in town”.

THE DEVELOPMENT

The sales brochure was labeled: “Town & Country Estates - Kansas City”, Mail delivery was through the Waldo branch of the Kansas City, MO Post Office.

But we were less “Town” than “Country” for many years. Coveys of quail were common and 85th Street between Delmar and Fontana was a popular roosting area. Hunting was good near the corner of Roe and Somerset. Cattle from the Calvin property frequently wandered into the yards of the early homes and looked through the windows. At one time, we thought the last of our local foxes has moved out when grading equipment chewed into the hillside fields near Franklin Park. Happily, we have had many kits raised in recent years.

Development of our Town and country area took place over three phases, covering six years. The original 100-acre tract was platted into 97 lots. As construction and sales progressed, additional property was added, resulting in 21 additional lots bounded by Somerset, Delmar, 87th Street and the cul-de-sac leading to Mission Road. Fourteen lots to the southwest of the original tract

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completed the development. These last lots required the construction of 86th Street from Briar to Nall, allowing access from the west. This explains the existence of the lonely entrance gates at 86th and Nall. Additional streets and entryways were added, beginning with Delmar, then Fontana, conforming to the pattern of Roe. Next, 84th Street Terrace, Linden, Cedar, Briar and 85th Streets were built. By the winter of 1956, all streets were in and 89 homes were built or under construction. Somerset, originally a cattle route running generally northeast from the old watering stop, at that time cut diagonally across the northwest corner of 83rd and Mission. To eliminate an awkward intersection (and incidentally to provide a valuable chunk of commercial property) it was rerouted to its present path about 1963.

Mr. Cowherd built the first house on the southwest corner of 83rd and Fontana, lot 33. It was one of those ‘Dream Homes’ of the year, with the most advanced design in utilities and appliances. The first purchaser of a lot for a custom home was Mr. Earl T. Scott, who also became the first president of the Homes Association. His home occupies lot 15, 8300 Delmar.

Promotional activities were frequent in the early years. Fashion shows were held in many completed houses, and 8361 Fontana was the site of a patio barbecue the weekend it was on the ‘Parade of Homes’ tour, Chefs from the Golden Ox, Eddy’s and the Westport Room presided.

The cost of lots was from \$ 5,400.00 to 6,800.00, or about \$36.00 a front foot. Homes ranged from \$37,750.00 to 46,500.00 in the earlier years. Custom homes, even then, came closer to six digits. All lots were sold by 1960.

THE ASSOCIATION

The Homes Association concept, relatively new in 1955, has become a necessary adjunct to home ownership. Other parts of the country were slower to adopt it, though now becoming pervasive. Its primary objective then, as now, is to maintain the property values and quality of living of its members.

In some ways, the function of our association parallels and augments city activities. This is understandable if one remembers that when our area was first developed, it was not in the city limits. If there is no city, a homes association’s activities become even more important. The President and Board of Directors of the Association are counterparts of a Mayor and City Council. The Association, in lieu of a Department of Public Works, handles trash and common area maintenance. Landscaping the common areas (our entryways) becomes the responsibility of the association. In each case, our Homes Association provides the needed services, with the much-needed assistance of resident members.

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At the first Board meeting on January 2, 1958, a trash pick-up contract was authorized. The first annual membership meeting was held at Milburn Country Club on November 18, 1958. Members approved a street snow-removal contract, discussed the installation of sewers to replace the septic tanks (this was accomplished in 1960 at a cost of about \$1,500.00 per homeowner) and considered a proposal to replace the frequently stolen incandescent lights at the entry gates with gas lanterns (completed in 1963). Thus it continued: significant discussion regarding a proposed shopping center at 83rd and Mission (now Corinth), creek bed clean-up, repair of entryways and discussion as to whether to incorporate as a city, join Prairie Village or join Leawood. The County Commissioners made that decision for us.

In 1977, the gas lanterns at the entryways were turned off for a number of years due to increasing costs of natural gas and replacement lanterns. Years later, the lanterns were turned back on and, more recently, underwent a complete overhaul to continue to mark the unique entryways along with new brass plaques identifying the Association.



Because of long periods of able and concerned leadership, we have not only maintained our position among the most desirable of metropolitan residential areas, but also have become a recognized influence on civic questions that affect our property values and living quality. Association representation on the City Council began early with Dick Epstein, followed by Jerry Gaines, Steve Carman, and Charles Clark. Other members have been, and continue to be, involved in city administration and important community problems.

Today

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The Association's concerns are much the same today. Loose or barking dogs continue to be a periodic nuisance, vandalism is a costly problem without a good solution, and home and yard maintenance must be encouraged. Proposed changes in traffic patterns require constant attention.

However, new concerns have also surfaced in recent years. Our large and beautiful lots have become so desirable as the metro area expands, that in some cases houses have been purchased for the value of the lot alone. These houses have been demolished and new ones constructed. Inappropriate uses of lots for projects needing large amounts of paving, fencing or lighting have been proposed.

The Homes Association has tried to respond to these changes responsibly. Between 1991 and 1993 considerable attention was given to drafting and approving new guidelines for design and construction. These were approved in December of 1992. In 2000 and 2001, the Homes Association found it necessary to review and revise the design guidelines. All homes association members were welcome to join the Design Guideline Review Committee. The homeowners who joined the committee spent many hours reviewing and revising the guidelines to submit to the board for approval. After the revised design guidelines were distributed to the homeowners for comment, the new Design Guidelines of Town & Country Estates were approved by the Homes Association Board of Directors on May 14, 2001. These new guidelines serve as a basis for the Board's review of all external changes to lots/homes in the Association, from changing paint color to major additions. The guidelines are intended to aid us all in maintaining and improving our neighborhood and Association. We still have some original homeowners, and those who were proud to move here in the beginning continue to be proud of their decision. Those of us who have come since-an increasingly large percentage of our 140 plus households-are responsible for carrying on the sense of history in our unique community. A quality living environment and a community of neighbors, not just houses, is what we are striving to maintain.

FINANCES

The annual financial report is published in the first newsletter of the year and can be obtained at the annual membership meeting. Solid waste collection and recycling costs account for over 25% of our dues. The remainder of our dues goes either to maintenance of our entryways, (landscaping, repair of damage from accidents, normal wear & tear, vandalism, lantern costs), cost of the newsletters, handbook and the membership roster or to defray expenses incurred for the annual meeting and other social events.

A FINAL WORD

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History is generally most important to those who live where the history was made. But the story has to be put on paper, if it is to remain alive. Those who have lived here the longest have a special responsibility to share and add their own remembrances to the story. Otherwise, much of our neighborhood history will be lost. We hope you have found this description of Town & County's history interesting. Each of us will be providing a valuable service to our children if we all save anecdotes for future additions.

Acknowledgments

Several individuals' assistance and a few original homeowners made this story possible. Mr. John Johntz, who now lives in Mr. Cowherd's former home, summarized our history in an earlier copy of the Town & Country Handbook. We have stolen freely from his text. He, in turn, was assisted by Mr. Carson Cowherd, developer of Town & Country Estates, and Mr. Bud Ellis, Sales Manager of Town & Country Estates, Inc. Additional factual material about Prairie Village came from "Reflection-A History of Prairie Village", published on the city's 25th anniversary in 1976.



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