

OAK PARK, ILLINOIS



Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

WORDS TO KNOW

bedroom community

ordinance

temperance

White flight

restrictive covenants

incendiaries

Ku Klux Klan

Women of the Ku Klux Klan

Homeowners' Loan Corporation



Mt. Carmel Baptist Church opened in 1905. It was located just south of Oak Park's main business district in the area that had the highest Black population. A few years earlier, White residents had blocked efforts to build the church in northeast Oak Park in an area of new middle-class homes.
Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

Cover: Residents of Oak Park demonstrate for equal housing outside a local real estate office.
Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

EXCLUSION AND RESISTANCE IN A TWILIGHT TOWN

Oak Park, Illinois, sits just to the west of Chicago. In the 1800s, it became a **bedroom community** for the city but with a distinct identity all its own. Large Protestant churches, a staunch belief in **temperance**, high-quality public schools, and unique architecture gave it a strong sense of place. Oak Park prided itself on being an educated and beautifully designed community. Yet, it was not immune to the racial divisions of the 19th and 20th centuries.

From the beginning, Black Americans lived and worked in Oak Park. Black children attended and graduated from integrated local schools. Black individuals and families bought and rented property and established businesses. Still, there were social boundaries. A group of Black residents who met for prayer planned to build a church just outside a Black neighborhood in west central Oak Park. White neighbors objected, and the town revoked their building permit. Eventually, the group found another site on land donated by a congregation member. Mt. Carmel Baptist Church became the center of Oak Park's Black community.

The 1920s marked an early high point of the Black Oak Park community, with 169 residents among the Village's nearly 40,000 inhabitants. Black Oak Parkers were mostly employed in service sector or railroad jobs, but many were also entrepreneurs and small business owners. Willis and Emma Walker owned and operated a house cleaning company with the help of their two sons. Frederick Jefferson owned a garage and auto sales shop, and his wife, Gertrude, owned a catering business.

SUCCESS AND STRUGGLE

Still, Black residents were often seen as second-class citizens, not fully integrated into the community. In 1914, the editor of Oak Park's weekly newspaper advocated for Black Americans to be sent to Mexico, asserting, "There is nobody in this country among the white race, except a few theorists and idealists and humanitarians, who wants the Negro here as a friend and brother. The only white men who want him to stay are those who want him to stay as a beast of burden." The same paper later printed a full-page response from the West End Men and Women's Club of Oak Park, which represented Black Americans who lived and worked in the community.

They wrote, "All we ask is equal rights and equal opportunity and the solution will take care of itself...The [editor] says the black man cannot work at a white man's trade or live in a white man's street. To this statement we simply ask the question. Why?"



Built to Order in Oak Park

WE can take a few more orders for these high powered ladies' and gentlemen's roadsters. The ladies' roadsters are 4 cylinder 28 h.p. I will make... The... from 4 to... weigh 1400... wn design... airs on all... nce in the... ANY EXPERT Oak Park

AUTOMOBILES BUILT TO ORDER

Automobiles built to order, repaired, altered, cleaned and overhauled by **WILLIAM HOLLIDAY**, Mechanical Engineer, practical machinist and Automobile expert. Eleven years' experience in the construction of hydro-carbon engines. High-class references.

TELEPHONE 1263 128 WILLIAM ST., OAK PARK



William Holliday was an entrepreneur who designed and made automobiles in his machine shop across the street from Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, in the heart of Oak Park's Black neighborhood. This 1907 ad in the local newspaper, the year before Henry Ford launched his Model T, touts experience dating to 1895. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

That same month, the home of Frederick and Gertrude Jefferson was firebombed. Though they did not know it at the time of purchase, a builder sold homes to the Jeffersons and another Black family in retaliation for an argument with local White residents. The Jeffersons had lived there several years before this violent act of racial hatred occurred. The local newspaper buried the story on page 12 with minimal details. The leading national Black newspaper *The Chicago Defender* put the story on the front page under the title "Oak Park incendiaries Attempt to Burn Jefferson Family Alive." No charges were ever filed.



Jefferson family, victims of a racially motivated firebombing in 1914. This photograph, taken sometime in the 1930s, show Gertrude and Frederick, daughter Faith, and her son Dewey. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS DISCORD

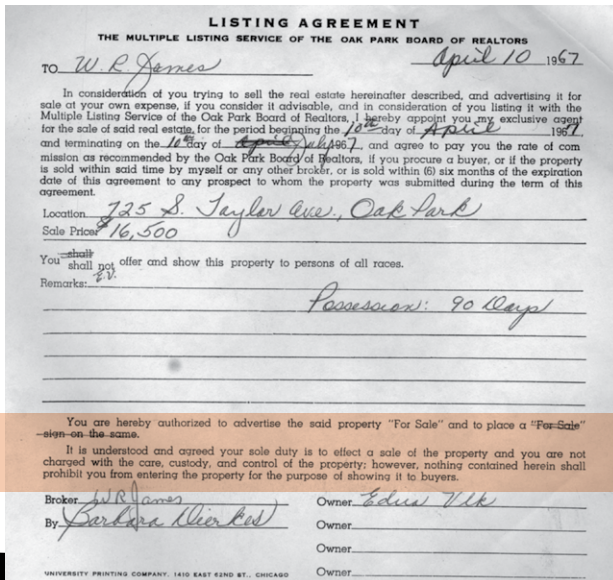
Oak Park's demographics were changing. The 1910s and 1920s brought an influx of Roman Catholics and newer immigrants. In the summer of 1921, the revived **Ku Klux Klan** arrived in Chicago with an anti-immigrant message. They took out recruitment ads in the Oak Park paper. Within a few years, an Oak Park chapter of **Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK)** had over 300 members. The WKKK in Oak Park was more concerned with the influx of Catholic immigrants coming from Chicago than with its small Black and Jewish communities.

Incidents such as the Jefferson home firebombing revealed the limits placed on the full participation of Black residents in community life. In the late 1920s, White Oak Park businessmen wanted to redevelop the central business district by expanding it into the Black neighborhood. Suspicious fires were set in and around the Mt. Carmel business district. The hard times of the Great Depression were also undermining the Black community. By the early 1930s, the church and many of the remaining Black-owned homes and businesses had been bought and demolished. The historic Black neighborhood anchored by Mt. Carmel was redeveloped as a retail strip.



A new chapter of the Women of the Ku Klux Klan was chartered in 1926 in Oak Park. The name the Walosas Club on the 1926 charter helped hide the group's real purpose. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

Incidents of discrimination happened regularly in Oak Park. In 1939, some White residents asked the Oak Park Real Estate Board to use **restrictive covenants** to ban the sale of property to Black residents in the fashionable northwest corner of Oak Park.



You are hereby authorized to advertise the said property "For Sale" and to place a "For-Sale" sign on the same.

It is understood and agreed your sole duty is to effect a sale of the property and you are not charged with the care, custody, and control of the property; however, nothing contained herein shall prohibit you from entering the property for the purpose of showing it to buyers.

Real estate listing documents noted when certain houses were not to be shown to buyers of excluded races and religions. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

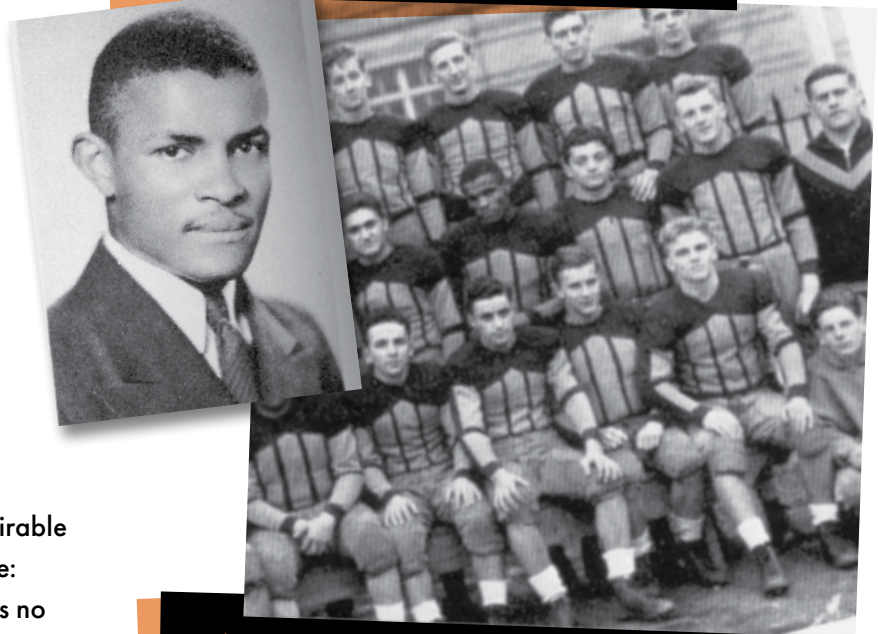
SEGREGATED SPORTS

In 1937, Lewis Pope was a young football quarterback for Oak Park High School's Huskies. Nicknamed "The Ebony Streak," he was one of a few Black students at Oak Park High School. The team was one of the highest-ranked in the nation. They were invited to play against Miami High in Florida's Orange Bowl stadium, but the team was told that Pope would have to stay behind because of Florida's segregation laws. Many community members publicly objected, but the Florida team did not relax its rules. Instead of playing in the game, Pope relayed the live broadcast to a packed audience, who gave him a standing ovation.

Lewis Pope in his yearbook photo, 1937. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

REDLINING IN OAK PARK

In the 1930s, Oak Park was divided into nine sections on **Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC)** maps. Three sections were rated Grade B and shaded blue for "still desirable." Six were rated Grade C and shaded yellow for "definitely declining." The agents rated some areas Grade C because of the conversion of single-family homes to two apartments as well as the "infiltration of Italians," "presence of Hebrews," and "presence of Catholics." Even a minimal presence of "undesirable residents" was called out. One HOLC agent wrote: "One negro family resides in the area, but there is no possibility whatever of any further infiltration." This comment referred to the Shannon family in northwest Oak Park. In an oral history interview, Virgie Shannon Peerman recalled that her parents owned their home outright in the 1930s, while many of their fellow Black



The undefeated Oak Park High School Huskies football team with quarterback Pope at center, 1937. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest


residents in Oak Park were renters. Those who rented were unable to remain when their homes were sold, and the community became less welcoming to Black residents. The Black population steadily declined over the next few decades, reaching an all-time low of 57 in 1960.

THREATS AND INTIMIDATION

In 1950, renowned chemists Drs. Percy and Anna Julian bought a mansion in Oak Park. That same year, the *Chicago Sun-Times* named Dr. Percy Julian "Chicagoan of the Year." Fame did not protect the Julian family from two separate firebombings of their home. The family was physically unharmed in both attacks, the damage to their property was repaired, but the psychological trauma remained. The racism toward Black residents of Oak Park and discriminatory practices used to exclude Black, Jewish, and Catholic newcomers could no longer be ignored.

In 1963, violinist Carol Anderson triggered a reckoning with Oak Park's racial inequities. After being invited to perform with the local symphony, she was later blocked from playing because of her race. The orchestra's conductor came to Anderson's defense but was overruled by the board president, who said, "We didn't know if anyone would object to the orchestra being integrated, but we weren't about to find out on our own. We're not a band of crusaders." This remark embarrassed many and led to the creation of the grassroots Citizens Committee for Human Rights and the municipal Human Relations Commission. These groups worked to force local realtors to end discriminatory practices.



 Drs. Percy and Anna Julian purchased this home in Oak Park's estate section in 1950. The house was firebombed twice. The incidents caused many in Oak Park to rally to the Julian's aid and to examine community attitudes and policies on race and open housing. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

Violinist Bows Out **Carol Quits Orchestra**

BY TOM LEACH
The controversy over the integration of the Oak Park-River Forest Symphony orchestra


...the strains of Wagner's "Rienzi," and notes: ...the conductor, Milton Preves, refused to recognize Anderson's resignation. Carol Anderson, the 23-year-old Negro violinist who was the subject of the controversy, said she never wants to play with the orchestra

...the chairman of the orchestra association, Mrs. ... Palmer, who set the controversy, said, "I'm a little wiser now. I'm not going to make any comment."

An audience estimated at 750 persons watched Miss Anderson play with the orchestra yesterday in the Oak Park-River Forest High school.



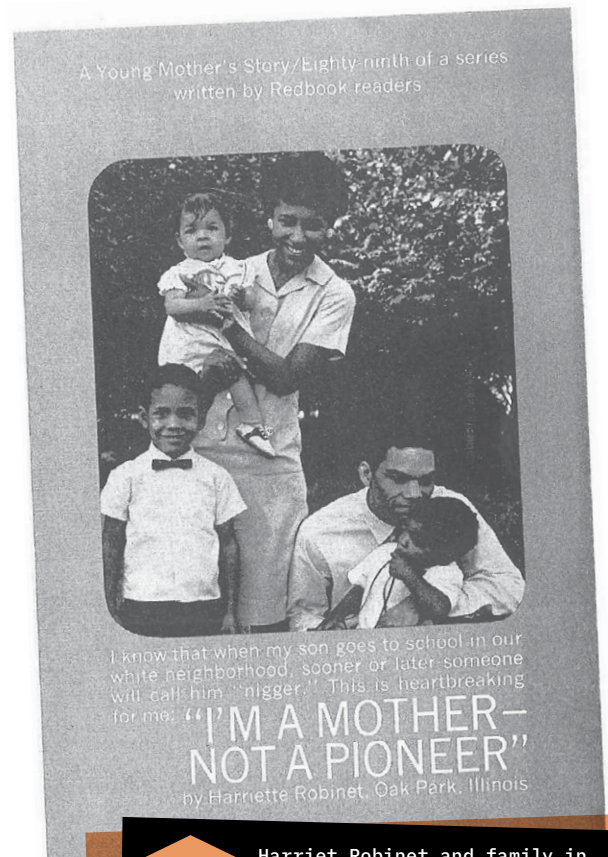
(CHICAGO'S AMERICAN Photo)
MILTON PREVES, CAROL ANDERSON
Retiring conductor congratulates violinist.

 The Oak Park-River Forest Symphony Orchestra invited famous violinist Carol Anderson to play with them, then took back the invitation because of her race. Even after they recanted, she refused to play with them. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

REINVENTING OAK PARK

Grassroots organizing, fair-housing marches, public testimony, and behind-the-scenes campaigning resulted in the approval of a fair housing ordinance in 1968. Policies banned “For Sale” signs to discourage **White flight**, created a Housing Center, enforced housing law, and addressed racial inequities in the schools. The new philosophy was one of active, ongoing efforts to slow White flight, welcome underrepresented residents, and demonstrate that racial integration was desirable and sustainable. However, many Oak Park residents protested this new direction. Some realtors still refused to show properties to all interested potential renters and buyers. In response, the Housing Center and grassroots activists used a diverse group of testers to see if prospective home buyers received equal access when trying to see listed properties.

In 1965, Harriet Robinet, a young Oak Park woman, wrote a moving essay for *Redbook* magazine that described her experiences of racism when she and her family, including two-year-old Stephen and two-month-old Philip, moved into the village. She worried that “when Stephen goes to school, I’m sure that sooner or later someone will call him [racial slur]. Even now he says, ‘Some people don’t like us.’ This is heartbreaking for me. I’m a mother, not a pioneer.” Through her essay, women across the nation were learning about residential segregation and prejudice in Oak Park.



Harriet Robinet and family in *Redbook* magazine, February 1968. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

WATCH
ORAL HISTORY
"Sherlynn Reid"

Left: A fair housing protest march outside a local real estate office. Right: Message in the *Oak Park Village Economist* newspaper urging Oak Park residents to oppose fair housing. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest



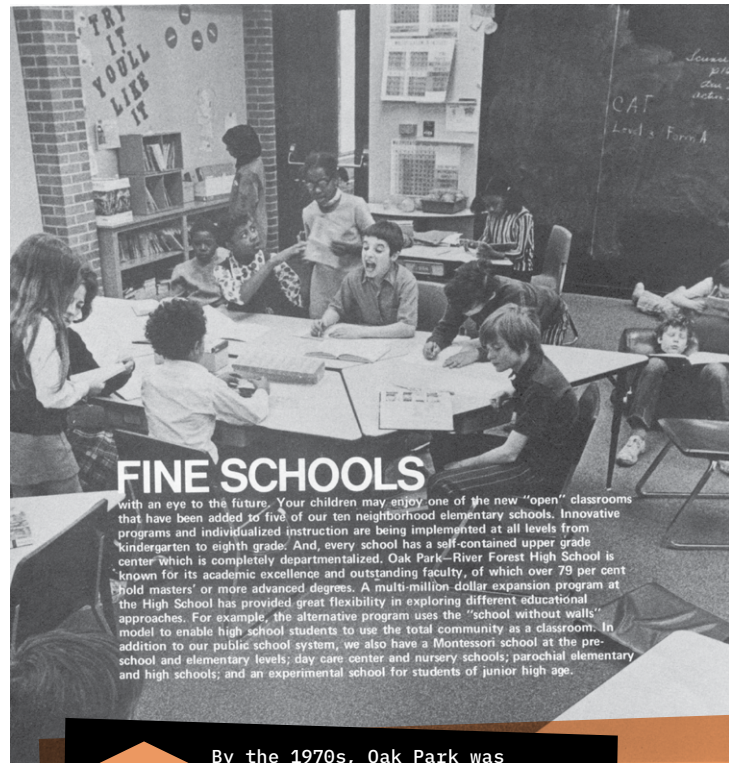
FORCED OPEN HOUSING!

- Do you want it? ...
- Do a few Village officials have the right to decide the fate of 60,000 Villagers? ...
- What are the feelings of the apartment owners who received letters this past week from the Human Relations Commission asking their opinions on renting to minority groups? ...
- Do we still have a government by the people and for the people? ...

OAK PARK TODAY

Since the 1960s, Oak Park has gradually reimagined itself as a diverse and inclusive community. The journey was not smooth. Along the way, there were competing visions and incidents of resistance to this experiment in inclusive living.

In the years since the passage of the fair housing ordinance, the pursuit of racial inclusion has become a prominent part of Oak Park's identity. Once an elite, majority White suburb, it has now become a place known across the United States as a progressive, racially integrated "New Oak Park." Today, a socioeconomically, racially, and religiously diverse range of people call Oak Park home, including members of the LGBTQIA+ community and sizable Black, Jewish, Asian, and Latino populations. However, disparities remain, fueling ongoing community conversations, grassroots advocacy, and government action to ensure that Oak Park lives up to its contemporary reputation as a progressive community rooted in intentional inclusivity.



By the 1970s, Oak Park was working to present itself as an inclusive community, as the integrated classroom in this brochure shows. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What role has religion played in Oak Park's history of housing discrimination?
- Oak Park's reputation as a highly educated, professional city was on the rise at the same time as discrimination was increasing. How can discrimination exist side by side an educated population?
- Write a different ending to the story of Lewis Pope and the Oak Park High School Huskies game at the Miami Orange Bowl.